Ember, the girl

Ash, the boy

Clay, the rival

Shale, the shocked witness

Rain, the thoughtful witness

Brand, the boy’s father (presumed)

Rowan, the boy’s mother (host)

Aspen, Rowan and Brand’s first daughter

Willow, Rowan and Brand’s second daughter

Finch, the academy adept (consulted about the ring)

Dancer, the girl’s athletics master (at the academy and in the underworld)

Lane, the boy’s second cousin

Heather, the second cousin’s friend (and fellow muse)

Confronting Rain, Ash asked him what he needed to talk to her so urgently about. He told her he had not been able to keep his mind off what had happened to her. She thought her father had explained the whole thing, but he shook his head. He understood how it had happened. For that matter, he had spent a good part of his life trying to figure out how to create spell or artifact capable of such a permanent transformation. It was *what* the ring had done to Ash, he emphasized, that he had spent so much time thinking about.

At first, she did not understand. He asked her a lot of questions about her change, how she felt about it, how she felt about herself before and after it happened, and about the potential of human minds to become either male or female, why an artifact would be designed to compel someone to develop as both male and female, and how a person knew which they really were. She had asked herself a lot of those questions, but as he asked them, she got the idea that he was trying to ask her to have sex with him and could not bring himself to ask outright. Instead, he was going to the trouble to find out if she considered herself a real girl, with a girl’s desires, and to assure her that he accepted her as such. Admired her deeply in fact.

She decided to make it easy for him and asked him directly if he was trying to repeat his offer to help end her ordeal. Ash assured him that she had always liked him and would be honored to have sex with him, if she was inclined to sleep with *any* male. Instead of reassuring him, that seemed to make him more upset. He asked her more questions. How would she feel if he had been the one who had changed? If she were the guy and he was the miraculous girl, and he proposed the same thing. Her experience with Ember came to her aid. She asserted that it depended solely on who he was, not what he happened to be. If she liked Rain the person, she would be happy to embrace Rain the girl.

In a spurt of abject honesty, she confessed that if she really liked the person, she might be tempted to change her sex just so she could embrace the person. Then she apologized to him for basically saying she did not like him *that* much as a person. Ash tried to explain that, if he loved a guy as much as he loved Ember, she would be able to sleep with him. Rain admitted he knew exactly what she meant, with a sigh. He doubled back quickly asserting that he did want her and that was the problem. She raised her eyebrows at that. How could that be the problem? He took a deep breath and tried to explain. When Rain saw Ash become a girl, he had experienced an epiphany. When he realized that he was still overwhelmingly attracted to her, he felt crushed. And he had been consumed by doubts ever since.

Ash faced him squarely and asked him if he was trying to tell her he was gay. He gave her a shocked look, then burst out laughing—so hard he started crying. She became alarmed at the sound of pain in that awful outburst. After he calmed down, he sighed deeply and came right out with it. He was not gay, or maybe he was considering, but that was not his problem. His problem was, *he* was a *girl*. In mind, or in spirit at least.

After seeing how the tomboy had changed, the friend confided his temptation and asked the tomboy's advice. The tomboy was stunned when her friend confessed his desire to use the ring, claiming he should have been born a girl. The tomboy explained how the ring worked, and that the effects were permanent without possession of the ring, but her friend was not discouraged.

The tomboy granted her friend's request but then had to explain when the other boy who witnessed the tomboy's transformation arrived in search of the friend who went missing. The tomboy tried to explain the situation. The other boy calmed down only to become upset again when he recognized his missing friend as a girl. Before the tomboy could resume her explanation, the girl showed up and realized what they had done.

The transformation of her friend into a girl confronted the tomboy with certain facts and convinced her that being born and raised a boy was no obstacle to being a girl.

08

Ash frowned in confusion and said she did not understand. Rain calmly and carefully explained to her about a problem called gender dysphoria. He had it. He had grown up different, instinctively identifying as a female. He had been confident he would grow up to be a girl, despite the fact that he was being raised as a boy. He had not understood the differences between sexes until he was confronted with the biological facts. The facts changed his life, turning it into a nightmare. He tried to adjust, but he just did not have the instincts of a boy. He had been persecuted mercilessly, beaten and taunted by other boys. Every time they called him a girl, he felt secretly vindicated, but merely surviving depended on convincing everyone that he was a boy.

His story anguished and outraged her. The same kind of pressure had caused her to reject the expression of herself as a girl when it manifested. He went on to describe the nightmare of adolescence, and being forced to confront his parents with his problem. His parents had sent him to a therapist who sadly informed them that their son’s problem was tragically real. The phenomenon had existed as long as humans had, and only recently begun to be understood. There was no cure for gender dysphoria, and the only treatment that relieved the suffering it caused was hormone replacement and in an astonishing number of cases, sex reassignment surgery.

He told her that the reason he had such an androgynous appearance was because he had begged to be allowed to take anti-androgens to prevent his body from changing irrevocably into something that could never pass for female. He was fighting to be allowed to take hormones to encourage female development and saving money to have the surgery as soon as he turned eighteen. The fact that an appallingly high percentage of transsexuals who pursued transition fell prey to rape, assault and murder, or risked an insanely high suicide rate for avoiding transition, could not discourage him. The only hope he had of feeling like he belonged in his body was to make it as close to female as possible.

Ash could hardly believe it. She believed him, but the idea that there were people who were literally trapped in bodies hopelessly alien to them was appalling. That people would desperately seek to neuter themselves just to possess an approximation of a gender appropriate form was utterly depressing. But now she understood Rain’s problem. He knew it was possible for a boy to change into a girl, literally. He had seen it. To know that and suddenly be beset by doubt because he discovered that he was attracted to her in an entirely male way—it had to have shaken him. Or her, she noted.

She considered the matter and made an observation. The body could have a tremendous impact on the mind, and the mind had the potential to respond to the impulses that were uniquely male or uniquely female. The attraction he felt, she suggested, was largely physical. The fact that Rain, as a person, a mind, had already become attracted to her as a person, first male and then female, only proved that he desired her for who she was as much as he was attracted to her for what she was. Besides, sexual orientation had nothing to do with sexual identity. For all Rain knew, his circumstances had encouraged him to become bisexual, to allow for his instinctive and acquired tastes. She suggested that, if he really did want her, it would both ease and clear his mind to have her. He realized he could not argue with that.

They proceeded carefully at first, then became carried away. He was a virgin, it turned out, but he had obviously given sex a lot of thought and curled her toes with little effort. They lay for a while locked together when they were done. Finally, she asked him. He said his feelings about himself had not changed, but he was much relieved to have gotten the impulse out of his system. She told him she could change him, but, if she told him he would never be able to be a guy again, would he still risk it? He assured her he would, without the least hesitation. Paying special attention to what he was asking her to remove forever, she lifted him to the heavens and asked again. He answered the same. Pleasure was nice, but his soul cried out for peace within himself. She closed her eyes and confronted herself silently. She had to do it. She turned her mind to the problem and took him apart on a molecular level. Ash rebuilt her as the female version of herself. It took a heartbeat to do.

Rain sat up carefully and examined herself. The floodgates opened, and she was laughing and crying again, but this time with the sweet ring of joy. She quickly got hold of herself, and hugged Ash. As she let go, she lamented how unfortunate it was that she had not been like this when Ash was a guy. Ash smiled at her and explained that she still was a guy. The boy she had been was still inside her, and she brought him out. Rain almost did not believe it. He offered to return the favor, and Rain stammered her wholehearted demand that he would or else. He checked her, to ensure she would not be able to get pregnant and broke her in with all the skill he possessed.

It was very late when they finally stopped. A quick swim freshened them up, and Ash reverted to her female default. Rain drove them to Ember’s home, and Ash snuck her into the house. She quickly explained to Ember, and they put the neo-girl to bed with them. Rain fell into a warm, fuzzy sleep at once. Ash confessed to her fiancée, that she had resisted Clay but exchanged favors with Rain whole-heartedly. Ember assured her that she understood, and that Ash had done the right thing.

Confronting Shale—and Rain’s Transformation

It was a Tuesday, so they did not have any classes to go to. Ember and Ash woke early to slip Rain out of the house. They had made plans to go shopping and Rain’s car enabled them to set out on their own. Ash had solved a problem for Rain but created one for herself and Ember. They were not sure that their parents would approve of what she had done for her friend. The world they lived in had forced their parents to impose strict rules on when, where and how there were allowed to use their powers, and this might well have crossed the line. They discussed it silently while touring the mall for must-haves and bargains.

While they were shopping a visitor came to Ember’s house looking for Ash. Shale had copied the return address from Ash’s letter into the dojo’s database for his father before taking the letter to show Rain. It had not been hard to guess where Rain went haring off to, but the mystery of why had gnawed at him until he had to go after him and find out. He did not see Rain’s car there but saw no reason not to ask for Ash. Ash might have already seen Rain and if not, they could wait for him to show up together. At the house he was told that Ash had gone shopping at the mall and might not be back until dinner. Shale asked for directions to the mall and set off to find her there.

The girls had completed their preliminary tour of the mall and set off for the food court to discuss their shopping lists. Ash and Ember had silently agreed that they would have to present their problem to their parents and face the music. The girls doubted they would object to Rain’s transformation once they knew the facts. It was a common belief among psionics that the division of the sexes had a lot to do with why people almost never tapped into their psi potential. Ambisexuality was not a prerequisite for psi, but the social and environmental impact of gender typing did in fact contribute to the atrophy of the mind.

Shale saw them before they saw him. The sight of Ash and Ember caused him to do a double take, on account of their resemblance, but the real shock was recognizing Rain. He flat out said it. *You’re a girl!* That caught their attention, as well as that of many other passers-by. Rain almost turned and fled. Ash caught her arm and dragged her along as they closed on Shale, before he managed another outburst. Realizing that they could not talk to Shale there in the middle of the mall, they escorted him out, nearly having to drag both him and Rain as they stared at each other in different states of shock.

Rain was worried that she was on the verge of losing her best friend, and Shale was just plain blown out of his mind. On the way in, Shale had spotted and parked next to Rain’s car, so it was there waiting when they arrived at Rain’s. Rain’s car would not start. That roused Shale from his stupor. He used his key to Rain’s car to open the trunk and then went under the hood to return the battery to its proper place. He explained that he had not wanted Rain to be able to drive off until he found him—her. Rain asked if Ash or Ember could drive—Ember had gotten her driver’s license the day after her birthday—and asked them to follow in her car while she rode with Shale and explained things to him.

Ash and Ember agreed, that was best. In fact, Rain should not have been driving that morning, since she no longer possessed a valid driver’s license, and presenting her old one if she got pulled over would cause a whole world of trouble. Ember led the way back out to the new house, where they could manage privacy even if crews were there working on it. When they arrived, Rain and Shale were arguing. They did not get out of the car, and glared at the twins when they interrupted to tell them where to meet them when they came in.

Ash and Ember looked in and saw that there were in fact crews at work, painters and carpet layers. They picked their way through and found sanctuary in the atrium off of the upper pool. They debated for a while whether it was safe for them to indulge in their favorite pastime and decided that most of the guys looked fine enough to invite into their little bower if they happened to get caught. The alternative was to worry about Rain, or worry about Rain and Shale, or worry about Rain and their parents. This was one of those times when worrying could accomplish nothing, so they teased each other’s clothes off and cheerfully distracted each other. Neither of them took the lead, instead, Ember produced her real twin and treated her lover to a threesome.

They were interrupted, but it was Shale, with Rain in tow, and the sight of yet one more of them amazed, amused and delighted the couple. The trio noticed that Rain and Shale were standing, hand in hand, and concluded that a history of crossed signals had finally gotten straightened out. Ash introduced Shale to Ember, and Ember, and let them explain themselves to the bewildered boy. While Shale absorbed that, Rain silently stripped down behind him. He did not notice until she wrapped herself tightly around him and reached into his pants.

Shale nearly jumped out of them. Before he could tell her to stop, she reminded him about who he had told all of his sexual fantasies to. One of his favorites involved being overwhelmed by gorgeous blonds and redheads. Ash got up and quickly examined Rain, then Shale, and assured them they were both clean, healthy and none of the girls were at risk of pregnancy. Shale was no virgin. Nor was he intimidated by four willing girls. He did surprise them by stating that, tempting as the offer was, he only wanted Rain. Rain nearly fainted with delight.

Later, after talking and bonding had reached their climax, they reminded themselves that Rain and Ash desperately needed new clothes. Keeping three girls dressed would stress Ember’s wardrobe past its limits. They stretched the day to include all the shopping, a nice dinner, and a movie—the second in two days, Ash was thrilled to note. They arrived at Ember’s house at dusk and stopped to collect their wits. It was time to brave the parents in their den.

09

Confronting Necessity, Awakening and Training Rain and Shale

The girls led Rain and Shale inside and introduced them to Ember’s family. None of them had ever seen the two before and silently enquired if the two were active or latent. Willow, particularly, eying Shale with feminine interest. It was an irony that a psi could sense a person’s potential but not determine immediately if that person had tapped it or not. A psi actually had to touch the person, mind to mind, to tell—and of course risk catalyzing a latent potential. By saying that they had not checked, Ash and Ember only confirmed that they had not witnessed either friend utilizing psi.

Occasionally, the Families approved of waking someone, usually when they had exceptional untapped potential. In the past few generations, the Families had grown to the point that their children constantly kept an eye out for such promising latents, in search of fresh blood. Willow, in particular, had an interest in finding and marrying a virgin—a popular description of a latent psionic—and breaking him in herself. Rain sensed her interest and asserted her claim on Shale, by taking his hand and interposing her body between him and Willow.

Willow’s eyes took on a wicked gleam and she allowed herself a smug smile. The promise of competition only enhanced her interest, filling her with anticipation. Brand came out to find out what the commotion was, drawn more in search of Brand who had excused himself to meet his daughter’s friends and had lingered to watch his middle daughter finally taking interest in a man. Brand recognized the couple immediately, only, the last time he had seen them, they had been a couple of boys.

Brand confronted the girls, demanding they explain Rain’s condition. Willow inquired about what was wrong with Rain and raised her eyebrows in amusement at the answer. The story of Ash’s metamorphosis in front of normal witnesses was dragged out. Brand had initially assumed that Rain’s transformation had been spontaneous, and hoped that the girls would confirm that, but Ash admitted freely to changing her. Brand sighed deeply and gave her the lecture.

When Brand got to the part where he commanded Ash to change the neo-girl back, Rain stridently opposed him. Brand turned to confront her. He gave her a lecture about the dangers of playing games with the bodies and minds of latents. Rain asserted that it had not been a game, but a miracle cure. She was forced to explain the medical condition she had suffered under, and how Ash had saved her from a life of hell. Shale backed her up, having known what a pitiful and unhappy boy Rain had been.

Brand, as a doctor, asked Rain if she could support her claims, and Rain went out to her car to produce the files and records she kept in a traveling folder, since she often had to travel halfway across the state for tests, treatment and therapy. With support for her story, the adults agreed that she should not be changed back. That would be unusually cruel. Ash was still given a sound tongue lashing for failing to consult an adult, or checking Rain’s story, before acting.

To Rain, they explained that the world did not willingly accept miraculous transformations. Because her condition and treatment had been documented, it was possible to introduce her to their own community as a post operative female—with Brand able to assert that she had privately arranged for and followed a regimen of hormone replacement, followed by surgery performed by him. Brand was known as the best reconstructive surgeon in the business, who lamentably devoted himself primarily to researching and developing surgical techniques. Officially, he generally worked with hand-selected candidates, who received free treatment in exchange for serving as the test beds for new procedures. Such would be the official case with Rain.

Rain would have to instruct his parents to come down and sign off on the agreement, since Rain was a minor. That way Rain would be able to correct his official identity legally and enter school with Ash and Ember in the fall. Typically, post-operative transsexuals elected to move and obscure their past, so the official story was only intended for bureaucratic consumption. To the rest of the world, she was free to present herself as a natural born female. To do otherwise was to court disaster. He recommended that she not get pregnant. The problem with her cover was, if she had children and someone bothered to check her background, unpleasant questions would be roused.

That was a potential problem. The immediate problem was Rain, Shale, and by necessity Rain’s parents, would all be fully aware of the truth about psi. A thousand, or five hundred, or even one hundred years ago, a psi stood a chance of escaping the pyre if a witch-hunt got started. In the modern world, a witch-hunt was still possible, but more likely to provoke a kind of war only the Bible hinted at. Psionics survived in the modern world by remaining invisible and intangible. When normal people noticed them, stories inevitably got started and inevitably spread to those who waited hungrily for leads to true psionics, and a hunt would be started.

Rain and Shale were good people, but it was not their own necks at risk. Psionics who killed normals to keep their secrets were the worst threat to psionics and were hunted down by their own kind. There would be no threats to keep Rain and Shale in line, or silent, inscrutable eliminations to negate the threat they posed to the psionics they knew about. There was a simpler, more reliable way to keep normals from betraying psionics. Turn them into psionics themselves. The potential was universal; the only secret was tapping into it.

Rain and Shale were surprised. They asked if they really had the potential to do the things Ash had demonstrated that first, eventful day. Brand explained that the potential for psi had evolved before humans had. In humans it was constantly being refined and enhanced, for the most part by the very pressures that typically kept if from becoming fully expressed. Psionics like Ash were perhaps one in a billion, but latents with the same level of potential she possessed were closer to one in a million. Rain and Shale were in that category.

Willow had already guessed that, and the question she asked whiffed of disappointment. She asked if her parents were saying they were going to take the two of them in and initiate them. Under the circumstances, there was no option. They needed to be awakened to their potential and trained to harness and use it properly. Willow sighed and realized her plans for Shale were not compatible with that, and she did not dare interfere with her parents on such a sensitive point. Rain and Shale were warned, in the same way that psionics policed themselves to weed out casual killers, they also weeded out those who could not control their own power. They really had to be careful, learn quickly and correctly, and make no mistakes.

Except in the rare instance where a psi and a normal are certain of each other, psionics did not talk openly about the existence, application, articulation, or expression of their ability. They would have to learn the two basic abilities, what they would call telepathy and telekinesis, right away. They were the abilities most commonly expressed in children, and least likely to be noticed if they made small slips. Their first experience with both abilities would come from the people in that room. But that would have to begin in the morning.

It was already late, and people needed to get to bed for school and work the next day. The meeting was adjourned, and the four of them dismissed to bathe and go to bed. The girl’s bath was governed by Japanese custom. Any or all the girls in the house might be in there at any time, scrubbing down in a large open stall with four faucets and shower heads, or soaking in the huge basin across from it. It could be entered from the hall through the dressing room, or directly from the girls’ bedrooms or the utility room. Ember, Ash and Rain washed each other down and then retired to the big tub to talk.

Shale was taken by Brand to the guest bathroom, across the hall from the master bedroom in opposite wing of the house. Shale took a quick shower and considered what had happened that day. He had spent his life pursuing the acme of martial arts, chi. He had already begun to learn how to focus and channel his body’s natural energy. When he had first confronted psi, he had actually sensed it, recognized it. Now he was going to learn to harness it. He had meant to discuss this with Rain, so he slipped into shorts and a shirt and went looking for her.

On his way out, he confronted Aspen, who told him the sleeping arrangements. Ember, Ash and Rain, being female in mind and body, were tripled up in Ember’s room. Shale, as the only guy, had to sleep in guest room—with its two double beds—with Brand. It was that or give Shale the couch in the den. He accepted the spare bed in the guest room. He explained that he needed to talk to Rain for a minute, when she tried to lead him back the way he had come. Aspen assured him that Rain would be in the bath for a while and handed him a stack of sheets and blankets.

