Avatars-26

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Hunter appeared at the top of the cliffs. A psionic could be beaten down in a fight, he noted wryly, but once the pressure was off, he needed only a moment to sort himself out, and if he had the attention to spare for a single teleport he could jump shift and restore his body to peak condition. Once the body was fit, the mind was free to burden it again with the full weight of its potential. He reached out and found Artemis, and jumped to her side. She felt his arrival and did not hesitate. She laid him out with a flying roundhouse kick to the jaw, and sprinted across the road and into the woods. Hunter picked himself up again, shaking off the shock of the blow, and grinned with pride.

He had to be proud. She had come so close to winning, the only person to ever come that close. She could have killed him before he pulled his ace out of the hole, and there would have been nothing he could have done to stop her. If she had known about matrix technology, if she had realized for a moment that he would render her powerless with a single act, she probably would have killed him and been fully justified. Still, he was glad he had been able to leash her. She had passed the first part of the test with flying colors. Now all she had to endure was the acid test. It was his least favorite part of the exercise, but perhaps the most necessary.

In that regard she was fortunate she was not a boy, even though she could be one. The second part of the exercise was the attempt to break the subject, and all she had to do was survive what he had to do to her. It was necessary to demonstrate that even the most powerful psionic could be rendered helpless and vulnerable. If a person did not understand that they could be hurt, or how badly they could be hurt, they did not learn. They remained over confident and that was a dangerous handicap. Also, it was not enough to take the subject’s power away. It was not enough to merely threaten them with violence upon their person. The object was not merely to hurt, but to teach what it felt like to be hurt. To understand what a victim felt, and hopefully discourage them from ever making a person victim to their own acts.

Hunter loped along after Artemis, pacing himself as surely as she was pacing herself. She did not believe she could get away, but she was buying herself time, trying to think of a plan, looking for any means she could find to trap or snare him. If she could manage it, she would try her best to kill him now that she was virtually powerless. As a skilled martial artist, she had a chance still. So, he was careful, looking ahead and keeping track of her, seeing where she was going, observing what she did and what she focused her attention on. He respected her too much now to stumble into any traps she might set.

He hounded her, keeping her moving and giving her no time to set traps or plan an ambush. She kept her eyes open, looking for natural deadfalls, scanning the trees and ground for any advantage they might offer. She was also concentrating, focusing, trying to tap into the chi energy around her, within her, remembering everything Jean had taught her about harnessing and using it. Victor had talked about how a chi capable martial artist could face a psionic and win. Now she had to find out if there was any truth to that. She reached a brook and glanced around. It was the best spot she had seen. She took a deep breath and picked the place from which to launch her attack.

Hunter saw her stop and choose her fighting ground. He nodded to himself and went to meet her. She went on guard the moment she saw him. She was so calm, so focused; he hesitated to just slap her down with telekinesis. Then he set his teeth. He knew better than to play with her, and launched a massive invisible fist. To his surprise, she anticipated him perfectly, launching herself into the air and riding the stream of force. Her hair was standing on end as she landed gracefully on her feet. He jumped up onto the rock she had been perched on to look down at her.

Once again he tried to smash her down, again she surprised him, meeting the wave of force with a lightning punch and a blood curdling ki shout. A flash of genuine lightening flashed from her fist to his solar plexus, which combined with the awesome clap of thunder blasted him off the top of the boulder. As he flew back, he saw her charge the boulder. He landed on his back, gasping for breath, and stared in disbelief as the boulder suddenly exploded into thousands of murderous shards all aimed at him. He still could not get any air, as he desperately deflected stone missiles away from himself. Artemis sailed in through the hail of rock to deliver a flying pile driver to his face.

As her feet crashed down on him, he desperately flexed the skin of psi armor to absorb the tremendous kinetic energy of her attack. She rebounded off his face, as his head sunk into the embankment, and sailed into the trees. As he rolled away, finally going physically on guard, he realized how she was performing these miracles. The damn girl had learned to harness chi. The air around him crackled with energy she was tapping and channeling to fight him. Every blow he threw at her only increased the reserve of energy she could tap and throw back at him. When the entire embankment shifted violently, he lifted straight up into the air.

She flew out at him, meeting him in the air as he came level with the top of the ravine. She placed one palm flat on his chest, sinking through his skin of armor like it was not even there. He felt something hot pulse through his chest and his heart stopped. She finished her movement, her momentum whirling them around in the air, and she flew away from him to the opposite embankment. He dropped spinning to the ground. His concentration had been shattered by the blow to his heart. As he desperately willed it to start beating again, the entire shoulder of the hill the brook had carved its way past shuddered and toppled. He was buried alive.

But he was not dead. Not yet. The shock of being buried under tons of earth jump-started his heart. The fear of being crushed caused him to teleport free. He found himself among a cathedral of leaning trees. Artemis was on the run again. He was pleased that she had not lingered to see if he was dead, many would have and he would have gotten the drop on them. He was also pleased to discover that the thought of going after her again did not terrify him. He had never been in a contest like this before, and it was nice to see that he was not entirely shaken by the experience.

He dusted himself off and started after her again. She had surprised him, using chi based attacks, but now that he was warned, he knew how to deal with it. If there had been a chi attack to turn the brain into jelly, she would have used it. The killing attack she had used would have done the job on a normal man, for sure. He heaved a deep breath and told himself to finish this. He opened his mind again and sought her out. He found her quickly and reached inside of her. Chi was dangerous in a direct confrontation, but there were ways to strangle it. One was to prevent the person from moving freely, popular with control freaks like his brother—he would not let a subject even twitch if he did not approve of it first. Another was to simply tweak the body’s natural flow.

