Avatars-25

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It had been a couple of hours before dawn when Eric left to check Athena’s story. It was still an hour before noon when Eric had returned to Athena in turmoil. When he reappeared in the room his face was a mask of pain and anger. He had been changed so much by her he keenly felt the tragedy of the situation. He studied the girl he had abducted, and the vacant body she had created in her attempt to escape the prison within his mind. That vacant body had been his assurance of success without further need of killing or destroying anyone else.

Now it was a fatal promise of life for him and death for her. He looked at Athena again. Her story had been easily confirmed, he had talked to Artemis himself. He had jumped into the body of an old man and waited for her to emerge. The circumstances that inspired his initial plan still applied. He was less capable now of walking away from the twins than ever. His need to possess his goddess had become a need to become her after internalizing so much of her. The only way to take her place was by removing her from it.

Eric finally spoke, in a voice filled with pain and sadness. His simple apology told her the entire story. He confronted her with her worst fear; he had intended to take her place. She fought the realization, protesting her ignorance, asking him why. She could forgive him for everything up to that point, she just needed to understand. He finally explained why, with the absolute honesty one reserved for one’s closest intimates and the dead. It was a crushing explanation, in which she learned that the boy she had fallen in love with was truly his previous victim, dead long before she ever met him.

She also understood the terrible price she would pay for his confession. She was not his closest intimate, even if he was capable of true love now, he could not allow her survival to be more important than his own. All the feeling he had for her he redirected to her twin, and any pity he had for her, he soothed by assuring himself that she would at least live on in him. She addressed it openly, telling him that living on as a memory was no substitute for the life she was losing. She wanted to hate him, but could not. She felt great sorrow for him, knowing that he was already so much like her he would hate himself forever for going through with this scheme.

He agreed, but he was still all he had been before, and on that understanding he knew he would hate himself forever if he did not. He was not doing this because he wanted to hurt her. He had never wanted to hurt her, but he could not fight his brother, and he could not run away from her in fear of him. From the beginning he had realized his only chance lay in doing something Hunter would never believe him capable of doing. He was utterly desperate. Now that there were no secrets on his side, he gave in to his desperation.

He looked down in misery, but when he looked up there was no humanity in his face. He had made his decision and become the executioner. He hardened himself to finish the job of taking her apart. When he touched her, there was no warmth in him, no seduction. He aroused only fear in her. She had successfully stalled him, but only for the morning. Her voice quit after one last plea. He had become deaf to her; he would hear no more appeals. He started to break her. She understood that she would live only as long as he failed to do so, and he would not let her die. He had the power to prevent that, while hanging her over the abyss on a thread.

The energy that she had been soaking up had built up to the point where she could enhance her strength so immensely she would be able to break his telekinetic grip long enough for one, maybe two moves. This might be the last chance for her to act. She might not have a whole body to fight with if she hesitated. She did not hesitate. Jean had taught her a way to use chi against active telekinesis to discharge massive bolts of electricity. All she needed was the chi to seed it, and the strength to throw one punch through the TK field. She waited for him to arch back in ecstasy and did it.

Her punch could never have contacted him, but he had still tried to clamp down on her to prevent it. He totally underestimated her chi-enhanced strength, and tried to increase his power. The strike was too fast, but the surge of TK enhanced the effect she was trying to generate. As the lightening flashed from her fist, the awesome detonation of thunder shook the enclosed space, and Eric went flying backwards into the concrete wall. If Athena had not had her back pressed into the mattress she would have flown off in the other direction. She launched herself after him, unable to believe her own strength.

Eric had been shocked so badly he had lost his grip on her entirely. She flew at him with a speed and force that would leave only a smear on the wall when it connected. He glanced quickly over her shoulder at the empty vessel. She had always watched, her eyes followed them constantly as she struggled with a child’s determination to comprehend the strange universe about her. Athena’s kick had been aimed at his head. Even the wall behind him caved in when she landed it. It was the first time in her life she had killed anyone, but there was no question in her mind that his death was justified.

San Francisco was an excellent place to run and hide, confounding pursuit in the busy streets and swarming masses, but it was no place for a fight. The first round of the game was their attempts to maneuver each other to a chosen fighting ground. They took shots at each other, and closed for a brief exchange of fury, but only to press each other in different directions. The audience of awakened spectators shifted along with Artemis and Hunter as they darted through the city and off into the distance. They watched, but did not interfere. They would act only to enforce the first rule, and they would act with lethal efficiency.

Artemis led him to a deserted location on the coast. As she had known, she had the edge in power. She was able to box him in and keep him on the ground, unable to fly or teleport away, and force him to use his remaining abilities defensively. By going entirely on the defensive, he was able to protect his mind from hers, but he welcomed a physical fight. She had only proved why a psionic made a huge investment in physical training and development. A psionic either ended the fight in the first power confrontation or he won at the end of a physical duel, shaking his opponent’s mind through assault on the body.

She fought him on a beach under towering stone cliffs. She could still use her powers without letting any pressure off of Hunter. As he closed in to exchange blows, she smiled. The male and female forms had different strengths and weaknesses. Hunter knew her limits as a girl, and was confident that he would win a long engagement, but he had never fought her as a boy. The instant he seemed to be taking the upper hand, she shifted, and turned the tables. As a boy, she was still at a slight reach and height disadvantage, but she possessed the full use of her original training. By shifting back and forth through the fight, she used all the advantages of her two forms while covering for all their weaknesses.