Aspen went in to bathe herself and told Rain to go talk to Shale, when she was done. Rain borrowed a robe from Ember and went to the guest room to find out what her best, and boy, friend wanted. He had lain down on the bed after making it up to wait for her and had fallen asleep. Rain cuddled up next to him on the bed and tried to tease him awake. Brand walked in and chased her out of the room before he did.

10

Confronting Psi—and Rain’s Parents

In the morning, Ash and Ember had to part company with Rain and Shale. They wanted to sit in as their friends were confronted with the facts about psi, but their parents insisted they had their own educations to attend to. After breakfast, they left, and Brand and Brand drove over to the new house with Rain and Shale. The men excused the work crews that were there—just cleaning up after the last of the painting and carpeting.

Brand asked Rain if she knew where her parents would be at that time of day. Rain explained that her parents worked from home, which was on a large property on the Klamath River. Brand nodded; he had been out to her house once for a party they had thrown. Brand announced that it would be best if they collected her parents. To explain what had happened to Rain, they would need to understand what Rain and Shale now understood and thus undergo the same initiation.

Rain explained that it was a six- or seven-hour drive, but Brand just shook his head. There was a lot for the kids to learn. He turned his attention to the world and focused on the house where Rain had grown up. He stated that there were times when a person traveled openly, and times when a person just showed up and departed unseen. With that, he teleported. He appeared standing on the front porch.

Brand rang the bell and announced that he had come to pick them up. They recognized him and asked him what he meant. He explained that something had happened to their son, and he had come to take them to him, and help explain what had happened. They were immediately concerned. He assured them that she was not hurt, and they almost failed to catch the pronoun. When they asked, he stated that it would be simplest to show them and asked if they were coming.

As they nodded, he gathered them up in his mind and teleported them back to the new home with them. They were startled, asking themselves what had just happened. Brand assured them there would be explanations, but they had to see their daughter first. At which point, they noticed Rain, staring in shock at their sudden appearance. They recognized her and forgot their sudden dislocation to marvel at her miraculous transformation. They had to assure themselves that they were seeing a female Rain and not a clever make over.

Rain’s mother made the necessary confirmation, at which point she was totally willing to accept the impossible as merely improbable. Rain’s father took his wife’s report to heart and asked the necessary question: How had it happened? Brand, with Rain and Shale’s help, told the story of Ash’s transformation—and the following chain of events. With that introduction, he formally introduced them to the subject of psionics.

Psi potential had evolved undetected, and in most cased unexpressed, in the human race. Science had never grasped it, simply because conventional science had overlooked the most obvious component of reality—the mind. He briefly explained the difference between physics and psionics but interrupted himself to address the reason they had been brought to that place.

Bringing them and confronting them with Rain established the fact that psi was real. They needed to understand that first to deal with the situation that confronted them. They were familiar with Rain’s problem and hopefully approved of its resolution. They enthusiastically approved. Their only problem with Rain’s medical condition was the fact that nothing satisfactory could be done about it, so this miracle was absolutely welcome. Brand pointed out, it had one drawback. By curing Rain, they had confronted Rain’s entire family with unfamiliar consequences.

Psionics had no ulterior motive for keeping their powers to themselves. They had learned through bitter experience that their power was as much a curse as a blessing. Individually, normal people embraced the possibility and delighted in the reality of psi. On that small scale, people could come to terms with it and embrace the potential within themselves with proper guidance. On a larger scale, the discovery that a single person or a small percentage of the population had such awesome abilities provoked almost fatally negative reactions. In all of history, there had never been enough psionics in a population to achieve a safe, sane awakening of that entire population.

The only successful group awakenings had been on the scale of families. The awakening of a single member of a family typically resulted in misunderstanding and conflict. Spontaneous awakenings had established that reliably. The essence of the problem was that a parent was responsible for a child. If the child—and children were far more prone to awakening—did not have her parents’ confidence, her power often caused problems for her and her family. Because psi power was potentially dangerous, a child needed guidance and support in handling it. A parent needed psi abilities of his own to be able to manage her.

Because they were responsible for Rain, her parents needed to be a part of her awakening. Shale interrupted to ask why his parents had not been summoned then. Brand explained that his parents already were. His father had come into psi on his own, as a product of his devotion to martial arts, and awakened his wife. It was the reason Brand had sought him out. Shale, he explained, had been in the process of guided awakening, through the only process his father had known to accomplish it. Brand had improved his understanding of psi during his stay.

Shale’s father had been the reason Brand had simply left Shale and Rain behind after their exposure to psi. If they had waited, instead of following Ash, they would have been initiated by him. That brought him back to Rain. He explained to her parents the decision they had made. Brand explained the cover he had arranged for Rain’s reintroduction as a girl, and his intention to act as her guardian while she finished school there. If she were to go back to her home the way she was, only a miracle could explain her change. But, after a few years away, she could return if she wished, and say it was all hormones and surgery.

Rain’s parents accepted that arrangement and said the money they had been putting aside for that surgery would certainly pay her room and board. Brand then explained that Shale’s father was able to see to their own education, and Shale’s, if they were unable to relocate themselves. Shale protested at that. He had no intention of leaving Rain. With a red face he explained that he had proposed marriage to her. Rain’s parents where both shocked and delighted to hear that and insisted that he stay and protect their daughter from the wolves.

Brand examined the young man and announced that he was welcome to stay in his house until the two of them were ready to go off on their own. Brand accepted that and said he would see his parents and talk to them about it. He then returned to the subject of psionics. He explained the nature and workings of psi, and the theories and mechanics behind it. He demonstrated a number of abilities and then tested them all for ability.

Rain surprised herself by actually doing the things he asked her to try. She seemed to have a grasp of the six primary aspects of psi, and sufficient control for the primary abilities. Apparently, the experience of being taken apart, redesigned and put back together had shocked her mind awake. Shale was able to demonstrate chi, but the discipline of his mind actually made him more resistant to such shocks and thus no closer to being awake in that sense. Rain’s parents were able to manage a little bit of ESP, perhaps as a response to being teleported.

Brand took them back home and spent the rest of the day with them, introducing them to Shale’s parents and making arrangements for the two couples to work with each other and for Shale to remain with Rain. Brand worked with Rain and Shale, but Rain benefited the most from his efforts. They were joined in the late afternoon by Ash and Ember, who had stayed after gymnastics for martial arts instruction with Dancer. The four of them elected to stay the night at the new house, since the next day was free for the two girls.

11

Confronting Decision, Shale’s Transformation

Before their fathers left, they talked to their daughters about sex. In a psionic household, secrets did not keep, so the matter was hardly closed to discussion. Aside from ensuring that they were protecting themselves, their fathers wanted to remind them that normal people were as odd about sex as they were about psi. The fact that they were so erotically charged was natural, psi stimulated the brain intensely, and the resulting increased sex drive was actually a survival mechanism. A psionic could very easily lose touch with her body. A fully developed psionic could actually survive without it, but without it she could easily lose touch with reality. A body served as the seat and anchor of the mind. Physical activity and stimulation engaged the mind with the world, and nothing engaged the mind as fully or intensely as sex.

The men assured them that they were free to indulge themselves, they encouraged it mightily, but they asked them to stop sneaking around like guilty children. They were concerned about them putting themselves at risk by foolishly trying to avoid parental censure. All that mattered to a parent was that a child be safe, and they were free to use the new house as their playground, but aside from that, they should restrict themselves to their own home. Ember’s family had been waiting for her to come of age—it would have been rude to flaunt their own sexuality in front of a child who was not ready for an openly sexual environment—to implement the policy of free and full expression in the house.

In their new house, there would be no rules or taboos. Clothing would be optional, and any safe and healthy recreation openly encouraged. The girls were amazed and asked if they were serious. They answered that society had a lot of warped views and ideas, but most of them due to the fact that most people were naked and helpless and uncertain about themselves. For people like them, it was sheer folly to live that way. Ash and Rowan’s intention in starting a family was to create an island where people could be openly and unapologetically true to themselves.

Ash sensed that there was more, and she was right. The men explained that all people are possessed with natural drives and appetites which society regarded as abnormal. That was not the case. The truth was, if such desires were pursued by people who could not or did not take suitable precautions and responsibility, tragic and unfortunate outcomes could result. It took a moment to read between the lines, but both girls realized at the same time that their fathers were advertising that they had a healthy and natural interest in their daughters—which, if proper precautions were taken, was entirely true.

Ash was struck suddenly with the realization that—just as a girl could also be a boy—a father could also be a man. Looking at her father as a man, she realized at once that she would be thrilled to have him. The fact that he was her father, whom she loved and trusted more than any man in the world, only enhanced her awakened desire. And to be honest with herself, her first thoughts about expressing herself as a girl had been of him. She looked him over meaningfully and asked when the new rules went into effect.

Brand caught her real message. He told her they would discuss it, but he assumed they could wait until suitable amenities were in place. She smiled at him; he obviously wanted to bed her properly. She agreed that there was much to talk about. The men left and Rain and Shale confronted Ash and Ember. The girls asserted that the couple had interpreted that exchange correctly. They debated that for a bit, but the girls’ eyes had opened a bit more. Life imposed certain limits, and people responded by imposing even more limits, compromising themselves because they had made or accepted compromises. People accepted too many limitations and ultimately cheated themselves of what life really had to offer.

For the rest of the evening, the four engaged themselves in the exploration of their bodies and minds. It was very frustrating for Shale, who was excluded from full participation on one side by his lack of access to psi, and was excluding himself from full participation on the other on account of his professed devotion to Rain. He saw no reason for Rain not to indulge in adventurous sex with other girls but would not allow himself to touch either Ash of Ember. As it finally got dark, his frustration led him to a solution to both problems.

He had given a lot of thought to Rain’s effortless opening, and Ash’s evolution, and wondered if there was some chance that his untapped potential lay coiled up in the neglected feminine side of himself. He brought it up when they slipped back to the old house for a late dinner. He presented his musings and suggested being changed into a girl on the theory that it might shock him awake.

The adults, and the older sisters, stared at him in surprise. He argued that he had always accepted things the way they were. When the notion of actually being female had first come to him, it had been patently impossible. Now he knew it was not, and in fact, a potential he possessed as certainly as that of psi. If, as might happen, being turned into a girl caused him to suffer the way Rain had suffered at being male, he would have additional incentive to change back, but if, as was equally possible, his psi was lying dormant in the same shadows as his anima, he might never tap into it without first changing.

He was warned that he was making a radical decision, and that he might well be compelled to remain female. No one objected to that, in particular—except for maybe Rain—but it presented potential legal problems. He did not have a history like Rain’s to support a plausible cover story. He would be faced with having to create an entirely new identity, which the government frowned on, and thus invested significant resources in trying to prevent. That was playing with fire, since arousing official interest in a psionic was not generally approved of.

Nevertheless, when Shale persisted, assuring him he was prepared to take those risks, they humored him. He asked Ash to do the honors, as she had with Rain. She asked Shale silently if she wanted to be broken in like Rain as well, once she had finished. Shale looked at her, sensing the boy within her looking out. Her mind was ringing with excitement at what her chi sensitized perceptions had observed, radically adjusting itself to a new order of perception. She thought she would have to get used to the idea of being a girl before she could answer that question.

They gathered up blankets and pillows and returned to the new house. They were all girls now, and Shale was willing to let them help her explore her new condition. She saw no immediate change in her grasp of psionics, but she was at least free to participate freely in their other activities. Rain seemed no less attractive to her and found Shale as a girl very attractive. She assured her boyfriend that she could love her the same if it happened that she never wanted to change back.

Ash confided that a similar statement had helped her come to terms with the prospect herself. Shale was a little nervous at that, but she had meant it when she said she was prepared for the possibility. As a girl, Shale finally felt free to express the feelings she had had for Ash since her own transformation. She did not notice when Rain and Ember wandered off, but she noticed as Ember came back and devoted her full attention to Shale and Ash.

Ember had left Rain in the company of her other, who was making up for the poor girl’s sudden, unexpected loss of male attention. Rain deeply enjoyed the company and attention of other girls, but at present she needed the embrace of a man and had kept her mouth shut about it instead of creating problems for Shale. Asking him to remain a guy and possibly give up the chance of awakening his potential, just to make her happy, was not to be allowed. Besides, she had been curious about Ember’s male side. As identical to Ash, the way she had first met him, as Ash, the way she had become, was to Ember. Ember, as a guy, was amazing—the embodiment of the lover of Ember’s dreams—an ideal, whereas Ash had been merely, wonderfully, real.

12

Confronting Shale

The night and evening before had been busy, but the day ahead would be even busier. Rain could only claim to have gotten more sleep than the others, in truth she had washed up and nested down only a quarter hour before the others joined her. They only slept for an hour or two and then were up again. For a psi, it was possible to regenerate with only an hour’s sleep. Shale bounced back so quickly the others thought she was beginning to tap into her psi. Shale corrected them; chi was also useful for restoring and maintaining proper health and balance. They started talking about chi, but that brought up martial arts, and Ash jumped up and slapped herself

Just as her own change had taken the edge off of her martial arts, Rain and Shale would be suffering the same difficulty. Rather than allow them to discover it the way she had—in a fight—she dragged them all out on the lawn for a quick retraining session. She condensed the lessons Jack Dancer had given her and passed the essential points on to them. As they practiced, an audience formed of men arriving to work on the house. They were discrete and tried not to be noticed for fear of startling the naked girls and ending the show.

The girls finally did notice the men and quickly retired to the pool. They were fortunate that they had not been using psi, but they had been addressing Shale by her given name. A couple of the men confronted Shale about that, and she thought fast. She explained the French pronunciation of the name Shale, and her friends caught on immediately. Since the presence of the men forbade the use or open discussion of psi, the girls retreated to one of the upper pools and discussed the proposals of Ash and Ember’s fathers.

The four of them were unhappy at the intrusion, since the idea had been to spend the day working with Rain and Shale on psi. Unable to fight it, they switched topics when they sensed the men coming into earshot to plans for the coming Friday night. They were relieved when Brand showed up and explained that the young men who were working on the house were all members of the Families. There had been some normals among them from time to time, outside contractors, but the main crew were all distant relatives making extra money while enjoying the opportunity to work with their hands and in certain cases their minds.

They had not been informed as a test, to see if they would be discrete in the presence of strangers. They had done well and were now free to exercise their minds within the walls of the atrium. The men would act as spotters and inform them if an outsider came in, before they could be spotted. While he was there, Brand showed up, and the two of them were dragged aside by their daughters. It was a quick private exchange. Brand almost excused himself, but the subject of chi was brought up, and he stayed for the discussion.

Chi was a related phenomenon but differed from psi in significant ways. Chi was mastered through physical discipline, or rather mental discipline over the body. Chi was energy harvested from the world, from matter and energy, and closer to emotion than thought. Psi was innate, personal power, and was summoned from within. Only with great difficulty could psi be harvested from other sources and harnessed by an individual. Chi could only be harvested from other sources, from the energy that constantly bled out of the manifest world. The law of entropy assumed that the energy bled was irrecoverable, but in truth it pooled and flowed and could be tapped from its original sources or the reservoirs it eventually settled into.

Shale was finally able to explain why she had been so sensitive to psi. The bleed from psionic energy was a perfect fuel for chi. Just being around the three psionic girls all night had kept her chi batteries fully charged and allowed her to shed fatigue and function efficiently in a quick nap and stay charged through the intense physical activities of the night and the day. The other three girls became very interested in chi and could now share Shale’s frustrations as they struggled to tap into that unfamiliar resource. The two men assured them that once they digested the matter, they would realize that potential almost effortlessly. They were making the same mistake with chi that Shale was with psi. Looking, as hard as one could, only made finding it harder than it had to be.

Rain was feeling fairly comfortable with her psi, at this point. The four of them decided that it would be safe enough, and wise in light of the men’s advice, to take a break. They went to the old house to clean up and change clothes. Following lunch, they headed out to the mall. It was Shale’s turn to be outfitted. At the mall, Lane and Heather jumped in, following introductions to Rain and Shale. Lane and Heather found Rain and Shale intriguing, an odd mix of self-consciousness and self-possession. They were not awkward about being female, just a bit shy and naïve. In matters that did not remind them of their physical condition, they were as bold and adventurous as ever.

In an odd encounter, when Shale lagged behind the others, she found herself confronted by the kind of guy she would have made heroic efforts to befriend as a boy. He was obviously athletic and seemed to be the kind of guy who got along very well with girls. He spotted her in a store and struck up an easy conversation. He noted that she was new to the area and invited her to a party the following night. Shale initially thought it might be a bad idea, but her quirky and adventurous nature rebelled at once at the thought that someone might not approve. Too bad for them, it was her decision, and her answer was yes. They exchanged numbers and parted company.

Shale kept the encounter to herself. If she announced that she was going on a date her friends would undoubtedly tease her. They did not know it, but they were still treating her more as a guy than a girl, and it had not been until that boy confronted her that she had really been made to feel like a girl. It aroused her curiosity. Ash’s offer was still on her mind, but for some reason her attitude toward Shale made her feel like a guy in a dress. She felt no urgency to sleep with a guy who saw her as a guy. She had no idea what sort of reaction she would have to a guy who saw her as a girl.

Not yet, but she intended to find out. They finished their shopping and returned home, by parental request, for dinner. Dinner was a pleasant affair—Shale took the opportunity to explain the name change and muse aloud about making it official—followed by an intense discussion of the night’s sleeping arrangements. Rain and Shale wanted to go back out to the new house, but Ash and Ember needed to go to school the next day and could not join them. Or not entirely. Ember’s other could go with them, since two of her could not go to school. Ash almost objected to being left out, but Ember reminded her that they could stand to enjoy an evening alone together.

Ember left with Rain and Shale, while staying behind with Ash, after dessert. Neither group got much sleep. There was too much temptation to play, and sex was the one activity that never got old. Ember was curious about Ash’s progress, wondering how long she would need to balance her two sides and when she would face the decision about which side she would commit to. Ash confessed that she did not know. Her own thoughts had been more about the resemblance between them, how chance, and common ancestry, had made them perfect twins. Ember tried to debate the term, but Ash shocked her by saying she had checked it out. They were genetically identical.

It raised a haunting question. Did they dare have children together? A detailed examination, possible for a psionic, revealed that there were no risks. Genetically, they were both perfectly clean. Their child, if they had one, would be identical to them, due to the fact that their codes were thoroughly reinforced. They really were the culmination of a thousand years of selective breeding; they had become an archetype. Only by breeding out would that perfect reinforcement be compromised. Their parents had to have known it, and it explained why they had schemed to hook them up.

13

Introducing Aaron and Confronting Erin

Ash and Ember rose and prepared quickly for school. On their way to class, they were confronted by Clay again. As Ash had feared, he had become more forward with her after their date. If Ember were the jealous type, she might have fumed a bit, but instead she was just amused. Clay’s interest that morning surprised them, however. He confessed to Ash his deep affection but asserted that his interest in Ember had not paled and wanted to be sure she would not take offense if he pursued it.

Ash became amused and gave him her blessing, then watched as he leaned on Ember. He went through the same routing seeking her confidence to inquire if she were offended by him sharing his affections with her sister. Ember knew exactly how far his affections had gotten him with Ash and assured him that she was fine with it. He then proposed making it up to her. He was obliged to extend the same courtesy to her he had to Ash and thus asked her out on a date.

