Avatars-27

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Alt had adjusted to the new world, after discovering that she could not trade places with Athena. It was actually turning out to be quite an adventure. It had been strange at first, blinking into entirely unfamiliar surroundings, in a strange bed and learning bit by bit that she was in a completely alien universe. It had been amusing, and a bit frightening, to wander out naked and encounter a strange man sleeping on a couch and have no idea who he was. He was surprised she had no idea who he was, or what she was doing there. When she asked him, perplexed, if he knew who she was, he reminded her of her mugging.

She would hardly call the mess she had been in a mugging. Then again, Eric had possessed every intention of stealing her mind. A careless comment on that thought aloud turned into a discussion on amnesia, which her host asserted she must suffer from. She began to wake up then, she listened to the story he told her and realized it was a story she had told him as Athena. As he repeated back to her the things Athena had said to him, she had caught on. She thought of where Athena had been and deduced, following the same logic she had, that she was in a world within Eric.

She had laughed like a maniac at that, *Talk about the best hiding place, a man hardly ever looked to carefully into his own shadow.* She had tried to switch with Athena many times after that first realization, and discovered she would not. After a few days had passed, she had begun to suspect the worst. She feared that Athena was dead, how else did she explain her complete inability to swap places? There really was no way to know. She would continue to try; there might be some reason aside from death, perhaps something that interfered with Athena’s mind that prevented her psi from functioning normally.

Athena had found a safe place, and put her in it. Until she figured out how to get back where she belonged, she needed to make do with what she had. Realizing that she might be stuck there for life, she had gone along with her benefactor’s attempts to identify her and treat her amnesia. It was such a convincing cover story she sometimes found herself believing it too much. She reminded herself constantly that her life was not a dream, that she was who she thought she was, a stranger in a strange land.

All the same, she had been driven to latch onto something to remind her of the life she had lost. That was what brought her to where she was at present. She had been surprised when one of the people she had identified as a friend and possible link to her past turned out to be real. Considering who he was, she was intensely apprehensive about meeting him. She told herself that it was just a coincidence, a chance occurrence of the same name the same number. She was about to find out. He was coming to visit her.

She was alone in her benefactor’s house when the boy arrived. As she answered the knock at the door, she prepared herself for a fight to the death. It was Keith, to her shock, and he said he recognized her. He made no sudden moves, gave off no hint of threat. He was the same charming boy who had pursued her as Athena, who had made perfect and passionate love to her only a few days before. He was everything she knew him to be, and yet he was not Eric. The intensity, the obsession, and the lurking pain were all missing.

She relaxed and the two of them went out to get acquainted. He told her that he had been contacted by her doctor, and had agreed to come on the chance that he might remember the girl who would not remember him. She told him that she remembered him, just not in any way that connected to the real world—that world, anyway. She apologized, and said she had hardly known him, maybe a day if at all, she did not expect him to remember her at all. He confessed to her alone that he recognized her from his dreams.

Jean squinted into the light as Hunter entered her cell. She was shocked to see who he had with him. Hunter threw Chris down next to Jean as he announced he had brought someone to keep her company. He looked at them both, as they wrapped themselves around each other, and commented. They were both lucky they did not need to be raped to understand that they were powerless against someone like him. Once again, he reminded Jean that they were buried under natural rock; using chi to break out would only get her, and now Chris, crushed.

Capturing Artemis had not ended Hunter’s campaign. In the hours between her defeat and their last conversation he had kept her on ice while he ran down each of her friends and continued to investigate Athena’s disappearance. Artemis and Athena’s friends were not being tested so much as they were being contained. With a real adversary on the loose, it had been wiser just to tie them down. Since Artemis and Athena were both on ice, in not both safe, the adults had abetted the process. It was not until it was almost too late that Lauren, Morgan, Chris and Erin realized that the ordeal they were caught in was part of a test endorsed by their own parents and guardians to determine if any of them would be allowed to live, possessing the power they did

It was not, again, the kind of ordeal Athena and Artemis were enduring. The only danger to those kids would have come from blowing their own cover, breaking the first rule simply because they were being hunted. Jean might have been the worst for that if Hunter had not gotten the drop on her so early. Jean was a real fighter, and what she had taught Artemis had made him wary of ever having to fight her for real. Chris had surprised him the most, by eluding him the longest. Even though her guardians had left her exposed, she had made a good run of it, using her powers intelligently, and also using normals against him in a manner that put the burden of the first rule on him.

Now that he knew where every one was, he could go back in and face Artemis. The exercise was almost over. She had passed every stage, even to the point of anticipating the exercise itself and working the problem from that angle as well as the one she had initially assumed. The points she had made when he confronted her were all correct. Since she had defined rape as the deciding factor, he had been able to continue the exercise by simply ignoring her. Until and unless he tried to touch her again, she would not know where she stood. Even if he was the real bad guy, he would have made her wait like that. Now he had to go back in and see if he could figure out if she was stable enough to set loose.

