She - Followed

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Thunder rolled menacingly through the trees, echoing in the depths of her belly. She smiled at the odd sensation. The leaves danced in the wind as the storm rolled majestically on its back. The clouds were heavy, painted silver and black as they swallowed the sun. The promise of violence from the sky sat perfectly with her mood as she walked down the road. It had been an hour since she left the campus and set out to calm her thoughts. Instead, her mind had quickened with the approaching storm, her thoughts churning the misty depths of her subconscious. Her sensual smile turned into a hard grin.

*Is it really too much to ask to be left alone?*

*Obviously it is,* she told herself a moment later, as she sensed someone turning onto the road behind her. Morgan was used to being followed. She was used to the uncanny pressure that even the most circumspect pursuer created in her mind. As usual, the person following her was not alone. This one was working with a partner, and the two were so coordinated they had to be communicating with each other. The way the two presences she felt would fall periodically into a resonant state suggested telepathic contact. That only made the game more interesting. It was almost to be expected. No sooner did she try to slip out from under the oppressive cloud of thoughts unleashed in the wake of the delegation arriving to tour the campus than she picked up the presence of attention focused too keenly on her. The minds were unfamiliar to her. These were clearly not any of her regular observers. Her initial assumption had been that she had been pointed out to some of the delegates. Morgan did not bother to ask herself what interest anyone might have in a mere student. Despite her age, she had a reputation as distinctive as her appearance--if not quite as appealing. The flavor of those minds was unusual, evincing the qualities of recognition and attraction overlaying quiet depths of intrigue and concern.

Morgan had set out to lose her unwanted admirers--if indeed that was what they were. She had left the campus and cut through the streets of the surrounding community. She did not expect members of the senate delegation to abandon the purpose of their visit to pursue her, but these strangers did not seem to give the tour a second thought. If they truly were part of the delegation, they would have to be part of an official's entourage or security. It was difficult to read their minds, being limited to passive perception, but she had picked up enough to know that her pursuers were disciplined and motivated by a sense of duty.

They were also very good at staying out of sight. On the winding road she walked, her shadow could slip behind a tree as quickly as she could turn around. The two had dropped back once she had left behind the populated streets, but they had remained steadfastly on her tail. By this point, they knew she was sensing them, and she was certain that they were tracking her with equally enhanced sensed. Unless she made an effort to perceive them actively, she could not know who or what they really were, nor could she initiate any action against them or retaliate quickly to any initiative on their part. Of course, she did not dare to initiate any sort of engagement. Within the Human Establishment of the Aegis Empire, psionic assets were strictly regulated. It was not illegal to be psionic. Not precisely. It was simply against the law for a psionic to use her abilities without a license. A typical civilian license could be obtained by any psionic who could demonstrate restraint, precision and discretion in the control of her ability, and comprehension of the rules and restrictions governing Class I Psionic Activity. Morgan had a Class II license, and expected her pursuers to be at least that, if not Class III. Anyone who took an undue interest in her would know that her ability far outstripped the classification scheme. Only a fool would send someone after her who either did not possess enough potential, or could not get away with using it.

Anyone really interested in doing her in only had to trick her into exceeding her license.

Morgan frowned. She had been in the Avatar Program too long. A little bit of paranoia was to be expected of those enrolled in the program. Her experience had all but convinced her that someone was out to punch her ticket. It was not entirely her fault. Or, perhaps it was. It had been almost nine years, but still no one had forgotten her reaction to her mother's death. No one had been injured, and the campus had been rebuilt almost as quickly as her mind had torn it down.

Morgan stumbled to a halt.

It always happened like that. She still ached at the thought of her mother, and no matter how careful she was, her mind would wander right back to the memory of that day as soon as she became distracted or lowered her guard. Morgan's eyes had snapped shut in pain, and it took her a few moments to blink away the tears that had welled up. As her vision cleared, she realized that her mind had tricked her twice. While she was preoccupied with the presence of her silent pursuers, her feet had led her back to the last place she had seen her mother alive with her own eyes. Morgan debated silently whether or not to turn onto the path leading onto her mother's private estate. It was a large property, and the grounds had been the haven of her childhood. There were so many things she had not seen in the intervening years. Could she return to the haunts of her innocence and resist the temptation to visit that one spot now haunted by her mother's ghost?

Would she still find her mother's ghost if she did not?