Ember already had plans with Ash for that night, but that was no reason to refuse. Her “other” enjoyed parties and would be delighted for the opportunity to get out for the night. Of course, she might just well sleep with him, but she did have her own prerogatives. Having two minds meant that she would constantly compete with herself if she expected both of her to pursue all the same interests. If that only encouraged his interest in taking his twin goddesses, and Ash objected to entertaining him, she could handle that matter too and double-team the lusty lad herself.

She discussed with Ash how her evolution had given Ember a hope of freedom she might never have known. If she went back to being a boy, her spare female identity could be assumed by Ember’s other. If she remained a girl, then Ember’s other could assume his male identity. By swapping identities, they could carry the deception through matrimony however the matter evolved. Ash considered the matter and suggested that she start right away. If her other was willing, he could assume Ash’s male identity right away and learn a few things in the process.

The other Ember was with Rain and Shale, working with them to better their minds. Unable to tap into psi, Shale had begun experimenting on the relationship between psi and chi to attempt things with chi she had never tried before. With chi, the main difficulty was tapping into and channeling energy efficiently. With such a pure residue coming off of Ember and Rain, she was able to meet the fuel requirements of some of the more difficult chi techniques she had been struggling to master.

After her latest effort churned up a tempest in the atrium, they broke for lunch. Rain and Shale had decided that Ember was the perfect third for an ideal three-way relationship. Their feelings for her were not conflicted by their relationship with Ash, who they both loved but whom they sensed was extremely shy of interfering between them. The intimacy she had shared with them had been out of friendship and limited to specific circumstances. Her full attention was reserved for Ember.

Ember presented a different matter entirely. She gave her full attention to Ash. As far as their friends could tell, they were so deeply in love they did not even realize it. Ember, however, had full attention to spare. Her own integrity compelled her not to interfere in Ember and Ash’s relationship. The girl that confronted them the night before had been a free agent, an Ember for whom there was no Ash to embrace. So, she embraced the two of them with all the love and passion she possessed. How could they not have fallen in love with her?

Ember prepared lunch, leaving the other two alone to talk freely between themselves. Rain confessed to Shale, her activities with Ember previous of the night before. Shale understood and said she might have done the same if Ember or Ash had made her feel receptive. She had not imagined how the perceptions of others affected self-perception, but now that a guy had evoked her feminine feelings, she knew that there was more to that side of her to explore. She confessed to Rain, bidding her to secrecy, about her coming date. Rain listened to her and then gave Shale her blessings.

Rain did not betray Shale’s confidence, but as soon as she and Ember had a moment to talk alone, she expressed her own apprehensions. Rain and Ember discussed their common problem, loving boys who might choose to be girls forever. They both had experienced the other side, and Ember could confess to her own crisis. A penis was a wonderful toy, and she had never quite gotten over having one. It had come down to which role she would choose if it should happen to be a permanent change. She realized that it would cripple her to be trapped in the male role.

The fact that there would never be a permanent or final transition meant that she could indulge in her male side at will, and she hoped that Rain would heal to the point where she could appreciate the qualities of her birth sex. In the even that Shale and Ash opted to remain female, they themselves could not fault the decision. They had made it. They would love them no less, but it was difficult to see how they could come to terms with it. They both confessed they would have almost the same attraction to a girl who possessed all the strengths of a man, that they would to an actual man.

Rain did worry though. Shale did not have the abilities that Ember and Ash had. If it happened that Shale became a girl who could become male at will, that would be marvelous. If Shale went so far as to become able to be both at once, as Ember often did, that would be simply ideal. Rain herself would need that twinning ability herself to bear the expression of her male side. She could stand the thought of being male part time only with the assurance that she would still be female full time.

In the afternoon, the five of them focused on improving their bodies, increasing their skills or reapplying them to suit their present statures. Shale joined Ember in the bath—the one she had spent the day with, and who had learned that her “other” had set her up on a date—and enlisted her in preparing herself for her own date without explaining her plans. Once she was dressed and looking nice, Shale announced that she was going out to the mall, for time alone and the chance to observe female behavior.

Ember’s date arrived and was willing to drop Shale off at the mall. Clay was taking Ember to dinner, and the party they were going to afterwards was not mentioned. Shale waved cheerfully as they dropped her off and went inside to meet her own date. Aaron was early, so the two of them walked the mall, engaged in conversation. He complimented her sincerely and frequently, rousing all sorts of pleasant feminine feelings Shale had never experienced before.

Before it got dark, they left and proceeded to the party. Shale had been letting her instincts set the pace and was quietly signaling that she welcomed a more private and intimate kind of party. Aaron was picking her up just fine but restraining himself gallantly. He encouraged her to enjoy the party, dancing and flirting with Aaron and his friends. It was a big party, organized by professionals who had turned a family mansion into a gothic paradise.

Ember and Clay were at the same party, and Clay was one of Aaron’s friends and teammates. Ember knew Clay and was surprised to see an entirely different Shale laughing and flirting and hanging on his arm. Ember was quick enough to realize what had made such a difference and took pains not to be spotted in Shale in return. A guy could become a girl, but he had to be treated like a girl to really embrace the change. She did not want to remind her she was a guy and ruin her fun.

She was actually relieved when Shale finally lured Aaron into a bedroom and locked the door. Avoiding notice had cramped her style. If not for her new feelings for Rain and Shale, a sense that she was falling in love with both of them, she might have been dragging her own date into one of those bedrooms. Instead, she was letting him set the pace, and he was pursuing a careful seduction. He really did want to get his twins and was working on a strategy that would get them willing and eager at the same time.

In the bedroom, Aaron was trying to give his full attention to the wonderful girl he had found. She was making it difficult by proving to know all sorts of ways to make a guy sit up and beg. It was as if she knew what it was like to be inside his skin. He returned the favor, worshipping her with that special intensity he had devoted to girls. He may not know what it was like to be in a girl’s skin, but he had given the matter decades of thought. Shale could not have asked for a better man to relieve her of the rest of her virginity.

Having been born a guy, she had experienced more than a little apprehension about sex as a female. enough apprehension that she would not have considered it with a partner who knew her secret. Still, she had always had insatiable curiosity and would have tried sex even if the idea had terrified her. Before, she had been anxious over the possibility that she might like it better as a girl. Now she was certain. She loved it, it was over whelming, and she feared she would never enjoy sex as a guy again.

The boy who had possibly shattered her manhood was far from through. He was a sex machine, bridled passion that never spent itself in explosive release. She wondered if he was ever going to stop and found herself wishing he would not. Her perfect ecstasy had a spice of tragedy, and she cried through the next few rounds. It was not that she had lost herself as a boy, but that she feared what might happen if she got no pleasure out of having sex with the girls she loved.

As he finally let go, he noticed her tears and asked her what was wrong. It was hard for her to explain. Instead of explaining, she said he would have to experience sex as a girl to understand. That she wished she were a boy, so she could find out he could feel pleasure as intensely as she had with him. He wished he could help her, saying he’d trade places with her if he could. She was thinking, if she was not such a retard at psi, they really could. Something inside her twitched. She was so curious to test her fear, she changed herself and her partner without even thinking about it.

It shocked them both, and Shale was afraid to explain. He was panicking, muttering to himself that it could not be happening. She was too amazed to speak, touching herself and touching him; she finally announced her realization that it was actually happening. Her sense of wonder turned suddenly into apprehension. She feared this miracle might slip away in an instant, as whimsically as it had come, and she begged him to take her. She could not bear to waste the opportunity. Shale collected his wits and regarded her.

He knew from his own experiences what a turn off it was to expect a boy to remain a boy in a girl’s body. He confronted her with one question. How should he treat her, as a boy or as a girl? She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. In a whisper, she said “girl” and he prayed he was not about to mess her up for life. He could not help it though. He had a need and curiosity as great as hers, and her life was changed forever, no matter what else happened. He finally realized that he had been asked how to be treated, and he had not been as brave as she. Combining experiences as a boy and a girl, he broke her in as exquisitely as she just had.

At first, his fear seemed to be confirmed. He became aroused easily enough, perhaps more than he ever had been before, but the experience was taunting—pleasant without being ecstatic. Just the same, he could not have taken her as far or as frequently over the edge as he did then, if his own nerves were as stimulated. He discovered that it was her pleasure that begat his true pleasure in sex. A man was built with a hair trigger, but he was also designed to do, to act, to effect. He became deeply conscious of the being he held in his hands, her exquisite vulnerability, her embracing openness, the abandon with which she received his attentions.

A man’s pleasure was not less. It was different. He had not known what sex really was until that moment. Being a girl had opened his eyes, opened his mind, and finally revealed to him the ecstasy a man could feel. He finished in a shivering embrace, feeling awe equal to hers. He knew where she was now and was relieved to know that there was something wonderful for her to experience when she changed back to normal. He commented to that effect and was surprised at her vehement protest.

She refused, absolutely, to be changed back. She announced unequivocally that she hoped the miracle never reversed itself. Shale was so shocked at her statement he lost focus for a moment. His vision cleared and she was staring at him and examining herself in a panic. Shale understood, Aaron was thanking God that she had not changed back, and grateful that he had allowed her to on her own. God had nothing to do with it.

Shale had changed her but apparently could not really change herself. He still thought of himself as a guy, but he realized he was still thinking like he had as a girl—and far better than he ever had before—and wondered what that meant. She remembered the explanation Brand had given them about Ash’s change.

Her power had come through being female. Her development lay in that domain of herself. For a glorious moment, she had been totally at peace with being female, and then she had been able to assert her existing male side. Like Ash, being male was now only an ability she possessed. It was no longer what she was. Strange, it did not seem to trouble her much, but what had happened to Aaron did. What had he done to make this boy so desperate to remain female?

She responded to the question with the unbelievable. It was nothing he had done; it was what she had always prayed for. With eyes wide, he was struck with perfect understanding. Once again, she had been drawn to that one in a million boy who was a girl at heart. She had a story virtually identical to Rain’s and had only been afraid that Shale had been transformed by some unconscious act or wish of her own. In a way he had been, but by the experience she had given him as her last act as a young man.

She had a serious situation to deal with. There was no question that she had to introduce her to Brand and confess. Aaron would have to be initiated as well. She explained Rain’s situation and suggested a similar compromise. There was one problem with that. Erin—a quick change from Aaron—did not have the understanding, consent and support of her family and could not go home. She refused to even consider changing back or approaching her parents with her transformation. Shale saw no other option but to take her home—or rather to Ember’s home—immediately.

14

Confronting Necessity Again, Erin’s Appeal

Clay had made an interesting confession to Ember. She had been trying to find out why he was so intently fixated on her. He had extolled all her virtues, skirting the question, but finally confessed that he had been in love with her since she was nine years old. That actually alarmed her. She thought back to a chain of events that she only remembered as Ember’s other. Events that had planted the seeds of her duality. Clay Thomas had never figured in any of those memories, so she relaxed.

She quipped that she hoped she had not disappointed him by growing up. He gave her an odd look and asked her if she was suggesting he had a thing for little girls. Point blank, she asked if he did. He looked stone-faced for a moment then grinned and started tickling her, saying, *only you, little girl!* Before things went any further than that, she noticed Shale sneaking out of the bedroom looking positively ashen. She declared a girl emergency and ditched Clay, with apologies, and went after Shale.

Shale was surprised and grateful to see her. She grabbed her and dragged her into the bedroom, telling her, on the way in, that she had a major serious problem. Ember took one look at Erin and gasped. Even with the change, she was still recognizably Aaron, high school chum, star athlete, all around nice guy. She asked Shale if she was responsible, and she said it had been an accident. Ember turned to Erin and assured her that she could be changed back, at which point Ember learned the real problem.

Shale shook her out of her musings at the improbability that Shale would zero in on a closet transsexual the first time out the door and explained that they needed to get Erin to Ember’s home. Erin could not wear the clothes she had entered the bedroom in. She already looked like Aaron’s twin sister, and wearing Aaron’s clothes in public would tip off anyone who bothered to look. Ember pointed out that they were in a classmate’s home, and there was a girl in the family the right size to loan a dress.

Ember went out to find the girl and ask for the loan of a dress, explaining that her friend from out of town had fallen in the pool and ruined her clothes; she just needed something to get home in real fast. The girl provided a cotton summer dress and a sweater. Erin managed a quick shower while waiting and soaked Aaron’s clothes into an indecipherable lump for good measure. The girl came in with Ember, producing a bag for the wet clothes, wrapped around the giveaway shoes, and offered to drive Ember and her friends home. They accepted gratefully.

On the way out, they were so concerned with avoiding Clay, they failed to avoid the shutterbug who had photographed Aaron and Shale going in and got photographed coming out. Cameras had been out all night, so they paid no attention to the flash, cut through the crowded house and slipped out through the garage. Ember asked another friend to explain that she had to see a friend home following an accident and extend her apologies to him. Sensing the dread in Shale’s heart at the prospect of explaining the situation, Ember reached out and communicated the entire story to her father before they neared home.

Brand was not happy with the news, but accidents did happen, particularly with people on the verge of awakening. At least the kids had tried to keep a low profile and come straight home as soon as possible. The thing that worried him most was not the exposure of Aaron/Erin, but the fact that she swore up and down that her family could not be confronted with this. That would have to be investigated. If the family could not be brought in with the child, problems—serious problems—might result.

Erin was ushered inside without delay, once they arrived at Ember’s house. Rain, who had spent the evening getting better acquainted with Aspen and Willow, followed those girls as the household was called to a meeting. Erin was introduced, and she repeated her story, pleading for help and understanding. She earned Rain’s instant friendship, and Rain shared her own story. Willow also took an interest in the girl, who was the same age as herself.

Without a doubt, Erin presented the household with a problem. They had no objection to putting Erin up, or supporting her decision to remain female, but she was another liability and one with no legal identity. With the support of Rain’s parents, it had been possible to transfer her identity over to her new sex, by finding and editing her legal records and moving her to a new area. Erin, without such support, presented them with a need to fabricate a completely new identity as they had with Ash. With less to build on.

A number of problems were discussed, including the need for one of the adults to screen Erin’s parents to confirm or deny Erin’s assessment of their open-mindedness, and as a contingency, work out a solid back ground to support a new identity for Erin. The problem of what to do with yet another girl in the house was solved by Willow. She volunteered to take Erin under her wing, sharing her own big bed, and acting as mentor to things feminine and psionic. She had let Shale slip through her fingers, and Aaron had been a friend of hers for a long time. She had confidence she could make a man out of her yet, at least for those little necessities like marriage and conceiving children. All she had to do was open Erin up to the possibilities and of course get her to fall in love with her.

Ash and Ember were spending the night in San Francisco, so they could not be brought up to speed until the following day. They had made plans with Lane and Heather to see a play and sleep over in the big town house apartment the Morgan family reserved for their own use, while renting the rest of the building out. They would not get in at the apartment until rather late, and a message was left on the machine there instructing them to come home promptly in the morning.

Lane, Heather and the twins got out of the theatre around midnight and wandered downtown San Francisco looking for a dance club. The four of them were all very tall girls, and dressed for a play at a high-class theatre, they easily passed for young, twenty-somethings, so getting into the club proved easier than it might have. In any case, Lane was not above forging a handful of driver’s licenses just in case. The object of the evening, it seemed, was to play with men’s poor little minds, and Ash got into the spirit of it. She figured that Ember’s two friends had explored their male sides as children, if at all. Of them all, including Ember, Ash understood the adult male mind best.

Ember enjoyed watching her work. It was nice to see her twin asserting herself, spending the better part of the night circulating among strange men without being pushed or protected by Ember. It was a big change from the previous week’s party. Even Lane and Heather admired her guts and flair, commenting on how shy she had been at the pool party. Ash let her beaus down easy, devoting the last few dances to her twin, and then leaving in the company of the three other girls. The boldest of the men actually came out after them and dared to walk along with the girls as they headed back to the apartment.

Ash surprised the girls by both welcoming them to walk with them and thanking them for not exposing their real identities. Only then did Ember recognize them as four of the guys who had worked on her new home. She confronted them, and they confirmed that they had overheard Ash and Ember discussing their plans for the night, the day before. She was surprised Ash had not said anything until now.

The men were all first-year college students, only a couple of years older than the girls, and had to fake their own ID’s to get into the club. They were also all psionics, and members of the Families. Ash had already been entertaining the idea of indulging the men’s interest in her, and the other girls started thinking along the same lines. The only question on Ash’s mind had been what Ember would think about her decidedly female interest in the older boys.

Ash was far from sure how she herself felt about it, but the whole business of being a girl had forced her to put her instincts in charge. She conferred with Ember silently about it. Was her interest normal? Was she just a nymphomaniac, or worse, a slut at heart? Ember assured her that a girl’s sex drive was just as lusty and adventurous as a guy’s. Ash was entirely normal, both in her interests and concerns. A girl could take on a whole gang of boys quite happily, and that had a lot to do with why society had such a nasty opinion of girls who proved it.

The question was handed off to Lane and Heather, who it turned out had been openly competing with Ash for the men’s attentions all night. They voted enthusiastically to bring the men upstairs and threatened to lock Ash in the closet if she did not share. As it turned out, Ash was still a bit uncertain about men. Flirting was easy and fun, but the prospect of laying down with a guy she barely knew was a little frightening. She had assured herself that the four men were all decent, healthy and clean, and trustworthy as long as she herself did not abdicate responsibility. She still could not go to bed without Ember by her side for moral support.

In an odd way, it was yet another bonding experience for the young couple in love. To lie down, side-by-side, and share the experience of opening themselves to the unknown. Ember watched her love, seeing her rapid evolution as a girl and wondered again where she would end up. Already, she was arousing the male side of Ember, awakening that masculine protectiveness, and perhaps even a hint of possessiveness. She admitted that if she had gone out that night as a boy, she might well have gotten in a fight with one of those four men over her in the dance club.

15

Introducing Wolf, Cougar and Confronting A Situation

Ash and Ember did not get the message to come home until the next morning when they finally entered the apartment’s kitchen. Ash had followed Ember in to eat breakfast, while sharing her thoughts. she had concluded that if she lost the ability to become male, she would be perfectly happy to remain female. Ember was asking her if her feelings were the same the other way around when she noticed the light blinking. Ember checked in silently with her “other” to find out what the emergency was, and after hearing the report, demanded to know why they had not contacted her directly.

Ember’s other told her point blank that she had been about to but noticed what they had been up to and decided not to interfere at such a decisive moment in Ash’s life. Ember shared the news that Ash might have just decided to remain a girl forever. Ember’s other asked her the hard question, would she decide to be a guy to compliment Ash if she did. Ember told herself that she had given the matter some serious thought. For Ash, definitely yes, but for herself, she did not know if she really could.

Ember’s other left her to her thoughts and turned to consider the problem with Erin again. They were up, eating breakfast, discussing whether or not anyone had noticed that Aaron had entered the party and never left, and Erin, who had never entered the mansion, leaving. How were they supposed to find out without asking a lot of questions, and how could they ask a lot of questions without pointing out the very thing they were trying to hide. The only thing they could think of was to have Erin circulate a bit and see if or how people from the party reacted to meeting her.

The people they really needed to test that theory on were the very people least likely for them to visit. That morning, the head of security for the party organizers was making a round of all the rooms trying to locate the one guest who had not been checked off. The head organizer caught up with him and asked for a status report. The conversation between them would have greatly interested the Morgan household. Wolf informed Cougar that one of the guests had not been checked off his list. Aaron had been on the invitation list, and he had been checked off with his date when he arrived but never checked out.