He had made this mistake with his brother, accepting his keen analysis of the situation as the sign that he had passed. By the normal protocol, when he was conducting this exercise, he did not relent until the subject could confront him with the reason why. Eric and Artemis had both been able to do that, but Eric had cracked, and Keith and Athena ended up paying for Hunter’s mistake in missing the fact. Some people, when they got burned, learned not to play with fire, while others just became pyromaniacs. It was time to see which would be the case with Artemis.

Hunter jumped into Artemis’s cell and confronted her. She had said, if he attempted to touch her again, she would know this was not an exercise. He told her then, he was sleeping in her cell that night. He would be naked and powerless, just as she was. He produced the same kind of device which had robbed her of her own power, showed her how it worked and then told her to use it on him. This was the only chance he was going to give her to take revenge on him. If she killed him, she would still have water, but there would be no one to bring her food. She would remain trapped, and would starve to death, but he never promised that was not her fate anyway. There was only one way she could get him to actually free her, but she had to figure that out on her own. If she wanted any clues, he told her, she needed only think about what she had said to him the last time.

Artemis did think about it, as he settled down and pretended to go to sleep. Everything she had said to him had hinged on trust. What he was doing now hinged on trust. She had talked about his need, if this were just an exercise, a brutal lesson, to see which way the frog would jump. To know that, he had to know how she really perceived the situation. He was trying to find out if he could trust her. That was an odd thing for him to do if he was going to torture her. Just the fact that he could torture her was reason enough for her to kill him now, even if it meant she would starve to death.

She would far rather starve to death than be tortured. She was sorely tempted to kill him, since he might still be toying with her. Still, if this was an exercise and she tried to kill him, he would simply kill her and get on with his life. If not, she probably discover that giving up his powers was just a trick, and the nightmare would really begin. A horrible thought, but at least then she would know where she stood. She could slam her head into the wall hard enough to kill herself. She would prefer to just end the whole scenario, however. Her love was still in danger. She tried to think of what she could do to get him to free her.

Once again, she replayed her previous conversation through her mind. She had forbidden him to touch her, warned him that was the surest way to convince her he meant her no good. If he did not touch her, she would still consider him her mentor, but he would not free her until she proved that to him. How could she do that unless she proved she was willing to accept him in the role she had known him longest? She had to make love to him to prove that. She swallowed hard. This really was a big test. He had said nothing forbidding her to touch him, not even to kill him. She thought about it. If she did not trust him, she could not do that just on the frail hope it might get her free.

She could only do it if she really did trust him and accept him as her mentor. He had shaped her, helped her become whole. She approved of the job he had been doing. She had trusted him implicitly until she heard a bunch of stories from a new group of friends, just acquaintances at this point, at a time when her soul mate was in dire peril. He had tried to keep her trust, had admitted, even tried to explain, but she had cut him off before he could. So whose fault was it that she was in this predicament? She looked at him for a long time before she approached him. When she made love to him, she did it like she meant it. And so she did. Not trusting him was like not trusting herself, and she realized she would not want to live that way, and could stand, in the end, to die because she placed her trust in a man.

Hunter and Artemis were finally able to talk to each other about Athena’s abduction. Hunter quickly brought her up to speed on his investigation. He told her about Eric and what he thought about Keith. Eric had died, he had seen to it himself, but in Keith he seemed to have found a way to survive. As Keith, no one had been keeping any tabs on him, but it had only been a matter of time before he hurt someone else. He told her about what had set him off, a report that Athena had been caught using her powers. Then he gave her the bad news. He told her about his history with his brother. His brother would see proof of Athena’s power as an excuse to close in on her.

He would know the underground would move on such a report—perhaps not with lethal intention, but such an event usually prompted the underground to confront the candidate, run her through the gauntlet, and then exert pressure to make her join—and his brother would rather kill his goddess himself than allow the underground to get their hands on her. Having just been through the wringer, Artemis already knew what Eric’s experience with the underground had been like. He had failed to grasp the reason for the grueling exercise, however. He had simply proven the reason why the practice had been instituted.

A psionic had too much power to remain an unrecognized threat. Within his organization there were those who argued that the testing created the kind of monsters it was designed to ferret out. Hunter sometimes agreed with them, since it seemed to be true in his brother’s case. He wavered, because he felt that his brother’s testing had been botched. He had failed to take all the pressures the boy had been under and then let him off the hook too quickly. Still, he was the exception that proved the rule. A lone psionic who moved undetected was the most dangerous threat. What had happened to Athena proved it.