He quickly mapped her flow and then applied pressure to a thousand specific points on and in her body. Artemis had been loping along unaware, then her body began to tingle. Artemis stumbled to a stop as her body heated and then seemingly caught fire. She felt pressure building up inside of her, accompanied by sudden dizziness and bursts of static along her nerve endings. Her limbs went weak as an intense wave of pleasure, the euphoria of intense pain, surged through her. She almost blacked out as the sensation reached an orgasmic crest, and collapsed in a heap.

It was hard to move, but she struggled to her hands and knees, crawling for all she was worth. She had no idea what had happened to her, but she knew who and why and she was not about to quit, even if she could only manage the most pathetic effort. It was exactly like trying to run in a nightmare, her sluggish body would not respond to the intensity of her need. She heard him as he came out of the bushes behind her. She rolled over to get a good look at him, and was reminded that they were both naked. He was standing at full attention, and she was ready to receive him after that improbable orgasm.

He took her. He had had her many times before, but he took her in a way that left her no doubt that she was being raped. He handled her like a piece of meat, thrusting into her violently, hurting her, controlling her. Satisfying his own need and leaving her aching, empty and miles away from any kind of sexual release. He simply stood up, grabbed her by the foot and dragged her along with him as he headed back to the brook. When they arrived, he grabbed her by the back of the neck and forced her to survey the destruction she had caused. He commented on it in disgust, and then teleported her somewhere dark, cold and hard. She was utterly lost. She had lost utterly. There was nothing to do but cry, and cry she did.

Eric Hunter was dead and his last thought after killing Athena was telling him self that it was finally over. She was Athena now. As much of Athena that still survived. She looked at her slain namesake for a long time revising her memory, convincing herself that something subtly different had happened. She looked at Eric as a different person, seeing the tormented soul that he had been. He had never given her dead twin much freedom of movement, but she had found a way. She had drawn on some hidden resource and killed him before he could rape her, mutilate her, dismember her.

He had given her no choice, promising to dangle her over the abyss and then pull her back from the brink, healing her and doing the whole thing over in a slightly different way. She could remember what he was saying as he began to rape her. As long as fresh blood flowed to her brain, her body could be savaged endlessly. She understood it would have been futile. Even if Athena had tried to give him what he wanted her instincts would have rebelled and she would not have broken. She had killed him, but his last act was an irresistible command to her twin, the one he had shattered, the one who had tried to escape him by destroying herself.

She had killed her twin, her other, but he had made her do it. He had tapped into the copy of himself he had burned into her and used her to execute his executioner. Now he was just a bunch of memories within her, new secrets to replace the ones she had destroyed—nearly destroying her self in the process—to prevent him from stealing them. She gave full voice to her grief, and then pulled herself together. He had unlocked her power so that she would execute his last command. She could now escape and go tell her family about the horrible things that had happened to her. Beg their forgiveness for being his tool in destroying so much of herself.

Jack Hunter brought light with him into Artemis’s cell. She looked up in misery, but quickly composed herself to face him. She feared to guess what he would do to her now. In the long dark hours she had confirmed she was alone. If Hunter had Athena, he was keeping her somewhere else. It would be such an easy way to torture them both, telling Artemis nothing, while confiding to Athena how he had run her to ground and raped her. She could only guess at her twin’s state of mind at that point. Had he raped her?

He had kept her a prisoner for several days, if he did in fact have her. Knowing Hunter, she could well imagine her sister and soul mate’s experience. How he would have been testing her, teasing her, taunting her, demanding she think her way out of the mess she was in, and since she would refuse to break, she would have been thinking constantly, trying to figure out what was really going on and confront him with it. That was how she had spent her isolated hours. As he studied her, she dared to challenge him once again. She had trusted him with her entire development. She did not see him as they kind of man who would invest so much time and energy in a girl just to tear her apart and kill her.

She had considered for a moment, that it had all been some test. He had always gone on about how deadly serious the life of a psionic would be. How a single mistake could get her killed, either by her enemies or her own allies, depending on the mistake. The present situation only had two possible explanations, since she had made no mistakes. Not being the best was never a mistake, she pointed out before he tell her all the things she had done wrong. She was there because he had been better. One possible explanation was, he either had Athena and was going to do whatever he wanted to both of them, for whatever reason, and there was damn all they could do about it. The other was, he had done this to her to prove that he had nothing to do with Athena’s disappearance.

He asked her to explain the logic of the second option. She answered, once he established that he could have done it, that he could turn his protégée into a helpless victim, he would stop. He would have made his point and would then review the exercise with her. He would make no assurances about Athena one way or the other, perhaps, but he would spend his time trying to see which way the frog would jump, her being the frog. If he felt that she was not going to go postal, he would then go on to the next step, working the problem of Athena’s abduction. If he did have Athena, he would continue the exercise, both of them would continue to be tortured or brain washed or whatever the plan was, and quite possibly both of them would either suicide or be killed trying to escape.

The deciding factor, she concluded, was whether he ever tried to rape her again. She did not, and probably would never again, give him permission to touch her. Once, she allowed him, might have been necessary to prove a point. Twice, and they were enemies for life. She looked at him coolly, and asked what he would decide. Would he remain her trusted, if cruel and ruthless mentor, or would he confirm himself as her nemesis for life? He studied her for a while and then left her without a word either way.