Wolf had tracked down the few people who had managed to leave without being crossed off, and his date had been one of them. She had left with two girls, one another invited guest’s date, but the third had not been noted at all. He dragged Cougar over to the sound room where videos taken at the party were being reviewed by Wolf’s staff. Wolf pointed out the three girls, leaving the party with one of the girls who lived at the mansion. Wolf was guessing that she had brought the girl in without notifying the party organizers. But he was waiting for more information to verify it.

They had not been able to rig surveillance in the bedrooms, so Wolf had placed photographers in locations where they could catch snapshots of anyone who went into or out of the bedrooms. Cougar asked him if he was suggesting what he thought he was suggesting. Wolf nodded. A number of potentials had been spotted and were on his list to be investigated further, but he suspected that they might have actually caught an active. When the photos finally arrived, rushed at Wolf’s express command, both young men poured over them together.

They quickly sorted out the photos that showed Aaron and his date. Aaron had been photographed going in with her, and she had been photographed coming out, going back in and finally leaving with the unidentified girl. No alarms had gone off all night, so he had not gone out the window, and based on the evidence, and the thorough work of Wolf’s security, they had apparently caught an active. Now all they had to do was track her down. Cougar congratulated Wolf for a job well done and called a meeting of the inner circle.

Ember quietly excluded herself as she and Ash arrived home with Heather, Lane and the four older boys they had picked up. She simply joined her other as she met her at the door, then escorted the others in and stood aside as they were introduced to Erin. Being part of the Families, there was no reason to ditch them or exclude them from the introductions. Besides, it would be interesting to see how they reacted to Ash’s story, which was bound to come up when the adults got around to explaining to Erin the events leading up to her own miraculous transformation. They were surprised, but three of them confessed to an embarrassed Ash that they had gone through a similar phase, and she had adapted far better than they had. The fourth came out and revealed that he had been born a girl and chose to remain a boy.

Rain and Erin took his story to heart, finding assurance in their own decisions to change, and Ash kept it in mind. If she had to make a decision, she would want to be a boy for Ember and a girl for herself. In order for that to happen, she would have to have an “other”, like Ember did. The boys’ confessions did set the topic for a heated debate. They discussed, sex, gender and the mind’s potential, and the fact that changing sex seemed to be the perfect short cut to awakening psi potential. It had been so for Rain and Shale, and proved again that morning with Erin, who had to be tackled when she slipped out into the backyard and spread her arms to take flight.

Erin had confessed, after crawling out of that dog pile, that next to being a girl, her fondest wish had been to fly. It seemed natural that with one miracle under her belt she should try for the other. After a lecture, in which everyone present sympathized immensely, she could understand how the will to fly was perhaps the most dangerous temptation for a psionic in the modern world. It took a long time to learn how to baffle radar, and even then, there was always a chance of being observed visually. She agreed to wait until she was trained, and approved for night flying, before experimenting further in that direction.

The ban only applied to full out flight. The new house had been designed to accommodate anyone’s interest in levitation, and that was what the work crews had always done on their weekends, before the girls had made the new house their personal playground. Those older boys were about Aspen’s age, so for the first time, she was eager to join the group headed over to the new house to play. The adults agreed that time spent practicing control was critical at this stage, and no one worked harder than when they were at play. The problem of Erin’s identity was set aside for the day, once Erin assured them that she often stayed out all weekend—as a guy—without her parents becoming worried.

It was decided that Shale, in male form, wearing Aaron’s clothes and a bit of makeup, would pass for the missing boy. He went to collect Aaron’s car from the mansion, telling a story about having slipped out through the back yard, and getting out the side gate. The security from the party accepted the story when Aaron’s key proved to unlock and operate the vehicle. He drove the car to long term parking at the Oakland International Airport after meeting Brand for the ride out.

On the drive to the airport, he had discussed another problem with Brand. Officially, he was a boy. With the awakening of his powers, he had become a girl by default. His intentions, when he asked to be turned into a girl, had mostly been experimental, and had now evolved to acknowledge the fact that he had a whole other side of himself to develop, much as Ash had. The fact remained, however, that being a girl left him in the same boat as Erin, devoid of legal identity. Unless Brand seriously suggested creating an additional identity for Shale, a real possibility if it could be done for Erin, Shale had an obligation to maintain her male identity.

Brand assured him that a suitable cover could be arranged if it became necessary, but he discouraged her from trying to fight his new natural state. He did not need to argue his point, since Shale proved it herself. The stress of staying male for the duration told on her, as she reverted spontaneously the moment she killed the engine. Brand teleported them back to the new house. They had remained in the car long enough for their surreptitious tail to expose a full roll of film, catching her in the act.

Shale returned to the point she had argued. She had an official identity already. All she needed to do was maintain it. In order for her to do that, she had to gain better control over her ability to shift. As it was, it took her full concentration to remain male, and as she learned through the course of the day, it only took a moment’s distraction for her to slip unexpectedly back to female. There in the haven of Xanadu, the new code for the new house, she was safe enough, but if she enrolled in school with Rain in the fall, she had to be able to keep the male side up with less effort or assume a new identity.

It took a bit, but a long talk with Ash got to the root of Shale’s real concern. Shale confessed to her that her date with Aaron had been an epiphany. If she did not make an effort to maintain her link to Shale, she would be irresistibly tempted to remain female. Not even Rain could prevent that. Just being Shale had to be important enough in its own right or she would lose it. Give it up willingly. Just knowing that sex as a man could be as rewarding in the male role as it was in the female role did not do it. Ash assured her she was dead right. Being a girl, she had discovered, was not an act or an experiment. It was an innate part of who she was.

Ash explained further. The decision to live in the male or female role had more to do with how a person wanted to realize themselves socially, and in her entire life as a boy, she had known only passing acquaintances. Only as a girl had she really made friends, and developed a social life. As a boy, she had actually gone to great lengths to keep from making any close ties to people. Being a boy, she had driven a wedge between herself and her own mother. Only as a girl had she been willing to see her father as a person, rather than the ultimate authority in her life. As it stood right then, she would fight to remain female. The boy in her would be fighting right at her side.

Shale listened to her with painful agreement. It was true. Already, she could not bear the thought of abandoning what she had discovered. Their lives were so much alike. The only exception was that Shale had been living in the same town his entire life and was popular in school. The devotion he had to martial arts had never-the-less limited his social development. As a guy, he could deal with people he already knew, or who like Ash, were as devoted to the art as he. With strangers he had always been on guard, remote. The fact was, she had better social instincts as a girl, and in light of the majority of people she did not know, it was as a girl that she could best deal with them.

Ash shocked her by announcing that Ember was going to be taking over Ash’s place. That is, she was taking over her male identity. Shale understood in part why she was doing that and hoped that she would not end up pressuring Rain to try the same.

16

Introducing the Wild-Psi’d, Lynx, Tiger, Jaguar, Panther, Fox and Kodiak

Jaguar arrived at the meeting of the Wild-Psi’d with the developed surveillance photos. Lynx had the research on Aaron and the girls who had helped him escape from the party after his transformation. Jaguar was excited, Lynx was apprehensive. Cougar looked at the two of them and asked for, what would be, the good news first. He laid out the photos, capturing Shale’s shift in full detail, announcing that they had confirmation that the target was a psi. Wolf interrupted, informing everyone that the person in those photos was not the target, but in fact the girl he had been with, with her hair dyed black. There were now two targets. The proof about the second validated the existing evidence about the other.

An excited debate followed, with individuals throwing around theories they each cultivated about the relationship between gender dysphoria and psi potential, and which might be at the root of the other. Cougar interrupted the debate to ask Lynx for the background report she had assembled. She began by laying out the photos from the party. She picked one that showed Ember, Shale and Erin sneaking out through the garage and asked anyone if they recognized the third girl.

Everyone studied the picture and then someone shouted in recognition. It was the girl that Eric was constantly surveilling. Someone reminded him to use Eric’s cover name, Clay, or at least the code name Dragon. By any name, he was a young man most of them feared, and then maybe respected. Lynx then pulled out the background data and announced it was bad news. The worst. There were a few details Clay had been leaving out of his reports, not that he was particularly good about keeping the group informed.

While doing the background on the two people they had been able to identity, Aaron and Ember, she had discovered several interesting things. One, Ember apparently had reunited with a twin sister who had been abducted at birth, through the simple trick of having her reported stillborn. The pair of them were enrolled in summer classes at the university. Their records contained the bad news. They were both in a class held by Jack Dancer.

The room went deathly silent. She had to confirm her report. Clay had never established that Ember was more than a very promising potential, but if Dancer was that close to her, she was probably more, and without doubt in great danger. Worse, both of the targets they had identified were only one step away from being spotted by Dancer himself. The people in that room had been rescued from Jack Dancer by Eric, his younger brother. How could he have failed to notify them that Dancer was back to his old tricks?

It went to an immediate vote. If they acted quickly, they might be able to contact and warn Ember, and the other two targets, before Dancer made his move. On the other hand, if they acted too quickly, they might end up back in Dancer’s clutches. He might already have sold the girl his lies and could be using her to quicken others, starting the cycle over again. If they approached her, and she was on his leash, she would betray them to him. First, they had to confer with Clay, he might have good reasons for keeping Dancer’s emergence a secret.

Until then, they could only continue surveillance. An opportunity might present itself, or adversity, and they had to be ready to act. Ember, her twin and anyone who was observed to be closely intimate with them or the targets they already had, would be kept under observation. Because of Ember, Clay was certain to contribute to the effort. In the meantime, they had to go over the list of potentials they had screened at the party. It was the reason they had gone into the business of staging parties; they could not neglect the potentials simply because they had a line on a few actives.

Ember, in male guise, arrived at Xanadu and was introduced as Ares—a new code for Ash. She had been talking to Brand at her old home about assuming Ash’s original identity, while Ash and Shale had been speaking together at Xanadu. Ember frustrated Shale by proving to have perfect control over her sex. Shale did not say anything as it turned out that Ember’s other was a family secret, shared only with Ash, Rain and Shale. Her other had stepped out of the meeting that morning to keep from exposing the secret to Erin, Lane, Heather and the four boys who had come with them from San Francisco.

After the family meeting she had sent her other back out with the others and called on Brand. Brand had agreed to Ash suggestion that Ember take on the role to aid the development of her male side. With Ash growing more and more into the female role each day, it might well be appropriate for Ember to take on a male role. The most important thing was that the two of them resolve to marry and have kids. Their child would be the vindication of a thousand generations of breeding.

The concern was not that one of them had to be male. That really did not matter in light of their abilities. The concern was that one of them had to be able to assume the role and responsibility of a child’s father. Good genes did not make a child immune to the environment she grew up in. Brand was already cursing himself for keeping his boy away from his mother so much. As a boy, he had taken after his father too much, and only as a girl had she escaped his hold on her and bloomed in her own right. Ember turned her life as a girl over to her other, and was focusing exclusively on being Ares, officially Ash, until or unless Ash asked her to give the role back.

Having made this momentous decision, she had decided to have fun with it. Right away, Ash made a fool of herself, throwing herself at Ares. Ember’s other, now the only Ember, pulled her off of him and reminded her that Ares was engaged to Ember, meaning her, and had best not forget it. Poor Ash was shocked to the pit of her stomach. What a fool she was, she had made no effort to act like Ember, and no one who had been there could have mistaken her for her twin with Ember right there beside her.

She got a grip on herself, telling herself that the scene had been more for Lane and Heather than it had been for her. Ares took one look at Ember and pulled Ash back saying he could just as well pick Ash, since it still honored the family agreement. Lane and Heather chimed in, telling him not to limit his options even that much. Ash remembered what Ember had confessed about her friends and a wild inspiration took her. She grabbed Ember by the hand and walked her back to the pool, saying loudly that arranged marriages were archaic anyway; maybe they should just leave Ares to the wolves.

Ares looked shocked and Lane and Heather jumped into the breech. Ash muttered under her breath to Ember, as those two girls pounced on Ares and dragged him the other way, that this was the best way for Ember to learn what being a boy had been like for her. Ember retorted that her other would hardly be troubled, she had dreamed of taking her two best friends as a man for years. Ash confessed that she had known it. She was just curious to see what her love would do about it.

Ash had trouble freezing Ares out, but as the sister of the girl he was supposed to marry, and a person he had just met, she understood that was the way she had to play it. If she could do a convincing impersonation of Ember, she might have tried it, but Ember’s other had a natural advantage over her. If this situation lasted long enough, they would have to swap places so Ash and Ember could actually get married, but there was plenty of time for that. She was thinking first of the worst consequence of Ember’s impersonation of Ares. They might not be allowed to sleep in the same bed anymore.

Oh, the adults in their household would not object at this point, they already knew what they had been up to. The deciding factor was that they were now openly keeping a young man as a guest, and they could expect their neighbors to be peeking in the windows and listening through the walls to catch any inappropriate behavior. Really, a person had more privacy with people who see through walls and read minds. At least psionics did not lie to themselves about what constituted normal behavior and had the sense to be discrete.

That evening, Ares was crushed to discover that he was now sleeping in the guest room with Brand. He gave a deep sigh and asked Ember to give her love to Ash. He was disappointed when his “other” showed up at the door to the guest bedroom and slipped back into his mind. Ember’s bed was not big enough for four. If not for the fact that Rain or Shale would be shoved out onto the floor, Ares could have stayed in Ember’s own room, tucked inside her own head.

Ares Ember finally got fed up. There was no reason why couples should be broken up by beds. She grabbed Brand and moved him into her room, dragging Rain, Shale and Ash with her into the guest bedroom. Unless someone came into the house to do a head count, they would never know who was sleeping with whom, but at least this way they all had a comfortable bed, the company of the one they loved—except Brand, Victoria was still in England. She reminded herself to ask Ash what to do if she paid them a visit while she was pretending to be Ares.

Ash had just decided that Ember had made an exception to her own rule, of living in the male role, when she slipped into bed. Her love was decidedly male, and she could not help but be strangely excited. They had both taken on the form to make love to each other, but she had not ever slept with a man, in the strict sense of the word. Rain looked on in amusement, while Shale looked on in envy. Shale declared loudly that Ember had to teach him how to do that; poor Rain was being neglected.

17

Confronting Victoria, and Adopting a Daughter

The next day, a Sunday, they all rose early to slip over to Xanadu. Ember awakened first, and split into herself and Ares, so Ember could slip into the bath while Ares cuddled in bed with Ash. Ash asked Ares if there was some way she could take Ember’s place without tripping over herself. Ares had wanted to ask her the same question, and they tried an experiment. Opening their minds to each other, they traded experiences and memories, copying themselves into each other. It was a hundred times more erotic than sex, and they had to go at it just to relieve the tension.

Rain and Shale awoke to that music and asked what had bitten the two of them. They replied that they had better not engage in mental intercourse if they could not go at it in the flesh. Ash had embraced Ember so deeply that she fooled Ember’s other when she went into the bath. Because Ember had been out of the loop, Ash had to do it again, so that she could be Ash. When it was done, Ash was Ember as much as she had ever been herself. A separate Ember, to be sure, and no less herself. She was a different soul, a different awareness. That was all there was to tell the difference.

It came out at the breakfast table, and the adults looked at them in shock, congratulating them in shaky voices. They were now more deeply married than the most binding ceremony could wed. A wedding ceremony had just become a technicality as far as they were concerned. The fact that Ash had embraced both sides of Ember only meant that she now had a wife and a husband. The tragedy, if they wished to see it as such, was that they were now locked in the roles they had adopted.

Ash was now Ember, and Ember was now Ares and Ash. Any other arrangement would only be an act. It was a stunning revelation, but the moment they tested it, it proved true. On waking up, they had all been unfinished. On embracing each other, they had given themselves so completely that they had finished each other off. Not fatally, but in the sense of absolution, of purification and perfection. Doubling their life experiences through each other. Ember considered herself, gazed deeply into the hearts of Ash and Ares. After careful soul searching, she found nothing objectionable about her new state, and her thoughts were so intimately woven into her mates’ that she knew they too were deeply satisfied.

While the three of them wandered away in a daze, Brand turned to Erin and announced that he had found a solution to her problem. It had occurred to him the day before, and he had consulted his wife about it. They were adopting her. Erin was stunned. The bit about what Ember, Ash and Ares had done had not penetrated her, but this drove it right home. She asked him to explain. Brand told her that in his younger days, he had fathered a woods-colt daughter. The girl had tracked him down after running away from an orphanage where she had lived since her mother’s death.

The poor girl had done all the research, confronting him with letters and bills and a birth certificate, all linking his name with her mother’s. He had resolved to take her in when her own powers did her in. She had manifested them in the orphanage, under extreme emotional stress, and had never been disciplined. Other psionics had noticed her and chased her when she ran from them. They killed her trying to subdue her, and he had arrived too late to do anything about it. He could not take revenge on the ones who killed her, she had been extremely dangerous, and they had only intended to kill her as a last resort.

There had been no need to bury her; she had teleported herself into a rock wall. The kind of mistake that instinct normally prevented, but she had fought the instinct in her desperation to escape. There being nothing he could do for her; he collected her things and sent them to his wife for safekeeping. Her legacy would be Erin’s. His wife had taken the fastest flight to come out and meet her new daughter, but he urged her to keep it to herself, since Ash—Ember he corrected—would likely run for the hills if she knew her mother was coming.

When everyone was ready, Ember, Ash and Ares were rounded up and dragged over to Xanadu. By the time they arrived, the altered trio was all eager to test the effect of their marriage on the abilities they had possessed. They found that they could isolate the specific abilities of their original selves or apply the gestalt and perform on a level they had never reached before. One surprise was that the new Ember now also had a double, and she was not married to Ash and Ares.

She seemed to have benefited from the union, however, expressing the combined traits of all three, while being unique to herself, apart from their trinity. On examination, she proved to be the new Ember’s other, differentiated on the understanding of the union the potential to split had derived from. The original Ember had possessed a fault-break, which had enabled her to split too. Whatever it had been, it was now the division between her sexes. Ash urged the new aspect to retain her independence, and to regard Ember as her home.

Her concern had been that she might feel obliged to take on the male aspect of Ash-Ember. It was not necessary; Ares had assumed that aspect of the original Ash. The girl accepted that and then posed a vexing question. Everyone had come out with a name but her, as confused as they were by the perspective shifts they had all experienced—what was she supposed to be called. Even the usual names they used publicly, Ash, Ash and Andrea, were taken. It was observed that she was essentially a copy of Ember—sticking exclusively to their present associations—so she was Alt Ember and could go by Alt for short.

Everyone had retired to the pools when Victoria showed up. Alt and Ember spotted her a mile away and were both panicked and excited. They were not, and would never again be her son, but they were now the daughter—daughters—Victoria had always wanted. To replace the son she was losing, she was gaining the best son-in-law there was, although technically it would be the other way around. She actually had to remind herself of that. Among other things. She slipped out of the pool to swamp her mother in a twined embrace, Alt moved with the same instinct, and equal vigor.

Victoria had not been told about this, but she recognized at once that her son had become twin daughters. She examined them intently, spotting the child she remembered. She warned Brand that he had a lot to explain, but since she had gotten the good news first, as it were, she promised not to beat him to hard to get it out of him. She then asked to meet the girl she had been told about. Erin came up shyly and introduced herself. They talked for a bit, and Victoria embraced her warmly and with full approval.