Once her eyes were fully open, she asked what Hunter’s organization was going to do about independents like her family, her friends, and the Wild Psi’d. He told her that he approved of independents, but unless independents demonstrated their own strength and will, people like him would take that independence away from them. As far as his superiors were concerned, those kids were still the responsibility of cell leaders like him self. His job remained the same, without the benefit of his guiding hand. They were making their own decisions, and he would be there to insure that they would be sound survival decisions. He told her that they would all face tests once the problem with Eric was resolved, and warned her not to interfere.

In any case, he said, people could not be told how to survive their tests. They never really understood until they figured it out for themselves. Athena herself was a case in point, since he had tried to teach her all of this more gently before. Since there was no guarantee that she would get it even now, since figuring it all out had a way of sedating people, she could be certain that he would still out there, just as willing to take her apart the moment she showed him a weakness. There was no schedule; there was no plan. There were simply opportunities. She allowed herself to make one observation, before closing the matter. He too was playing with fire. Necessary evil was only a hair shy of evil for its own sake. A person should not go too far in justifying harm. He answered; only the executioner could truly pass judgment on the execution.

The two of them had come out of the dungeon and sorted themselves out. After bathing and dressing they came back to the question of Eric and Athena. Artemis reminded him that he had said Eric had moved to intercept a possible move on Athena by the underground. Obviously, since he had such an obsession over Athena, he would not want her to fall sway to the underground’s opinion of him. Perhaps he even feared that the underground would rediscover him through her. She asked him if he really believed Eric would kill Athena. Hunter told her he had other reasons to do her harm. He had only needed an excuse to pursue his twisted obsession; to punish her and Hunter, for the way they had both betrayed him, in his eyes.

Hunter told her that the others were safe. He had gone after them simply to detain them. He had not wanted them to go off trying to rescue Athena and Artemis when there was a real predator on the loose. They had not been subjected to anything like she had, he assured her. As she accompanied him to go release the others, she brought up another mystery. Had he really used the FBI to cut her off from assistance? He told her that it had actually been done for another reason, though that side effect had been useful. He tried to explain. As the conflict took shape, it became evident that there was another potential threat, an organization with hands in the government and its agencies, and a profound interest in psionics like themselves.

The government had recently become aware of the existence of psionics. Her parents had actually been involved in the incident, which resulted in the government getting its hands on the means to awaken psi and build devices that could affect psi or even simulate it. He confided that the underground had been established by the very individuals the government had stolen those secrets from. As she listened, it seemed clear that the underground had a primary objective of keeping psionics like her out of the hands of that organization, to which end the underground was utterly ruthless. She asked him what the objective had been.

Tipping the authority off with a false lead had been Hunter’s way of verifying that they had not abducted Athena

By coming down on Vincent as swiftly as they had, they had assured Hunter that they took the rumor he fed them completely seriously. The authority knew about the underground, they had been indirectly responsible for creating it by trying to lock up the two psionics who had unwittingly betrayed the existence of psi to the government and shown them how to catalyze it. They had moved very fast to try and control psi, and lock up or employ as many psionics as they could find and the underground had acted just as swiftly to oppose them.

Because of the underground, independents, like the Avatar Families, had been able to stand the authority off and retain their autonomy. Since the authority did not have Athena, it was safe to assume that Eric did, because Hunter had personally confirmed that the rest of the Wild-Psi'd were innocent. Since Eric was more of a ghost than a man, he managed his material resources through the Wild-Psi'd. There was a list of safe houses they maintained at Eric’s suggestion. He had been checking those houses, and using them himself to incarcerate his own victims.

Hunter had put the pieces of the puzzle together and eventually figured out how to track his brother down. With Athena at his side, Hunter went to all of the safe houses on the list beginning with the locations where her friends were incarcerated. Chris, Jean, Erin, Lauren and Morgan were with them when they eventually discovered Athena’s prison. It ultimately did not shock him when the girl’s trail led him so close to his own home. Obviously, Eric had kept close tabs on the underground, or perhaps the authority. The place was equipped with devices which would fool a psionic into believing the house was deserted. A smart move, since the house was right next-door to where he lived.

Artemis, in a hurry to rescue her beloved soul mate, was the first to enter the cell. The sight that met her struck her cold to the depths of her soul. She dared to take the severed head into her arms and peer into the cold flesh to know her love’s last thoughts. It was more difficult than normal telepathy, reading the codes of memory that survived even death. Hunter had entered on her heels, and stood mute as she engaged in that final communion; assuring her privacy by instructing the others not to enter. Artemis restored the body, healing the fatal wound, but not even daring to try and reverse death itself. Hunter left her to her grieving embrace; he too had lost someone. It did not matter that he had tried to kill him; he had still loved his brother.