It was the power of the mind that had finally lifted humanity from its isolation on Earth. It was the power of the mind that fueled and sustained the intergalactic civilization humanity had become a part of. In spite of how central the mind had become to the Established Races, there was still so much that no one knew about the mind. The ghost of her mother was a mystery that had challenged Morgan for almost a decade. Morgan did not really mind being haunted by her mother, but the questions of how and why were torture to her, for she feared she understood the cause only too well.

Her feet decided for her, carrying her through the front gate and down the main path. Morgan was not afraid to confront her mother's ghost. She simply wished for some way to do so without being forced to confront her self. As she approached the house, she paused and sent out a warning. This was sacred ground to her, and pursuers, whatever their intentions, were not welcome. A licensed psionic was free to do whatever she pleased in the privacy of her own home. As long as her influence did not extend beyond the bounds of her legal property, her mind had free reign. Morgan did not hesitate to remind her pursuers of that.

Morgan sensed the presence at the foot of the path behind her, pausing as the wind and dancing leaves all visibly stilled. The second presence joined the first to observe the leaves hovering silently in the grip of Morgan's mind. They watched as she swiftly sorted through the collection of animate and inanimate material, and released the birds and forest creatures from the static matrix of her psychokinetic field. Once she was certain she had made her point, she relaxed her grip and allowed nature to run its course. The wind could blow, and the rain could fall, and bodies could pass as before, but only at her indulgence. Morgan was actively asserting herself within the sphere of her mother's estate, and no one she knew had the power to challenge her once she was so aroused.

Morgan was not surprised that the pair simply stood at the edge of her mind's envelope and waited.

She shrugged, and focused her attention on the grounds around her. Her pulse and breathing had unconsciously quickened as she advanced on the house. That had nothing to do with the use of her psi, and everything to do with the dreadful and delighted anticipation of where she already knew she was going. Her face became flushed and damp, and her limbs began to tremble as she tried to slow her approach. It had been nine years, but she still did not think she was ready for this.

Swallowing hard, she managed to stop and turn around.

For a moment, one of her secret fears returned to her. Could her patrons, her masters and mentors, know her dark secret? Was this some kind of test? Were those two strangers deliberately herding her here to this confrontation? Her temperature abruptly dropped, and her skin prickled with goose bumps. If they did know, she was in danger. There were several kinds of danger that evolved from such an understanding of her past. If her masters had set this up, if this was any kind of test at all, it was not a test of self-control. If they knew, and had arranged this, it could only be because they were certain she would fail--because she was intended to fail. Her psyche had been studied in detail, mapped and analyzed to the point where her sanity frayed. If they wanted to provoke her, to make her give them an excuse to take her out, they would know exactly how to do it. This was nothing like looking in the mirror and seeing her mother's face. Everyone saw the resemblance there. If she went to the house and saw her mother there, it would prove her suspicions about what had really happened that day. She did not know how she would react to that, but she did have a basis of comparison.

Morgan tried to take a deep breath, feeling the part world she had taken absolute control over, and forced herself to relinquish her grip. No one had ever realized how much power she had unconsciously wielded as a child. No one had noticed her taking the campus into her mind as the final moments of her mother's life played out in the depths of space. No one had been prepared for the world to shatter when her mind was struck with the blow of her mother's death. If she had not channeled most of her power to her mother, in her last desperate defense, her grip could easily have encompassed the world, and the world would have shattered as easily as the three hundred acre campus. Morgan stood there panting and shuddering as she considered the course of her thoughts. It was all supposition, and the basic assumption was itself too dangerous to consider. She could not afford to believe that her secret was known. What she knew about that day, that terrible moment, was instinctive, intuitive, a flash of understanding as the memory played through her. She had never dared to think it, to frame it in concepts that another mind could recognize. Her guilt was perceived as survivor's guilt. There was no way for anyone to suspect. Who would conceive of it on her own? Morgan had never heard of anything like what feared she had done.

Morgan managed to get a hold of herself as the realization settled in. If her masters knew, they probably would not even bother with an excuse. They would not want to risk provoking another episode like that again. They would use the resources at their disposal to get her in her sleep. She would never have a warning, if it came to that. But, every moment she was alive she was assured that they did not know and that she was safe.

Just the same, Morgan found herself profoundly curious about the two who had followed her. She focused her eyes back on the trail and looked at them. Morgan straightened her spine as she realized that they had come into view and were approaching her. They must have taken the dismissal of her psychokinetic field as an invitation to approach. She quickly schooled her features. Her face looked calm and mildly curious as they came to a halt in front of her.

As hard as it was to compose herself before they good a good look at her, she struggled harder to maintain her poise as she realized the pair were not human. She no longer needed to ask them what their interest was.