Erin beamed as beatifically as Alt and Ember, confiding that their mother was perfectly wonderful. Victoria abandoned them only to share a few words with Brand, and to talk to the Morgans’ about swapped children, marriage arrangements—to make what they had already done official—and living arrangements. Xanadu solved that last issue; it was designed to accommodate multiple families, on the assumption that the Morgan daughters would never leave once they were allowed to move into that paradise. Victoria had to get to know all the kids more or less from scratch, so she approached Ares and embraced him as a son.

On hearing the house rules, she stripped down and joined the kids in the pool. Having been informed of the difference between Alt and Ember, she cornered Alt for female talk, getting the unbiased view from her of her daughter’s love and sex life. Ember was finding that Ares and Ash were discussing how to divide her up, and jumped into the conversation, wondering at how she loved him-her twice as much. They surprised her by joining together and giving her a single person on whom to focus her attention.

Mated, Ares and Ash were perfect. A perfectly androgynous mind in a body that was male or female at will. Ember could still return the favor, her own mind was just as androgynous, for all she was a singularity, and they were a duality. Her mind suddenly stopped trying to quantify and qualify. She was in love. She could finally admit that. She finally said it. Ares divided and together they returned it. Finally, they could talk about it. They had given up all they had originally possessed and looked at each other from opposite sides. Ares finally whispered, *You truly are perfect for me. I can make love to you and never have to pretend I am making love to myself.*

They held on to each other, and watched Alt, as she swam away from her mother and joined the trio she could someday belong to. Rain and Shale took her into their circle with enthusiasm, and from where Ember stood, they seemed to compliment Alt so well. Ash said she was seriously considering giving Alt her own identity, not in the way the three of them had exchanged—it would not be necessary for her now—but just step into Ares and let Alt follow her heart with a place in the world.

Ember turned to her and reminded her that she was Alt, Alt would hear through her. Ash smiled and explained that she would not necessarily hear. Ember would be able to keep her secrets and her privacy and make plans for her other self in the same manner which she had manipulated her own Ember’s destiny. She had never imagined she would end up where she was, patting Ares on the shoulder, but if she could have imagined it, she would have aimed for it.

Lane and Heather showed up in the afternoon and stole Ares away from Ember. Alt proved that she could jump back into Ember by simply teleporting from wherever she was when needed. Since Lane and Heather had not been in the original Ember’s secret, she had decided to keep herself a secret as well. The four older boys showed up right behind those two girls and divvied themselves up. One of them was already attached to Aspen, two of them made a beeline straight to Ash and Ember, and the last one joined Rain and Shale. Willow was keeping Erin to herself, whenever she could steal her away from Victoria.

The next morning, Ares jumped into Ash, to join Ember at school. Victoria had gotten up to eat breakfast with them and then see them off to school. Ember was still so thrilled at her mother’s reaction to her that she would rejoice all week. Ash reminded her that she owed Clay an apology, and perhaps even a make-up date. A debt she inherited with the name and responsibilities of Ember. To make it up to him, Clay demanded that she con her twin into joining her on the next date, so that all three of them could have a good time. She told him she would.

Ares actually came out to watch the twins’ gymnastics practice and see if Dancer spotted the trade. He had proven he could tell the girls apart once he had confronted the fact that there were two of them. He did spot the switch, discretely asking Ember why she was pretending to be her sister. Ember pointed to the boy in the stands and explained that he was engaged to Ember but they, the girl Dancer recognized as Ash and the boy, were in love. Of course, she added, he thought she was Ember. Dancer chucked, shook his head, and laughed outright when she asked him how he was able to tell them apart. She had thought she was mimicking her sister perfectly. He told her that one word said it all. Mimicking. He could always spot a faker; body language gave everything away.

Ares noted, afterwards, that Clay had not made an appearance of his own at practice. How could he or the girls have known that Clay had been called to a meeting of the Wild-Psi’d. Eric-Clay, AKA Dragon, was confronted with the data on Ember, Ash and their friends and revealed that he had been aware of Ember’s potential but had never established if it were active. Dancer had given him no reason to suspect that he considered her active; his present role was a typical scouting role, if evidence came out proving her active, he would have to act immediately to keep her away from his brother.

Ares, Ember and Ash went home to find out how the day had gone for the others. Victoria had informed them that morning that she and Brand had an appointment with a lawyer to establish Erin’s identity and arrange for a formal adoption hearing. Brand had also approached Shale with a cover identity, something a bit sketchier than Erin’s but which could be strengthened if it became necessary. Ember had inherited a driver’s license, and so Ash, Ares and of course Rain and Shale, were all going to go in to reacquire their own driving privileges the next day.

The Morgan house was going to get a reputation as a halfway house for displaced and recovered children. Officially, they had rediscovered Ash, a long-lost twin sister, and they had helped reunite Erin with her long-lost father, with Shale they had taken a poor homeless girl and discovered her sketchy origins, and of course they were helping a transsexual girl start her life over again. Ember suggested the family consider officially becoming a halfway house, since there were bound to be more psionics who would need to adjust their whole lives as a consequence of awakening to psi.

The next day was a break from the normal routine. The day following they would go back to Rain, Erin and Shale—and Ares—spending their days together, working on mastering their powers in the mornings and going out together every afternoon while Ember and Ash—in their switched identities—were stuck at school. The date with Clay was looming somewhere on the weekend horizon, so Ember found herself with a day pretty much to herself. It was about time she went hiking. Instead of a heavily trafficked park, she headed over to the San Francisco Peninsula and ventured into the watershed, thousands of acres of protected forest and pristine reservoirs.

She did not notice her tail; her mind was still high with wonder and excitement at the change in her life. Her concern was with spotting and avoiding rangers as she cut through the woods like a goddess, or a wood nymph as she almost immediately discarded her clothes. The young man who followed her could easily keep up with her and mask his presence. He captured her exploits with a soundless, high fidelity digital video camera, relishing the response of his friends when he presented the evidence they had needed to make their decision about her. The poor camera quit after a few hours, but he continued to observe her as she frolicked through the woods, stretching her mind, and made notes.

18

Confronting Conflicting Interests

The Wild-Psi’d reviewed the tape the next day. The thing that surprised them was not that she had used her power so openly, but that she had managed to avoid all contact with normal observers. Several times, she had moved suddenly and arbitrarily to avoid encountering the people that wandered the trails, taggers from the forestry service, surveyors, rangers and game wardens, even a few hikers and adventurous kids were narrowly, but gracefully dodged. The only person she had not seemed to spot was the one person who was actively being invisible.

They concluded that this was not a girl who had only recently come into her power. She had a skill and presence of mind that suggested a long history of psionic activity, combined with tremendous devotion to athletic, gymnastic and martial disciplines of the body. She was the perfect fit for Dancer’s ideal prey. Once again, Dragon was not at the assembly, but a report was composed and one of them dispatched to give him the news. He would be at school, watching the girl and her sister.

Clay had met the girls and settled on a date that morning. He had suggested a trip to Yosemite for the weekend, but Ember had begged off, she had spent the day before hiking and gotten it out of her system. Instead, they voted for a trip to an amusement park. Great America in San Jose had been overhauled two or three times in the past decade and was practically a new theme park. Clay agreed, and bumped the date up to that Thursday, the day following, a day out in addition to the promised date, he suggested.

With that qualification, they told him they would be bringing some friends along to enjoy a day out as well. He agreed amiably. He even showed up for their practice and met Ares at last. Clay looked a bit pale at hearing that he was Ember’s fiancée but got a grip on himself. He listened to the story and silently contemplated how to break the two of them up. Ash was every bit as fascinating as her twin, but it was Ember he had so long been obsessed, Ember who had touched him so profoundly.

After practice he was found by Wolf, who gave him the report about Ember. He could not say which of the twins had been observed, but Ember’s own words had informed Clay. Clay sent Wolf back to the others with his assurance that he would start thinking of a plan. A fiancée, and now proof that she was active. He cursed. He had been getting closer to her each day, now there was no prospect of waking her up, and two very real threats to ever getting his hands on her and keeping her. If fate denied him that chance of winning her, he would have to start thinking about stealing her.

The trip to Great America became the event of the week. Everyone wanted to go. Aspen and the older boys they had taken into their circle could act as chaperones for the motley bunch, leaving the adults with a day to themselves. Kelly, Allen, Robert and Mark were contacted and agreed heartily to go. Lane and Heather also. Naturally, Rain, Shale, Willow, Erin, and Ares were in on it. The girls went out to get bathing suits, to wear under t-shirts and shorts or summer skirts, while the boys decided to tough it out in cutoff jeans.

In the morning they all met and sorted themselves into car pools. Ember and Ash rode over with Kevin, accompanied by Rain and Shale, as a boy. Out of respect for Clay, Ares had agreed to entertain Lane and Heather so that Clay’s day was not ruined with jealousy. For the most part, they ignored each other, but it was impossible for them to stay away from each other the entire day. The occasional shared glance or confidence gave Clay something to brood over, and he did not try to hide it. He brought it out in the open, making a game of actually competing with Ares for Ember’s attention.

Lane, Heather and Ash or course kept it playful by competing a bit on their own. The only remotely violent outburst was when Ares ended up as Clay’s prime target in bumper cars. Ash cornered a brooding Clay when Ember and Ares jumped back in line for a second go at one of the rides. The way Clay watched Ember urged her to address it. She pointed out that, in spite of his expressed interest in both of them he sure focused a lot of his attention on Ember. He opened up a bit, explaining his long infatuation with Ember.

He told her about the date, which of course she remembered, having been the one he had actually been out with, and how he had come right out and told her he had fallen in love. This time she pressed, because she, personally, had been the cause of a great deal of trouble when she had been nine years old. He only said it was impossible to explain. What he could say was that he had decided that he would win her love, and there she was engaged to a stranger, who was stealing her away as he watched.

Ash had gotten to like Clay, and knew he was correct. He did not have a chance with Ember, or herself, for that matter. Things had changed and there was no explaining it fully. Still, an obsession could turn dangerous, and he needed to get over his infatuation. She tried to break it to him gently, explaining that Ember and Ares seemed like strangers to each other, but they knew each other far better than anyone might expect. They were deeply in love and trying to break it to their friends and admirers gently.

She also counseled him. If he did not make a menace of himself, there was a good chance he would still have a place in Ember’s and her own heart. Ares was not jealous or closed-minded. He believed that variety was the spice of life, and that love could only be increased, not diminished, by spreading it around. A girl could only marry one boy, but she could have many lovers if all concerned kept their wits about them. His interest had never offended them, she assured him; he could still realize some of his dreams. He simply had to understand that one of them was off limits.

He did not reply, and Ash left him to think about it. She had other problems to deal with. Shale’s decision to go out as a boy had seemed reasonable at first. It was wonderful of him to treat Rain to a real date, chaperonage aside, and the two were so obviously a couple that they would have attracted strange looks if they both were female. That would hardly stop them, and in hindsight would have been safer. Shale still did not have full control of his shifting. Whenever he resisted the female role, he had to be very careful or change unexpectedly in public.

An amusement park provided more than enough shocks and distractions to keep him flipping back and forth. More than once, he had to think and move fast to cover for a slip, dealing with the annoying fact that he could not always switch back quickly or easily. The fact that no one could account for exactly who had ended up in which car made it plausible that Shale and Shale were both present, and circumstances forced him-her to present just that deception. The identity Shale had been given made him-her brother and sister to himself, and thus best friend and boyfriend of Rain.

Clay proved how observant he was when he confided to Shale that his sister apparently had a thing going with his girlfriend behind his back. Because of Clay, many others had to cooperate to keep him from twigging to the fact that something decidedly odd was going on. It was also the first time that Lane and Heather had really noticed his strange curse, and they took delight in provoking his changes when they determined that no one was watching directly. Only the weight of the crowds kept anyone else from noticing, to many certainly did see a sudden change. While they were blinking to figure out what they were seeing, the crowds shifted enough to make verification impossible.

It was a long, fun and expensive day and by the end, they had companionable settled into their original triads. Ares had pulled Clay aside and said there was no getting around the marriage thing, but he was open-minded and did not plan to keep Ember on a short leash. What happened between him and the twins was up to the twins, as far as he was concerned. Ash heard that and announced to Lane and Heather that Ares had just pimped his fiancée. As Ember’s twin, she was duly empowered to talk stud fees with them.

Eventually the crowds thinned, and Shale officially left with a raging headache. Rain and Shale were set upon by Mark and Allen, while Aspen made do with the attentions of Kelly and Robert. Willow and Erin were a happy and shameless couple, and Ares and Clay made out with redheads on each arm. The final event was a concert in the park, following which they set out for an all-night diner to unwind and talk over coffee. Clay set a date, an exclusive affair with Ember and Ash, for a trip out to San Francisco for that Friday night.

Instead of going home afterwards, Lane and Heather declared that they should go to Xanadu and have their own private party. It was the first time Clay had been out to the new house, and he added his vote, which meant that it would be a restrained affair. The group had spent the day reminding themselves that Clay was a “normal” for all they knew, and enough new people had been abruptly exposed to psi for one month. Ares, Ember and Ash decided silently that it might be a good idea to indulge the desires of their obsessed dates, to take a bit of the edge off of them.

In spite of the fact that the girls all had their bathing suits on, the house rule prevailed and everyone striped down. It had been a hot day, and it was a warm night, so the cool pool seduced them all. Following a bit of mischief and play, they began to focus on seducing each other. Heather and Lane stopped competing with each other to take advantage of the offer Ash had made at the amusement park. They either shared or they went without. As Ares was led to a private nook, Clay confronted the twins.

Ash asked him if he had given what she had said any thought. He asserted that he had given it a lot of thought. He had remained a gentleman and stopped brooding so much right afterwards. Together, Ember and Ash asked him if he could be satisfied to be just a friend and a lover. They assured him that Ares would consent if he never failed to treat the girls right. Clay could not say no, even if deep down he felt otherwise. He had worked so hard to get to just this stage in the relationship with them.

Besides, he told himself, justifying an act he, as yet, only toyed with, all was not lost. Ares seemed like the kind of guy who would understand if a girl changed her mind. And girls did change their minds. He relaxed, accepting what was offered on the terms he was given, and resolved silently to simply see to it that the girls changed their minds. He began his campaign by communicating the full depth of his worship in the very way he touched them. He stirred something deep within them, something he was surprised to learn they shared—but they were twins—awakening as the personification of sexuality.

Ash could hardly believe it. He did know. He had known her. He knew exactly what to do and did it as if by habit, and she still could not remember having been touched by him. Having entrapped him. As she looked into Ember’s eyes, she finally saw what had been born in her own eyes and realized that her secrets had become a part of her love. Things she had hidden from herself, she had given to her soul mate in marriage. As Ember looked back at her, the memories churned inside her. Ash looked away, only now able to feel shame. Now, only Ares was ignorant of the truth. Ember reached out, turning her face to meet hers, and she communicated her love and acceptance. She silently begged Ash to not be ashamed. She had been a child. She had not known better, nor had she been given any choice.

19

Confronting Conflict

The demons which Clay had awakened in Ash—and Ember—had long been buried memories. Now they were stirred up to the front of her mind. They haunted every thought as she struggled to get through the next day at school. She had made her peace with them a long time ago, but it was gnawing at her. Had Clay been one of her victims? It was the self-imposed torture of trying to fish a forgotten name out of the depths of her memory, and this one dark corner of her soul was where she had to look. Again and again, Ember tried to tell her to drop it. Or at least talk to someone about it.

Ember had not meant to talk to her about it. It was all there in her head, plain to see, and there was not much she could add to it. But that meant she could also see how the problem had been resolved. That she knew the truth about Ash and Jack Dancer. Ash had only ever had one person she could talk to about this, and Ember was suggesting that it was time to talk to him about it again. At gymnastics, Ash bit the bullet and asked to speak to Dancer in private. She made it clear that she needed to speak as a protégée to her mentor, and he took her into a private office and sat her down to talk. She told him quickly about a boy who touched her as if he knew her intimately, and who had tapped directly into what had evolved in her at nine years of age. She told him that she had wracked her brain, but for the life of her could not remember having even known him, let alone having entangled him in her web.

Dancer considered the problem. Many men could say that their lives had been changed by a girl. In his case the girl had been the original Ember, and she had been such a little girl. She had so much power, and in turn so much stimulation, that her sexuality had matured before her personality. She had developed a strange condition, as if she had gone into heat, in which her identity had become submerged by her sex drive. She had only been nine years old, but her condition had an impact on her body, triggering early menses and unbelievable pheromone production. She was completely unconscious of it, actually shifting into an altered state of awareness where she was totally un*self*conscious. She had no effect on females beyond eliciting affection, but it could make a man into a slave to her desires.

She had possessed no shame, no fear, and yet managed to cope with practical matters, such as avoiding pregnancy. The same could not be said of the men and boys who fell prey to her nymphomania. His brother had been shattered by guilt as he flew again and again into the heart of her flame. Dancer himself had been instructed to deal with her. Technically, in spite of her age, she was the type of threat he was occasionally employed to eliminate—a psi who had no control over her powers. He was supposed to have killed her. He had been a fool to assume he could resist her primal attraction. Instead of killing her, he had fed himself to her insatiable appetite. In the process he discovered the girl behind it.

After quenching her insatiable thirst, she emerged from her altered state, innocent and immature. She was a bright, gifted child. He realized that her potential was so great her mind was almost detached from her body. She lived in a world of omniscience, aware of everything and intrigued with it all. Her control over her power was absolute, but as she approached the point of severance, some instinct for self-preservation would reign her back in by kicking her into sexual over drive.

She understood what was happening; she knew exactly what she was doing and what it meant. She sensed, from the men she snared, that there was something wrong—at least from an outside perspective—and that such activities were inappropriate for children. Unable to endure without it, though, she compromised by keeping those episodes a secret from herself. Dancer confronted her parents with this discovery, revealing himself to them in full confidence. He informed them he had been contracted to kill her, but in his opinion the contract was not justified. She needed a mentor, not an assassin. Her parents, confronted with the facts—a choice between sex or death for their daughter—enlisted him to be that mentor.

Over time, her personality had matured into her sexuality, and her sexuality had evolved into a personality of its own. Her other self. He knew her so well, both sides, he noticed at once when her other took her place at school, in gymnastics and martial arts. And sex, how could he ever forget the sex? Dancer had struggled to avoid his brother’s fate, tearing himself apart for allowing himself to have sex with a child. It was difficult to remember sometimes that the girl was using him, and not the other way around—and that she really had no choice. Until she could embrace her power without discarding her body, she needed sex to survive. He managed to limit the episodes by teasing her to invest more attention in her body, into mastering her body through athletics, and embracing the world through her physical senses.

Dancer had thought that the problem had finally been put to rest. Now Ash approached Dancer to discuss her dark history, how her mating had revealed it to Ember, and the boy who had pushed their buttons. It concerned her that she still possessed buttons that could turn her into a willing sex slave, but it still bothered her more that she could not place a boy so close to her own age she would have to have known him, anywhere in those memories. Dancer did not recall that Clay had been one of her victims, but he promised he would look into it. He reminded her that she had gone into a dream state with most of her earliest victims, and also that circumstances could force a person’s identity to change.