Artemis paid him back for the beating in the bathroom with interest. Her only problem was how to bring the fight to a final conclusion. She did not want to kill him. Even if he had abducted Athena, even if he was guilty as sin, she at least needed him alive to answer questions. If he was innocent, and she had provoked this fight herself, then she truly did not want to kill him. The only question was, how to stop him without killing him. She would need to totally incapacitate him, and go into his mind to shut his powers down or fiddle with his brain by burning out whole synaptic matrices.

She beat him down, striking hard, breaking bones and dislocating joints, forcing him to weaken his mental defenses to repair the damage she was doing. Each time she landed an invisible blow, lashing his mind or sending searing blasts of agony through his nervous system. Finally, he could not keep up with the damage she inflicted. He crumpled to the ground, physically defeated. She finally came down on him, perched on his chest to focus her thoughts for one last major assault. She entered his mind. She came that close to victory. She did her best, but he out smarted her and over powered her.

As she was leaning over him, he called on his reserve. A strange device appeared in his hands, and before she could react, he snapped the big ring closed around her neck. She was trying to smack him down with her own power, and discovered it was gone. The device vanished before she could even look at it properly. Hunter used his waning power to throw her off of him. She felt her body twist off to the side, and rolled clear of him as fast as possible. His power was almost exhausted, but there was enough left for him to repair the damage to his body. She tried to inflict more, but he had already recovered enough to take the blows properly.

She thought fast, and realized her only remaining option was to flee. She had no idea what he had done to negate her psi, but without it she did not stand a chance. At least she had kept herself whole, healthy and fresh throughout the fight. She was in perfect condition while Hunter was clawing his way back from the brink of collapse. She was off the beach before he had climbed to his knees. She was up the cliff trail and into the woods before he was on his feet. She was through the woods and onto a road when he was only stumbling to the foot of the cliff trail. She was running down the road trying to flag down passing cars when he stopped and collected his wits.

Eric had watched Athena through uncomprehending eyes, finding in his shock that it was easy to pretend the total autism of Athena’s duplicate body. All he had to do was stare at her with a blank face as she stomped around examining her prison. He studied her, feeling the room crackle with energy that poured off of her. There was no way she had regained her psi, he knew how to slip the leash and she had never come close to figuring it out. He had watched her carefully simply because he had know it could be done. The only possible explanation was that she could harness chi. She was a martial artist of exceptional ability, he knew, but that was about all he could really say on the subject.

His brother had tried to teach him about it, he had tried very hard to encourage his younger brother to take up the physical discipline, and of course Eric had rebelled simply because it was Jack. But Jack had been such a beautiful girl before getting into martial arts and psionics. It was so simple, so stupid really, to hate the man so much because he replaced the beloved sister he had adored. Jack would appreciate the humor of Eric’s current situation. Eric had turned himself into a girl because of him. He had stolen a few female bodies from time to time, but by integrating with what he had stolen from Athena, he had finally made the mental shift to being a girl.

It was a lot different being in Athena’s spare body now that it had been before. It was the body he had redefined himself to inhabit and he felt more at home in it than he ever had in his own. He would not get to enjoy being in it very long if he did not figure out what to do about Athena’s other power. Just keeping her telekinetically hog tied had proved disastrous, with his own corpse laying across the room from him he could hardly forget that. He wondered if it would be better to just quit. From the look of the bloody wall, she would obviously be able to break out of her cell in time. She would drag her spare body along with her. Maybe her family would accept the damaged clone as part of the family, and he could fool them into accepting him by gradually emerging as a person.

He almost laughed at that. It would never happen. As soon as a functional telepath came near him, he would be discovered and that would be the end of that. He was only safe while she was trapped there with him and did not figure out he was in that body. He was still the only functional psionic in the room, but he admitted that she scared him. There was no chance now of breaking her, he would not risk it. He was already such a mix of him and her that he could easily go back to her family and tell a story of being mentally raped and forcibly imprinted by his captor. He just needed to remove her from the picture. Only one version of this story could be allowed to get out.

She had actually done him a favor by killing him. Now if Hunter came along, he would have to doubt. He would face the fact that Eric had survived him but died confronting her. Sure, his mind still tasted a bit like Eric, but he had to remind himself constantly that was who he really was. He had only one last thing to do, and then he could forget that forever. His stomach gurgled loudly, suddenly, drawing her attention to him. He remembered suddenly that the empty vessel had often started to cry if she got too hungry. That was convenient, after this last turn of events he really felt like crying and it felt really good to cut loose.

She came over to him and took him into her arms. The vessel had been able to walk, but usually did not unless prompted by Athena. She got him to his feet and led him over to the bed. There was no food in the room for her to feed her hungry charge, unless she counted the remains of her enemy, but she would knock down the walls before she got that desperate. She cuddled her double, singing to calm her. The girl eventually relaxed and stopped crying. Athena pulled back to look into her tear filled eyes and was surprised when she said, quite clearly, *I’m so sorry.*

Athena did not have time to react. As the girl spoke, Athena felt something jerk her neck, then her body went numb and the world tumbled end over end. When the world stopped moving she seemed to be laying on her side looking at Eric’s headless body. The final shock came just before the euphoria; that was a female body. Her body. Something warm and wet licked at her cheek and then she blacked out. She fought, and it felt like she was being torn to pieces, then all the pieces caught fire. Her consciousness stretched into an odd loop of dying and waking up at the same time in the eye of a hurricane.