Ash knew that only too well. She did not know enough about Clay’s past to be certain that he had not been orphaned or adopted. The fact that his name was not remembered meant little more than the fact that his face was not remembered. Boys’ faces changed a lot through puberty, and she had no idea what he might have looked like as a ten-year-old boy. She did know that the signals her body had produced back then had been more than sufficient to stiffen the resolve of such a young boy. Dancer assured her that it had. She told him she would still be working on it in the back of her mind. She had another date with him that night.

Dancer surprised her by telling her not to go. She asserted that she had to, she had promised. Dancer reminded her that she had confided the truth about herself and her mate. Ember and Alt could keep the boy entertained, but Ash had something more important to do. He strongly suggested it was time for Ash to let her other half in on the secret. When the girls left after practice, Dancer returned to his office and composed a report. He had suspected that something big had changed in the girls, but now he had the whole story, and it was time to update their profiles. In spite of their young age, they were ready. The report was coded and sealed between hard stock layers of a greeting card, which he then sealed in an envelope and dropped off for pick up by Fed Ex.

A normal could never have even read the reports Dancer made. Another psionic could, if he could break the code. Eric could. He routinely intercepted Dancer’s status reports. He watched unobtrusively as Clay, and then simply stretched his mind once Dancer left, and scanned the buried messages without physically approaching the drop box or handling the material. Clay walked down the hall of the main office in Dancer’s wake and discovered that Dancer knew about Ember’s power and was about to investigate Clay. He managed not to react, just kept walking out of the building and on to his car.

He got in and drove off on autopilot. His head was churning. Dancer was a real threat to him. The reason he had learned how to take over other people’s bodies. An anonymous body was a perfect hiding place, but if Dancer investigated his host, it would not take him long to figure out who currently owned it. Its real owner had been kicked out into his old body and killed by Dancer. Just because Dancer currently thought of him as dead did not mean he would not believe he had dodged the bullet. It was time to switch to Plan B. He did not know exactly what that plan was yet, but it started with scrapping his investment in Clay.

If he had to abandon the identity of Clay, he lost his carefully built interface with Ember and her twin. That was the agonizing part. The feud that existed between Jack and Eric made his interest in her lethal. He would end up doing the same thing over and over, striving to get close to her and then getting spotted by Dancer, who would just try to kill him again. He had toyed with the idea of taking Ares’ place, it was the perfect solution, but Dancer would see that too. It frustrated him so much he could hardly think. There had to be somebody he could use to remain close to her that Dancer would not guess at. He simply had to spot the obvious, which of course eluded him at the moment.

What he did know was, if he jumped before Dancer exposed him, he would probably be safe in that next body, as long as Dancer could not figure out later which way he had jumped. He needed to either convince his brother that he had been flushed out and contrive some way to provoke his intent to kill him in a way that would convince him he was really dead, without accomplishing it in fact. It would be much more practical to figure out a way to neutralize Dancer instead. he had been working on that for a while. No one was a match for him toe to toe, but enough of these young psionics might be able to take him out. It was a direction he had been working toward for some time, with the Wild-Psi’d but he was not sure if they were ready. They would need allies. Like Ember’s friends, and quite possible her family.

A long shot, he granted. He set these thoughts on the back burner and returned to the line of thought he had been following before spotting Dancer making a drop. He had a date with the twins that night. It might be his last time to spend with them for a while, depending on how his plans evolved. He would focus on that, enjoy it to the hilt, and pray for inspiration. Aside from that, he had a little time before he really had to start worrying. He headed to his host’s home and got ready to go out.

Cougar had called another meeting. Once again, their mentor and overlord begged off, claiming other responsibilities. naturally that became the first topic of discussion. The Wild-Psi’d were concerned that Eric’s judgment was unsound in regard to his twin obsession. In spite of that fact that he had been warned, he had only gotten closer to them. He was simply begging Dancer to catch him, and they all knew how much he feared Dancer. They just hoped that meant he had some respect for him and would not get wiped out.

With the topic shifting to Dancer, they got down to the real business. From their surveillance, they had concluded that most of Ember’s friends were high potentials, and most likely as active as she. They were too damn careful for normal people, confounding surveillance effortlessly, with the exception of the one who could not seem to settle on whether she was a boy or a girl. Their actions at the amusement park had at least proved that they knew about psi, which was the most important thing they needed to know. They concluded that it was time to approach their targets and warn them about Dancer.

They picked Erin, as their first contact in the group, on the grounds that a private investigator had been asking questions about Aaron and informing her served as an introduction. He had visited the Wild Side Private Entertainment Company and interviewed half of the organizational staff and the party security staff trying to track down the missing boy. They had given him a false lead, stating that the boy had ditched the party, and returned the next morning for his car. They lied and said he had made some comment about going out of town, and the car parked at the airport was waiting to lead him off on a wild goose chase.

Erin was a classic case. Most of their group had been runaways, fleeing from parents who did not understand them or their powers. She had been luckier than them, in that she had fallen in with a group that could create an identity to keep her on the inside. It had come as a shock to discover after a week of trying to identify her, and the one with her at the party, that the girls had suddenly acquired legal identities. The group voted unanimously to approach her that night, if possible. They could then confront her with their own power and give her their warning

Ash asked Ember if Alt could take her place on the date, she had things to discuss with Ares in private. She agreed, confessing that she had hoped Ash would resolve that matter. She took herself by the hand and Ember and Alt bathed and dressed together. They were ready for Clay when he arrived to pick them up. Ember had resolved to avoid making guys wait for her to get ready and made up for it by keeping him waiting on purpose just long enough for her rapid emergence to ensure that he appreciated it. On the way out, she picked up her key to the town house. Part of her duties that night lay in keeping Clay fully entertained and assured of his place in her life.

Ember and Alt went out to the city with Clay, to a nightclub concert. Afterwards, she would take him back to the townhouse. Officially, they were staying overnight so that they could spend the following day in the city, but Clay understood that it was primarily to give them a safe, private place to have sex. As always, he was a perfect gentleman and charming date throughout the evening, enjoying the sexual tension by pretending that the outcome was entirely uncertain, and dependent on his successful, subtle, seduction. Ember confided to herself, through Alt, that she really was falling in love with him, she just had to get used to his bridled intensity.

Ares and Ash had slipped out for a private date at Xanadu, asking to be left alone for the night. That left the girls looking for somewhere else to go for entertainment. Erin and Willow went out with Rain and Shale, also to the city, to visit the dance club the other girls had been talking about all week, expecting to use a couple of extra bedrooms in the townhouse for the night. The three girls argued with Shale, begging her to just be one of the girls for the night, and spare them all from having to cover for her slips. Erin’s decision to remain female all the time, in spite of the fact she proved right away—to Willow—that she had been awakened and could shift back, protected her from giving herself away in the same fashion as Shale could, but in her case, there were people actively looking for her.

As sometimes happened, an exciting night suddenly seemed uneventful in contrast to the strange encounter that took place on the dance floor in the middle of the evening. Erin was approached during the night and warned by Cougar and Lynx about Jack Dancer. Cougar caught her on the dance floor, taking her hand and dancing her while speaking to mind to mind. He urged her not to react but just to listen. He told her that she and her friends were in great danger, and where to go for help. Lynx confronted her in the bathroom to repeat the warning and assure her that it was real and deadly serious.

Erin called her friends aside and told them what had happened. They all agreed that something was up and cut their evening short to discuss it in safety back at the town house. They would have gone home, but they wanted to tell Ember as soon as possible. They made a quick call home and then waited for Ember, Alt and Clay to arrive. She had talked to Ash for a few minutes, Lane and Heather had invited themselves over to Xanadu, forcing her to bug out or reveal Alt’s secret. So, she was sleeping alone that night while Ares entertained them. If he was not too distracted by her revelation.

Clay had been very sweet all night, and naughty. He seemed to know her body so well, he could reach out and push Ember and Alt’s buttons without the casual observer realizing he had touched them at all. The dark and noise of the concert gave him every excuse to touch them, to get their attention, or lean close to speak through the noise. Fully dressed, and in public, he was making love to them the entire evening, arousing, teasing and toying with her. The struggle to keep her passion locked beneath a calm surface substituted for the passionate embrace so central to the act of sex. Alt asked her, how could a girl not fall for a man who could do that to her simply by escorting her through the world at large?

He had them both so worked up by the end of the concert, they had turned to each other on the drive to the apartment, taunting him in return by going at it shamelessly in the back seat, while he could only listen and glimpse them occasionally in the mirror. To further taunt him, they did not even bother to dress for the short walk up from the garage to the penthouse. Erin passed the warning on to Ember when they arrived inside, who could hardly believe it. Willow also told Alt she had to become scarce before morning, since Ash needed to be able to be seen in public tomorrow to investigate the strange story.

Considering the fact that they had Clay among them, the other girls told her to stick to her plans with him, keep him distracted, and let them worry about the problem for the moment. Ember promised she would keep her eye out for Dancer and be careful when she went out the next day and went back into deal with Clay. Unfortunately, Ember was a different predator’s target. Clay had been brooding all night, and his inspiration had finally come. Dancer knew about his obsession with her. He would never guess that he would dare to take over her body. Yet it was the ideal solution.

He had discovered that twins were identical to the roots of their very being, like one person in two bodies. The closest he could possibly get to the one he loved so desperately was to become her twin. Knowing Dancer had been as much in love with Ember as he, he knew that she was probably the one person his brother would hesitate to slay to kill him. If he acted quickly, he would never even suspect it had happened. He thought about it all night, reminding himself that he had to get one of her alone to do it, and that he would need time to study her before he could convince anyone he was she.

He thought he loved her, and he acted as if his emotion was love. The fact that he could contemplate stealing her life and even ditching her mind to make the body his own, did not strike him as evil or selfish. After all there were two of her, surely, she could spare one for the one who loved her do dearly. Ember, ignorant of this darkness within him, was falling in love, opening herself to the one who would destroy her. After several hours of the most intense sex she had experienced, she slept soundly in his arms, confident in her safety.

Ember rose before Clay, and pulled herself together, tucking Alt away within her. She checked on the others and then slipped in the shower. She was happy. She had worried that her feelings for Ares and Ash had spoiled her for any other. Clay rose shortly after and joined her in the shower, asking where her twin had gone. Ember told him she had to go home but that she was still free for the day. As his hands began to explore her body, she smiled at him and whispered encouragingly. None of the other girls were awake yet, she told him; they could have some fun before breakfast.

He smiled in delight. It was the perfect opportunity, and it had come so soon. He caught her face and stared deeply into her eyes. Ember gazed up at him, expecting a kiss when she realized she was being attacked by Clay. She was completely off guard, opening herself, willing him to enter her—if in a different way than he intended—and he was a powerful and unsuspected psi. She had been given no warning. The world swam in her vision and then all went black.

Eric gasped as her body unfolded in his mind. Her senses were now his, and there was a heavy limp form pressing against her. She pushed it off and then reached out quickly to grab Clay’s vacant body before it crashed to the tile and woke people up. She turned the shower off—Ember had been finishing when he entered—and gathered her old host body in her thoughts. Without wasting time, she teleported the water away from them and hauled the body telekinetically over to the bed.

There was no Clay, had not been for a long time, but there was a mind, the strange trap of biology which seized consciousness would capture raw awareness as long as the brain was intact. There was not much in him to build on, sort of like the world’s worst case of amnesia or autism, but he would live. The very emptiness of his mind would convince any psionic that a psionic had been responsible and he had already set up a psionic to take the blame. A psionic who was a known abductor.

She slipped into the clothes Ember had laid out to wear and checked the town house for signs of waking. No one had stirred. There was a lot still up in the air, but all the options were open. Ember could always reappear and claim to have fled from Dancer, or some other agent, when he had fully digested her. The body of Clay made up for the absence of any sign of struggle, while convincing any who investigated that Ember had been forced to flee on her own, or had never had a chance to defend herself from abduction. In full possession of her new body, she simply walked out of the apartment without a hint of trouble.

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Ares dozed lightly in the arms of Lane and Heather. None of them had really slept; they had been at it all night, talking between bouts of intense physical activity. Most of it had been the girls discussing the kind of relationship they could build with him without openly challenging the marriage of Ares and Ember. Arguing with him to consent to their desire for children by him, a license for which their parents had given them as soon as they were old enough to breed. He argued that a child needed more than the best genes, and he would not be able to be their father.

Ares had to wonder what he had really meant, as he hovered near sleep. He loved them and did not want to deny them, but he was lying to them. Part of the lie was the fact that he was really the childhood girlfriend with whom they had schemed to win the best man. There had been a moment when he had wished this was a Heinleinian world, where group marriages were accepted and embraced. A moment, but then he had been honest with himself. He also wished he could tell them the truth. At the same time, the truth only complicated things. It was not that he was not the person they thought he was, but he had not gotten there by the route they assumed.

But that was just distracting himself from Ash’s confession. As a boy who had once been Ember, he was having great difficulty dealing with the truth about her childhood. The memories had come to him though another mating of the minds, a strange one considering that this mate was his other self. The truth about herself had shattered the two assumptions on which her current idea of herself rested. As a child, she had made the decision to be female and embraced it so deeply that *being* female had been the only thing that saved her from losing her mind. As a person with two expressions of herself, she had embraced masculinity in the assurance that she was still female—that she was not denying herself her true expression.

Now she was not so sure. Ash had proved, past and present, that she was her, but a separate and complete expression of her—a reiteration of her individual self. On mating, their minds had finally recognized each other as fully autonomous, fully developed people—as the same person living two entirely different, but associated lives. She was not the male side of herself. She was the entirety of herself restricted to just being male. In another life, she was doing the exact opposite. She was like a timer traveler looped on herself.

The path she was on was the path leading away from herself. She could see that, now that she had confronted herself. She was forced to ask herself what she needed to do, to be healthy, whole and sane. She was not sure at that moment if she was going to be able to be anyone’s father in more than an act. There was an obvious decision for her, but it was complicated by another truth. Ember. Her soul mate, her completion, Ember was a different person. She had come from an entirely different place, met her half-way and then became her; by embracing her to become her equal. What was true for Ares and Ash was true for her.

Ember was meant to be what she had become, and Ares—as Ares or Ash, since they were the same person walking two different paths—was her soul mate. Born a boy, and raised as a male, she would tell herself it was her responsibility to assume that male role if Ares balked at it. Because Ares did balk at it. But the thing about a soul mate was not that she had to be the opposite, a perfect complement, but that she had the potential to make her soul mate whole and be made whole in turn. That was what they had done.

Ares had seen that. Finding the missing piece of her life had given her no choice. If she remained Ares, she would be an exile from herself. If Ember became Ares, the same would be true for her. They had to be true to who they were. What they might happen to be was nothing more than how they chose to express that. They could never lock themselves into a specialized role, for purely social reasons, and be happy. What they had become did not fit into the world they lived in. They had to understand that and take steps to keep from stifling themselves and each other to meet the expectations of others.

Ash showed up to collect Ares and give the two girls a lift home. While they were waking up, with a few laps in the pool, she told them about the warning Erin had received. They dried off and dressed, and on the way to their own homes, Ash suggested that the two watch each other’s backs. There was no saying if the warning was legitimate, but an outside group of psionics had taken an interest in them. They had to have observed the group before introducing themselves. Shale had been the only one who they knew had revealed her powers in public, but they had approached Erin, which meant they were certain about her.

If they could be certain of Erin, they had to have been watching her before she even knew about psi to catch her in a slip, and even then, they would have to have been very sharp. Lane and Heather agreed to stick together, even as far as getting out at the same house and going in together just to catch up on their sleep. Ash promised to keep them informed and focused her attention on Ares. She told him that she needed to figure out some way to check on Dancer. He had been her mentor, did she dare confront him directly, or was there some other way to verify his past?

Ares could hardly think. Instead of responding, he told Ash that he could not be Ares anymore. He explained about the one person walking two paths and confessed that there was only one path he wanted to be walking, and she was on it. She was silent for a moment, then told him she had been waiting for that to happen. There were no more secrets between them. No more division. Just a question and that question had been answered. Just because there were two sexes, and she could be two people, did not mean she had to divide herself up along those lines.

She told him that once they merged, there would be no going back. This time, they were deciding to walk the same path, and merging would absolve them of all differences. The ability would still be there, but the fault that facilitated it was gone. Another one might never form. Ares understood and asked anyway. Ash pulled over to the side of the road and took him in. It seemed strange that she should cry, but then again, it was the first time in years that she had truly been alone. She could not divide. There was no other within her to take the option, though she could still form the second attention as easily as ever.

She got a hold of herself and drove home. She was in no condition to face Dancer or make suspicious accusations. She needed to explain to her family that there would be no fiancée, there would be no wedding, and think hard about how to explain this to Ember—how to keep her from making the mistake she had almost made. As she walked through the door, she was greeted by worried and anxious faces. Cold fingers raked up her spine. The way they looked at her told her more than she wanted to hear.

Clay had been found in the town house with a mind as naked as his body. Ember had disappeared. Not one of them suspected that she had destroyed her friend’s mind and run away. All they knew was that they had received a warning and suddenly it was too late. They were all headed out to the city; they were just waiting for her to get back with Ares. It was a bad time to tell them that there no longer was an Ares, and she struggled to tell it in a way that did not cause them to suspect foul play. Brand was stricken. Just as his daughter went missing, he realized that he had lost his son forever. Victoria caught him and told the others to just go. She would stay with him and together they would hold down the fort.

Ash had spoken to Erin and Willow on the phone the night before. The warning they had described receiving was still fresh in her mind, as well as the alarm it had caused. Erin, Rain and Shale, struggling with awakened minds and switched sexes, had been startled to learn that they had drawn the attention of a gang of psionic kids and some kind of psionic underground that they had broken away from. She kept thinking the scene over and over in her mind.

She had wanted to run straight out there, to be with Ember, but Alt had been there, and it had seemed too complicated. She could not just show up when she was already there, and was afraid to risk teleporting in, for fear of being seen by Clay. Again, because of Clay, but by no fault of his own, they could not teleport over now. An ambulance had been called to pick him up and the EMT’s were taking their time getting him out. They could have waited, but they got in the car and started driving just to have something to do.

They debated about whether they kept Ember’s disappearance a secret, or whether they should report her missing when they could. The girls who had found Clay had told the EMT’s that Clay had spent the night, with plans to go out with Ember. They said that Ember had slipped out while everyone was sleeping and had not come back yet. The EMT’s had wanted to know if Clay had taken any drugs, and her absence had to have stuck in their minds. The best thing seemed to be to say nothing, since there was little that the police could do if she had been abducted by a psionic, and only a powerful psionic could have managed it without Ember waking the entire neighborhood.

They had agreed to keep Ember’s disappearance to themselves, by the time they arrived in San Francisco. The older, and more experienced psionics combed the entire town house, searching for clues to what happened to her. The younger psionics hit the halls and streets asking neighbors if they had seen Ash’s twin at any point that morning. Most of them swore that, if they had seen a girl like her, they would not only remember it, they would have pointed her out to others, and thought about it afterward. So, the short answer was no.

Ash, her sisters and her friends started searching further out for Ember, venturing deeper into San Francisco, using the town house as a base of operations. The few hits they did get, they were suspicious of, as the witness asserted that the girl they had seen had walked alone. That was not impossible, it only meant that the abductor was a telepath powerful enough to abduct people without coming anywhere near them. A telepath powerful enough to abduct Ember like that boggled the mind, and they found themselves disbelieving it simply because they hated to think about confronting that kind of power.

Erin had brought up contacting the people from the party much earlier, but as the day wore on, the rest of the group started to think it might be necessary. Turning to an unknown was not easy, but in the face of the unknown, it might be the best step they could take. Before deciding, they returned to base and conferred with Brand and Rowan. It was now safe to assume that Ember had not somehow fled from the attack and found some place to hide. If she had been able, she would have attempted to contact them, rather than resist every attempt by them to contact her. If there was a group of rogue psionics who were keeping tabs on them, they just might have a real lead for them to follow.

Before they could go to the place that Erin had been instructed to ask for them at, a group of them showed up at the town house. Word of Ember disappearance and her friend’s search had reached the Wild-Psi’d by that late in the day. It finally caused them to approach them. They revealed themselves, with dire stories of the abduction of psionic kids. Their stories, for the most part, but also stories of kids who had not lived to tell their own. Ash discovered that her parents had known her gymnastics trainer was an agent of the psionic underground, a very dangerous psionic. He was the embodiment of evil as far as the Wild-Psi'ders were concerned

Her parents had resisted believing that the man they had entrusted their daughter to—who they had actually given a license to have sex with her to keep her alive, who had refused to carry out a contract against her that they might have endorsed, and which many psionics would have carried out, because he had bothered to understand her problem and realize it could be solved without bloodshed—was a menace or a monster. The stories about him those kids told shook that belief.

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Ember woke up in a different world. At first, she thought she might have been drugged, and the shifting landscape was due to the disruption of her normal perceptions. Then she realized that it was not her, but the world itself that was a bit unstable. She wandered through the strange landscape for several hours, before passing through a door into a strange reflection of the real world. From the moment she noticed other people, the world around her had become stable. She wandered the streets watching the people, drinking in the awesome detail, and confirmed with all her senses that it was a real, true and subtly alien universe.

As the day dwindled toward evening, she looked for a place to sit down and think. What was she doing in another universe, and how had she gotten there? She struggled to remember the events leading up to her first suspicion of displacement. There had been that timeless disorientation, some sort of dreamscape, and before that only darkness—oblivion. What could she remember before that? It was difficult to remember the recent past, so she tried to reach further back. That proved equally frustrating, since there seemed to be two, and in places three, different pasts which she recognized as her own.

She studied the paths leading back and saw that two were knit closely together along their entire lengths and merged into one past if she followed them back far enough. The other path converged on those two from some remote origin. On one hand, she had been born and raised a boy, and on the other hand she had been born and raised a girl, but in both cases, she had broken form, reached some middle ground, become who she really was. As she sat there thinking about it, it all came back to her.

She had been attacked by the last person she would have suspected. He had torn her mind right out of her body and swallowed it, and she had been too shocked to do anything about it. He had banished her to the depths of his subconscious, and she had struggled to escape. He had been guarding the way she had come, so she had gone the other direction. Deeper. She had emerged in a world within his mind. Her father had told her stories about such things. She had never believed him, how could people have entire worlds—universes—inside them?

She believed him now. It terrified her. It raised the question of what had happened to her body. Had she lost it forever, along with the world she had been born to? Had she banished herself beyond the pale? It was then that she realized that she was not with her other. She studied the facts and realized that what she had done was possible only because she had possessed a free mind, a free will and attention. Her other was his prisoner—a prisoner in her own body. He had not even realized she had possessed a second attention, and she had avoided confronting his consciousness. She had escaped from him by hiding in his own unconscious mind.

Alt had been stunned for the first part of the day. She had been helpless as her own body made its way through the city, using public transportation to reach a neighborhood she was utterly unfamiliar with. She experienced everything but could affect nothing. Even thought had been beyond her command. In many ways, what had happened to her was not different from when she stowed away in Ember’s mind. Except this was not Ember’s mind, her birth mind. She had been trapped among his thoughts, his fears, his hopes, his memories, a captive audience.

After several hours of total immersion in him, she regained the ability to think but already knew all the answers to any question she might ask of him. She need not wonder how Clay had become so powerful a psionic and kept it hidden. He was not Clay at all. He was Jack Dancer’s brother. The two had a couple of other things in common. They both possessed dragon potential and had both been inducted into and trained as assassins for the psionic underground. They both had tremendous psionic potential, but only Eric had been scarred by his experiences with young Ember.

Eric was unstable, driven by dark urges, and forbidden passions. His motives for pursuing and abducting her were complex and convoluted. He knew that, while his brother killed for the organization he belonged to, he primarily located and “recruited” psionics for the underground. Stealing the girl of his dreams from under his brother’s nose and destroying her, if he could not keep her for himself, was simply a way of striking at the brother who he felt rejected him. It would also be a way to punish her for abandoning him for Jack all those years ago.

It left her afraid to think. She had never been this vulnerable, and only the experience passed on to her from Ash—the original Ember’s other—gave her any hope of saving herself. The ability to keep secrets from her other served just as well when the other in question was an altogether alien mind engulfing hers. Their minds were otherwise naked to each other, and it would take only a curious thought to trip off full mental intercourse, which would mate them as surely as Ember had been mated to Ares and Ash. That might be a good thing, since he could hardly dispose of her mind if he welded his own to it.

Then again, he had done just that at least once before to the young boy who had been Clay. When his brother had begun to hunt him, he had sought refuge in the mind of a little boy. When it became clear that Dancer would never quit until he was dead, he had shoved that boy’s mind into his own body to take the fall. Clay-Eric had been a redundancy to him, an unnecessary copy he had not hesitated to sacrifice for his own purposes. Since he had been motivated by fear and desperation to survive, Eric-Clay had not even flinched to do it.

If she provoked him, there was every reason to believe he would do it again. It was almost unavoidable. A forced mating of her mind with his was already at the top of his list, all she could do was hold out for as long as she could and pray for either inspiration or opportunity. If she could just squeeze past him, she could jump out of his shadow and manifest herself. It would put her at physical risk, but her mind and soul would be safe. It was fortunate that she had responded to Clay more than Ember, being herself unattached.

Ember would never have considered jumping out of her own body to escape his grasp. If Ember had turned her head up to receive his kiss, he would have seized her mind, and she would not have even considered the option Alt was silently thinking of. She had no idea precisely where Ember had gotten off to, but she was safe wherever she now was. At least her mind was safe; no telling what sort of nightmare she was enduring in the darkest depths of her assailant’s mind. She was certainly not in a position to fall into Eric’s grasp the instant Alt slipped free of it.

If Alt jumped free, Eric would have sole possession of Ember’s body. It seemed like a terrible thing to do to Ember, but Ember would hardly forgive her for selling their soul to a man who would use it like toilet paper. Alt told herself not to beat herself up. There was no time; she would be lucky to get one chance to prevent that. She was going to pay a steep price just for that much. She was learning him; digesting him from the moment he engulfed her. Taking him into her was half of the mating process, if he caught her and took her, she would have no secrets. She could only prevent that by doing what she was doing.

She was tainting herself, poisoning herself, adopting his traits and characteristics to camouflage her own, to hide from him in plain sight. To enable her to slip her mind free of his grasp and squirt herself back out into the world. The more of him she absorbed, the more she loved him, knowing that she would certainly be destroyed by him if she was foolish enough to offer him that love. By the end of the day, she had completed her task. Now all she could do was wait for the opportunity to apply what she had learned. She still allowed him to feel her, a stunned and helpless mind, as a shell concealing the manner in which she had changed.

Eric had taken a long time to reach her lair. She had traveled all over the Bay Area to confuse any attempt Ember’s friends and family could mount to track her. It was a wonderful body, young and strong, but she was tired after the long day. She needed to crack open the mind within her and digest it, if her plan was going to work, but she longed for sleep. It would have to wait for the morning. Ember had a mind as strong as her body, and she would fight, so Eric would need the rest. If Ember tried to throw Eric off while she was asleep, she would sense it and wake up to deal with it, but she had not come out of her shock all day.

Alt waited until Eric was asleep and then poked a tiny hole in her shell and reached out. Her own thoughts blended perfectly with his and pushed with the irresistible strength and patience of root tendrils. It took time, perhaps most of the night, but she gradually infiltrated the weave of his mind, opening a channel through which she could rapidly emerge. He would feel it when she did, but he would not be able to snare her as she bolted through. As she gazed out through the tunnel she had made, she spared one last thought for Ember, praying that she would be safe.

Ember had spent the day thinking. She did not have access to the things Alt had learned, but there was a lot of experience in the two lives that were her foundation, guided by men who wanted to arm her against any possibility. She had deduced that Alt was in greater danger than she was. Alt had no defense against a forced marriage, but as a married mind, Ember could stand off such an assault forever. A trick which the original Ember could do with her “other” had been a cold swap, for those times when both were expressed, but one needed to address something the other knew nothing about.

Ember had established that she had retained all her skills and abilities in this strange new world. She ought to be able to trade places with Alt and thus save her from a rape to horrible to contemplate. She took a step back to consider the situation she was going to be thrusting her other self into. It was roughly the same world she had known before, but there were differences. All of the major landmarks were the same, but a few familiar ones had been missing. She had not had time to check everything, but she knew that her family—or families—did not exist in this universe.

There might not be any active psionics in the world, for all she knew. She had made every call she could think of and found no one who had ties to the Avatar Families, but one of two normal friends had actually answered, and claimed not to know her. She had expected to end up on the street when it got dark, but a gallant gentleman had come to her rescue. He had accepted her story of having been mugged and losing all of her money and identification. He had been very attracted to her but did not put any pressure on her to have sex. He had simply wanted her to do some modeling in exchange for food and a place to sleep, and a little bit of money.

She was in his bed, and he was sleeping on a couch in the next room. Given the fact that she was not going to be able to replace her “lost” identification, dropping Alt into the situation with no memory of how she got into it would perhaps convince her good Samaritan that she had been thumped harder than she had said, and was suffering from amnesia. Alt was smart enough to play that angle. If worse came to worse, and she ended up trapped in that world, at least she had some natural advantages. It was better than the alternative.

Alt gathered her nerve and pushed through. At the same time Ember committed herself to doing what she had planned. Alt cleared the hurdle of Eric’s mind without even bumping the rail. She was out, in the clear in her own body as Eric twitched and woke up. Ember took a deep breath and reached in through herself. Alt was getting ready to defend herself from Eric’s instant, all-out assault, when she felt a strange tug and the world spun around her. Ember opened her eyes, surprised to find herself in her birth world, in full command of her faculties, and then she was slammed against the wall behind her. She impacted so hard she blacked out.

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In the split second of alarm, as she lurched awake and acted, Eric assumed that Ember’s twin, Ash, had teleported in by instinct. It was not quite a blind teleport, when the nature of a twin’s bond was considered, but damn close. She gave the intruder no chance to orient herself. She had sufficient power, especially when it was controlled by her instincts or desires, to overpower her, and of course she had the means to leash her power—once imposed on Eric by his brother. Jack had believed that the leash could not be slipped, but Eric had been motivated. Once Jack had realized he could not chain Eric, he had tried to kill him.

Just another detail leading to the present situation, but one Eric had learned from. The underground had developed new technology based on the understanding of psi, and designed to possess, modify, enhance, or inhibit psi potential. Once she placed the collar around Ember’s neck, and closed it, it activated and arrested the girl’s psi. Eric slipped the collar off over her head and stashed it outside the cell she had slept in. Eric had anticipated the possibility of an uninvited guest and been prepared.

The room she had left Ember in was a steel reinforced concrete cell, with no doors or windows, and all the fixtures—electric, plumbing and ventilation—sealed off by plates and paneling anchored by inaccessible screws and bolts that could only be turned telekinetically. With her powers leashed, it was an inescapable prison which Eric could teleport into and out of freely without any fear of Ember trying to escape. Now that she was secured, Eric could pop back in to examine her at leisure. Since she was awake, her first concern was digesting her sister’s mind.

Eric could not believe it. She was not there. Her mind had vanished. The body she was in was now hers and hers alone, and the mind containing the memories she needed to portray her host had escaped her grasp. Her plan seemed to be unraveling, but she caught herself and forced herself to think. All was not lost. The other one had come to her. She could not have told anyone what she was doing or else a whole crowd would have come in with her. She had probably been experimenting to see if it was possible to jump to her sister’s side.

Eric let out her breath. The situation had become more complicated, but the basic plan might still work. Ash, she still assumed it was Ash, had not had a chance to see anything when she emerged. Eric wished she knew what had happened to Ember’s mind. It was conceivable that she had died of shock, simply blew right out like a candle in a high wind. A strong mind could prove the most fragile under certain pressures. She would have to keep that in mind with Ash.

Eric went back into the cell and saw that the girl was still unconscious. Eric would have to break her mind from without, and the body of Ember would hardly do for that sort of thing. Since it was now mindless, Eric could set it aside for later. It was time to call up a resource he had never expected to need again. His original body had died, but Eric had translated it to and from thought enough times to have memorized it. It was easy to jump out of a host into his own flesh, hardly any different from simply teleporting from one place to another. Ember’s body crumpled to the floor, but lay there awake and empty, as innocent as a baby.

Eric picked the body up and moved it to the bed. Ash would wake up and find her twin in the same condition Clay had been in and her own mind crippled. Eric, who looked so much like his older brother, could go in and start working her over. It would take more time this way, but the bright side of it was that he would not have to dispose of her afterwards. She would be easy to manipulate into believing she was Ember, shattered by the horrible experience, and Eric could take over the role of Ash. Their friends and family would be so glad to have them back alive they would not question that assumption.

He was waiting for her to wake up. When he did, he welcomed her to the party, calling her Ash and tipping her off. She tried to fight but quickly figured out she was powerless. She considered attempting to harness chi, but he was guarding her too closely with his mind. She had to be able to move to direct and apply chi-enhanced techniques, but he held her body in his mind and clamped down on her if she even twitched the wrong way. The most she could do with chi was soak it in and wait for the chance to focus it, wield it. She made a show of defeat and asked for an explanation.

Ember believed for a moment that it really was Dancer, and he too went along with it. He explained “Ember’s” condition, saying that her mind had been destroyed resisting him and he advised her not to let it happen to her. He made her responsible for the empty vessel, saying it would be a shame to have to dispose of her twin. Knowing that Alt’s mind was safe and wholly intact, she had her own reasons for keeping that body alive for her. She challenged him, however, stating that she could not guess his intentions, but she would fight. He promised to enjoy it, there were, after all, so many ways to break a person.

It had been almost impossible to sleep through the night. Ash finally gave up and went out into the main room where Brand and Rowan were still talking with the leader of the Wild-Psi’d, Cougar. Ash and her parents had been shocked when their new allies in the Wild Psi’d identified Dancer as one of the people who had abducted and then inducted them into the underground. Ash’s experience partly confirmed that, Dancer had often lectured her about such dangers when he was her mentor. Ash had helped confirm the facts but remembered what Dancer had been trying to do with her somewhat fondly.

Her parents quickly shared what they had learned about the Wild-Psi’d. They had escaped from induction into the psionic underground, following a warning from an outsider, Clay, she was surprised to learn. They called him Dragon, and struggled to explain the story of Eric, Jack Dancer’s brother, who had left an impression of himself in Clay before Dancer killed him, and Clay had acted in Eric’s name to protect other kids from the dangerous man. He had helped create the Wild-Psi'd and suggested the practice of scouting potentials and trying to beat underground agents to them when they went active.

They explained that Clay had fallen in love with Ember and had constantly argued for the group to take her in, but they had never been able to prove that she was an active until recently. They feared that Clay had gotten himself wiped out trying to stop Dancer from moving on Ember; he had left a message for the group saying that Dancer had finally confirmed that he knew she was active. They mourned his loss, and a couple of them haunted the hospital where he had been taken, protecting him and waiting to see if he would recover. Ash listened to this and still found it hard to swallow.

Ash did not know what to do. According to her new allies, Dancer was just as ruthless, without the excuse of being psychotic. The kids really did fear and hate Dancer, but there were flaws in their arguments. Dancer had not just recently found out about her ability. He had been one of the people who had trained her. He was her mentor, for crying out loud. As Ember, she had been under the wing of Dancer—the man who had been contracted to kill her as a child, according to her parents—for a lot longer than she had indicated when she first met the original Ash.

A lot longer than she had even admitted to herself until recently. A consequence of keeping secrets from herself. Only recently had she confronted those secrets. The reason Dancer had approached her as a young girl, in the guise of a gymnastics trainer. The first time she had encountered him; he had obviously had power of his own and had tried to encourage her to reveal her own. She had identified him to her parents, and they had interviewed him and approved him as a mentor for their daughter. He was a major influence in her life.

The fact that he was her secret mentor in the most intimate sort of gymnastics—thanks to an ability to pick and assume any age he wished—as well as psi, only added to her uncertainty. Of course she had always been uncertain about that. Her parents had given that a lot of thought before arranging it and proposing it to her. How could they know they had proposed it to Ember as her other, or that she had kept it secret from herself? In her mind, Ember, as Ash, was still her first, but in Ash’s memory, as Ember, she had given herself away as a child. Once again, her mind had wandered back to her love, she forced herself back to the point.

Ash could not answer these new doubts. The stories her new friends told her about Dancer just did not sound like him, but they did remind Ash painfully of his brother. She had not thought about him in almost seven years. Mention of Eric had opened the door to a whole new bag of worms. Now she finally knew where Clay had learned to touch her so perfectly. Eric had only been about fourteen when he was sucked into her thrall, but he had already possessed a disturbing and dangerous mind.

Many of the boys and young men she had been with had felt shame, but only after the fact, they had not been able to control themselves. Eric had been able to resist her; he had kept his wits about himself, screaming to himself how wrong it was, and yet choosing to do it. He would seek her out to do it. He had actually kidnapped her, after she had turned to his older brother. He had hated her as much as he had loved her, and he had always wanted to own her. When Dancer had come to her and promised her that he would never be a threat to her again, she had gratefully forgotten him. She could not write off Dancer so easily. She wanted to see him in person. She had to ask him if these stories were true.

Ash called her parents aside. She pointed out that they were all in a fix. She had school tomorrow and saw two immediate problems. One was the consequence of Ember’s disappearance, people were going to ask her why she was not at school, and she did not know what to tell them. They could say she was sick, but they had no idea how long that story would have to last, and Ember’s dead body could turn up at any time to catch them in a horrible lie. Family was always at the top of any list of suspects, so they dared do nothing suspicious. Until they knew what had happened to her, hiding what they did know would only damn them.

The other thing was of course Dancer. She was in his class, she could hardly avoid him, and considering how important gymnastics was to her, and Ember, they would be expected to make heroic attempts to be there as opposed to actively avoiding it. Listening to accusations about Dancer was only going to get them into trouble. Such accusations had to be confirmed, and there was only one person who could confirm or deny Dancer’s actions. Dancer himself. She was not asking them to agree, she was simply telling them what she was going to do. She was asking them not to interfere.

Ash promised to be on guard but asserted that she was going alone. If she did not return, everyone would have their answer, and she would at least be in the same boat with Ember. The truth was, she would rather be someone’s prisoner with Ember than be perfectly safe without her. As long as Ember was in unknown danger, Ash herself was no good to anyone trying to help her. She was just a hair shy of absolute panic already. She was ready to tear down the mountains looking for her soul mate. Masquerade be damned. Her parents loaned her the car and let her go.

Ash knew where to find Dancer on a Sunday. She did not hesitate to confront him and demand that he tell her where Ash was. She had to explain that Ember had vanished. She had learned about Dancer and his past, and out of respect for his past with her, she came directly to him to find out if he had abducted her, like he had so many others. Dancer denied it but could not convince her. He *had* fooled Ember and her parents, keeping his ties to the underground a secret. Dancer had reportedly abducted, beaten, abused, raped and murdered kids like Ember for the mysterious psionic underground.

Ash realized that there was no way he could convince her of his innocence, only of his guilt. They argued for a couple of hours, but Dancer did not do anything more aggressive. He refused to take her to his superiors for confirmation of their innocence in the matter as well. He reminded her that she had been warned that there were those who knew about psi, or who possessed psi who were ruthless and deadly. There were reasons why his organization operated the way it did, and if she did not belong to it, she would never be allowed to confront them on a matter of policy.

That only pissed her off. In spite of what she had said to her own parents, she announced that she was quitting. She told him that, under the circumstances, she could not trust him. She was dropping his class and would not associate with him until her twin was found and his innocence in the matter established. He told her that would be a mistake; he was willing to help her, and he pointed out that she would be placing him in a situation where he would be forced to move against her. Because as soon as she forfeited his protection, others would start to move against her. She agonized over the decision, but ultimately, she cut him off.

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Ember studied the man before her, wondering what in the hell was going on. He was pretending to be Dancer, but she was certain now that he was not. His deception was as necessary for him, for whatever scheme he was pursuing, as her own deception was critical to her. Whoever he was, it made sense to stall him for as long as possible. She asked him about Clay. He pounced on her inquiry, asking her why she was asking. Since he believed that she was Ash, she lied and said that the last impression she had received from Ember had been of the two of them in the shower. The real Ash probably knew where he was but might well need an explanation of what had happened to him and why.

He knew what condition Clay was in and expected that she had seen it. He assumed she was asking about Clay to learn about Ember’s condition. He explained that Clay’s mind had crumbled under his attack and evaporated. With therapy a new mind could be raised on whatever foundation remained, but he had not been interested in Clay. He was concerned about Ember. Her mind was gone, shattered in a useless conflict with him. Still, he needed her, and intended to rebuild her, with Ash’s help, using her mind as a template. She replied coldly that after telling her that he had destroyed two minds already, she was hardly inclined to let him touch her mind.

To distract him, she pointed out that he had changed; he was not like the Dancer she knew. He laughed and told her it had of course been an act. He returned to the main topic. Before he started in on her, Eric tried to explain himself. He gave her the whole lecture, probably exactly what Dancer would have said to her if he were the man Eric was trying to portray. He actually was appealing to her, while at the same time assuring her that he would take what he needed if she would not help him by giving it. Ember was caught in a bind. If she were Ash, in this situation and she had believed him for a minute, she would of course have risked anything to restore Ember’s mind.

Still, she would have asked to do it herself, she would have objected to being picked apart by another who would actually go in and recreate her twin. She set her teeth and played hardball. She told him that he could instruct her in how and even oversee the process of restoring her sister’s mind, but she would not let him touch her own. She really had no reason to trust him, since all he had ever done was lie to her. He could beat her to death, torture her, and she would still maintain her defenses. He laughed. He did not need to torture her; he already knew how to get past her defenses. He simply reached out and touched her, touching her the way Clay had touched her.

She could hardly believe it. Having threatened to break her, she had expected to be raped. She had considered the fact that she was an adept martial artist, but against a psionic, with her own mind leashed, she would not stand a chance. She had simply resolved to withdraw. He could literally do whatever he wanted with her, and there was nothing she could do about it but get hurt. But, if he touched her like Clay, there was no chance she could withdraw and refuse to participate. On the physical level, it would not even be rape. It did not have to be. He was not interested in her body except as a way to get to her mind.

She had been prepared for rape, but he was telling her that he could rape her mind. Her own body gave him an opening he could force his way in through, a passage she could not defend, and which she could not fight. It was horrifying to think that she could be seduced into opening her mind, so that he could pick it apart at his leisure without bruising or crushing a single delicate fold of her inner being. Cold recognition of the threat caused her to recoil violently from her own sexuality.

Her eyes filled with a desperate horror. If he teased her open, he would spot her lie, realize that she was not Ash and learn about Alt. Realize that she was still buried somewhere in his mind. If she was vulnerable to him there confronting the man, poor Alt, in his mind, was confronting a god. Avoiding sex was simply impossible. He could pin her into any position he wanted and then work her over until she was a willing participant. She did not kid herself that the mortal circumstances would leave her cold. Just the thought of her own vulnerability had keyed her up. Forcing her to a cold realization.

She had to give it up. All that she valued and cherished in herself, all her secrets, her hopes and dreams, even her love for her soul mate, needed to be divorced from her sexuality. He already owned her sex; he just had not exercised his claim. He owned everything else in her that she left connected to it. It was a strange mental adjustment, but she accomplished it with a startled bat of her eyes. She looked up at the man with the mind of a child, unable to comprehend his desire. As he touched her, she understood he was not playing with her. It was like he was building a fire with his fingers, making her feel warm and happy, making her squirm and fuss.

He remembered this, the perfect sexuality, the absolute abandon, and the cool, light heart of innocence that basked in the center of a sensual storm. It thrilled him so completely that he did not even try to take what had opened so instantly, so willingly to him. He controlled himself, pouring over her, searching carefully for the first piece of her to consume. She did not react at all; she simply lay open to him and waited for him to take a bite. The fear he had sensed flash through her had completely vanished. She was the amaranth, the immortal flower of the gods, replacing the part of herself he took even as he swallowed it. That first morsel was now a part of both of them. A common thread. The first step to becoming her twin.

Dancer brooded after Ash left. He had to respect her decision; she had the right to leave him. The problem was he did not feel she was ready. What had happened to Ember had forced her to the decision too soon. It was his duty to report her split to his superiors, and once he did, they would dispatch an agent to vet her. He knew the program well, she would be hunted, and if she exposed herself, revealed her power to protect herself, they would kill her. He would not accept that. This was the worst possible time for her to be tested. She was already being tested by life, and additional pressure would only ensure that she would crack.

He took a personal risk; instead of reporting her refusal, he went after her. It was easy to follow her back to her family. He had been to the town house before, shadowing his charge on her occasional night out. The entire household was startled when he invited himself in. He explained to all that Ash had come to him to ask him if he had been responsible for Ember’s disappearance. He protested his innocence. It was then that he was confronted with the possibility that Eric might still be alive. They told him that Eric had warned them about him and had attempted to keep Ember and Ash away from the underground. He tried to pursue the matter, tried to force them to explain.

Dancer listened to the accusations his brother had made against him and confronted Ash. he told her again that he could not deny those accusations. But, he asserted, those accusations did not address the facts. There had been reasons; in most cases he had been following orders. He had abducted or inducted many of the kids who had broken away from the underground and killed a few that had tried. He could hardly explain further, as the entire group rose to their feet as Ash asked him to leave. They threatened him, when he did not move to obey. He asked one more time for her to listen, he had much more to say.

Ash told him flatly that she was not interested in anything he had to say. Standing him off, with the help of her friends, she finally made him mad. He turned to confront her family, revealing to all of them Ember’s childhood secrets as he demanded her parents confirm that the man they accused, about whom such terrible stories were told, was her mentor. Her parents only wanted to hear one thing from him; were the kids telling the truth? Dancer had already admitted to his actions, and said that from their side of it, they were telling the truth. Her parents did not give him a chance to make further excuses. They just sent him away.

Dancer grinned in restrained anger. Teleporting him to Antarctica was going a bit far to make a point. There were days when he really hated his job. The truth of it was, it took burned hands to understand fire. Dancer was a professional bad guy. An evil psionic was an unspeakable threat. To teach good kids why they had to master themselves, and to weed out bad kids who were too much in love with being bad, he had to embody the worst. Confronting naïve kids with true evil, and evil kids with greater evil was his job, and one he was good at. In Ash, he feared the worst disease, self-righteousness. She was in danger of catching it from her parents.

The underground had had dealings with the parents of the current generation of young avatars. The core members of the organization were themselves products of the Avatar Families. Brand had essentially told him to get on with the test, since he assumed that was what was really going on. They had not given him a chance to tell them otherwise. He returned to his home and admitted to himself that he could not protect his charges anymore, unless he took the responsibility of testing them himself. Well, really, he could only test her at this point. Her new friends were not on his watch list and her old friends were on someone else’s.

Testing Ash—and by extension, Ember—was his prerogative, and it would not save them from the real test later, but he could call it the final examination and use the exercise to shake some sense into the kids while he could. Her family and their friends firmly believed Ash—and Ember—were his current targets. If such had been the case when he confronted Ash, neither her parents, nor their new Wild-Psi'd friends could have protected her from him. It was time to teach her, and the rest of those kids, not to play with fire; show them what they were so afraid of. Particularly Ash. So, he moved her to the top of his list of targets, giving the poor kid he had been about to put through the wringer a temporary stay of excruciation, and submitted his intentions to his superiors.

That did not resolve the real problem. The fact was, he was genuinely concerned about Ember and he needed to investigate on his own. Dancer, from the moment he heard from Ash about Ember’s disappearance, already knew who had not abducted her. As far as he knew, the underground had her officially listed as his responsibility, and he would have been informed if any contract had been signed against her. That left the opposition, the Psionic Authority, and of course the Wild-Psi’d, but only one of them was a true danger to her. His brother. He realized the minute they told that farce that Eric had survived their last encounter.

There was not a chance in the world that Eric would have imprinted a little boy to carry the warning when he could simply trade places with him and let him die in his place. His little brother had always been a problem. He had trouble believing that other people were entirely real. His obsession with the girl Ember had ruined him. Jack had leashed him, before Eric convinced the underground that he was a loose cannon. He had never lost control of his powers, as some in the organization had suggested, he simply had redefined his priorities and refused to observe the imposed discipline of the underground. When he slipped his leash, Dancer had been given no choice but to terminate him. They boy had been too powerful, and too wild.

The problem with his brother was, he was a demonic. He had what the families called dragon potential. He had an understanding for other minds, and could enter them at will, dismissing his own body to a notion and seizing control of the body of anyone he wished. It was one of the reasons he was still alive, but Dancer could always find him if he had to. He started by visiting a number of his brother’s cronies. The Wild-Psi'd had given away far too much in their little confrontation. Skimming carefully, he had figured out how they were organized and the way they operated.

He had been impressed at the things he had learned. They had developed into something remarkably sound and stable considering they had gotten their start from Eric. Then again, Eric had not been stupid; he just liked to call the shots himself. As Dancer suspected, Eric had been able to make the gang serve his interests. There were members who seemed to have spent a great deal of their time keeping an eye on his main obsession, supplying him with pictures and information on the girl of his dreams. That girl, he sighed; what had happened to her? A girl with Ember’s potential simply could not be lost. He promised to devote his superior resources to solving the mystery of her abduction.

In the meantime, he was going to have to convince Ash that he was out to get her, and once he got her teach her a lesson she would never forget. The entire exercise depended on control. The same principle was used by the government and military to train agents and soldiers for the worst possibilities, capture and interrogation. There was no personal malice in it, but he had to embody all of the worst aspects of a man to do his job properly. It was a test only in the sense that he was not his target’s enemy. He did not want to destroy her, but he had to take his best shot at it. He was licensed to do every bad thing in the book, and a few that no one had the stomach to write down.

He was licensed to kill, if necessary, but that was not the object of the exercise. It was normally the only thing he was licensed to do which was irreparable, irrevocable. He would only do it if they violated the first rule, and exposed their power to normals, or used it at the expense of a normal to escape, evade or retaliate against him. Eric had failed that test, in a big way. He was the wrong person for Ash—or Ember, poor girl—to confront in this sort of scenario. There were no rules with him, no guidelines, no licenses for acts that violated the first rule.

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It was not sharing. Ember was allowing Eric to take whatever he wanted; she did not have a choice. She wanted nothing in return and hoped he would not offer. Not that she could really think about at the time it was happening. It was a return to Ember’s childhood. Her mind retreated from sex. It had calved like an iceberg, and now the other half shut her down to protect her from it as if she was still the child of those memories. It was a painful sacrifice, even if she could not understand the pain because of it, but it protected her secrets.

While the day was a long chain of blackouts for her, for Eric it was a feast of the mind and senses. Every metaphorical bite changed him, so much of her personality was unburdened with secrets that he could believe he was consuming her whole. It took him all day and much of the night to get down to the bone, the hard core untouched by her sexuality, the stone at the heart of the fruit. It was only then that he realized she had somehow held out on him. Her total submission had almost tricked him into believing there could be no more, but he had slowly started to become her, and with the last bite he could see the hole in the pattern which was her.

He left her to tend to her twin and considered the matter. There was no question he had been changed by her. She had given him an ideal, a too perfect expression of herself untainted by mysteries, secrets and apprehensions. He could see how becoming her could heal him, because he could now see how he had been incomplete. The very thought of taking her place would have revolted him if not for the fact that her twin was already destroyed and had left a place for her to fill. He had been clumsy and killed one of them, perhaps the one he had loved best, but he would not have to kill her. He would actually recreate her as the one he loved best.

He agonized over the remaining problem. She had hidden her secrets, and in order to become her, he had to make those secrets his own. He had been careful and loving in prying her open and feasting on her, taking without doing harm. He had been the only one affected by his actions. He knew there was no way he could crack open her last reserve, no way to avoid hurting her, no way to kid himself that he would not change the core of her. He had to remove her from her secrets to change her into Ember, or she would remember herself, and figure out someone else had taken her twin’s place.

It tortured him to think of it, it would be agony to do it, but he had gone too far to back out now. He needed to finish becoming Ash. It was like surgery; one did not transplant the heart and neglect to sew the patient back up. Pain was a part of healing, he told himself. It had to be done; it would make the final steps possible. He got a grip on himself and went back in to confront her. He told her that she had held out on him and jeopardized her sister’s recovery. He would not allow that. Since he was forcing her to, he was going to break her open the hard way.

She swallowed her heart as she realized that he was going to torture her after all. There was no way to hide behind sex; she was vulnerable again. Perhaps more vulnerable than she would have been when she was whole. Once again, she tried to stall him. She did not believe she could hold out against the kind of torture a psionic was capable of. He could pull her apart and put her back together, he could keep her alive totally dismembered; the possibilities were horrifyingly infinite. She had to tell him the truth. He might kill her, but that was better than torture. A person had to know when to quit and do so while they had the dignity to face death.

She told him the whole story. What the hell, he thought she was Ash already, might as well tell him what he could believe. She told him she had the ability to twin herself and used it to cover for Ember while she confessed to Ares about her past, the past Clay had reminded her of. The other body, she pointed out, was not Ember’s but her double’s. She had not teleported in to the cell, so much as she had teleported out of her other’s mind. Ember was still out there in the world, looking for her, she was certain. When he asked her to open up and prove it, she protested.

She could not. She did not want her mind married to his. Her refusal was an instinct for self-preservation; the same instinct, she suggested, that had caused her other’s mind to self-destruct. To go any further, in a fruitless effort to restore her other’s mind, would only succeed in destroying her. The easiest way to test her was to go find Ember, see for himself that she was out there and not in here with him. Whatever he had wanted, she asserted, he had apparently not intended to destroy her, why make such an effort to rebuild her if he had. She begged him to stop, to check her claim. She even explained that her twin would be calling herself Ash because she had been pretending to be Ember when she was abducted.

Eric was stunned. Her story was not impossible; he could have done much the same; jumping out of himself into a separate body. He could have doubled himself at will, but he only used the ability to ride others. If he had been possessed and was desperate enough, he might figure out how to jump out past his rider. The thing that really caught him was that her story, if it proved true, changed his entire plan. He could hardly go back as Ash with “Ember” at his side and confront the real twin and her family. He had simply assumed, without checking, that he had both of them under his control. He had to do as she suggested. He left at once.

After Dancer left, the previous evening, the Morgans had decided that they had to report Ember as missing. There was no way they were going to allow Ash to go back to school with Dancer there on campus. A missing twin sister was all the excuse a person needed to cut classes. Her parents went home to take care of it, after calling the San Francisco Police Department and filing the report. Ash remained at the town house so she could continue her search with her friends around to help protect her. Rain and Shale had slept with her and tried to comfort her—and distract her from her fears.

In the morning, the three of them went out together. A man watched them putting up a poster for Ember and asked them for details. They told the official version of the story and gave him a poster so he could contact them if he discovered anything. Ash could not help but wonder if Dancer would stick to his own routine after that big confrontation. Joining the search for Ember would have been an excellent way to get the drop on others, so it had been safer to assume he was guilty than putting a noose around their own necks and giving him the other end of the rope. Just thinking about him was enough to keep her on her toes though. She had learned the hard way that he was bigger, faster, stronger and more experienced than she was. A dangerous enemy.

Ash came a hair’s breadth from falling prey to him totally unaware. Ash, Rain and Shale had stopped for lunch. She went to the bathroom, and he attacked while she was sitting on the toilet. He came on mercilessly, attacking physically and mentally. She literally jumped out of her panties to escape him. She was a more powerful psionic, so she was able to negate his invisible assault, but he nearly pounded her into unconsciousness before she managed to summon Rain and Shale to her side. The three of them, being adept martial artists, were able to tie him up and force him to retreat.

They helped her clean herself up a bit and looked for her panties. Dancer had apparently swiped them during the fight, so she straightened her skirt and wrote them off. Rain and Shale could not believe that both Ash and Dancer had covered the commotion. If Ash had not managed a telepathic cry they would never have known anything was going on. Even to the extent of locking the door, to prevent anyone from walking in on them, they had observed the first rule. Ash tried to explain. Keeping normals out of it was the first concern of any psionic who was sane. Even when they tried to kill each other, psionics paid attention to details, covering their tracks, obscuring their struggle, presenting normal people with no mysteries to explore or paradoxes to ponder.

She urged them not to forget that. The most dangerous psionic was the one who could use his abilities freely in a crowd without anyone being any the wiser. The first rule did not forbid the use of powers on normal people, in some cases it actually required it, it was only forbidden to confront people with the truth. As long as they did not know the truth, they would not notice when someone who did know the truth manipulated them. The big grey area was knowing the difference between maintaining the masquerade and exploiting helpless victims. The latter was not very well tolerated.

The next encounter was a shocking lesson in how a skilled psionic could use his power in a crowd. Ash and Rain were following Shale through a door when Shale disappeared and they saw Dancer in the doorway, calmly and naturally walking out. He held the door for them, a perfect gentleman and dared them to make a scene. Ash stopped and asked under her breath what he had done with her friend. He smiled and told her it was not their problem anymore. She needed to think carefully about how she endangered her friends, he suggested. She slipped past him and grabbed Rain by the hand.

Rain was in a stone-cold panic. Ash gave her a hard mental shake and silently warned her to keep her wits together. She went to the nearest phone and called for backup. She explained that Dancer was after her, and she needed someone to come take Rain, before she got hurt too. Her sister had been about to ask about Shale and realized what had happened. She asked, but all Ash could say was that Dancer sent her somewhere. She was either going to call and tell someone to come get her, or she was in someone’s clutches unable to do anything. She doubted she was dead, or likely to become so soon.

Ash then concentrated hard on piercing the veil of invisibility Dancer kept around himself. He was obviously keeping close tabs on her and jumping ahead of her to spring his traps. Shale and Rain had too little experience to defend themselves from the use of psionics; they could barely control their own abilities. Using chi, Shale could make a psionic’s day pure hell, but she had no idea if that would be any help where she was now. Brand showed up with a group from the town house to collect Rain and asked her what she was going to do. She was not sure. She could go with them, but she was afraid she would just bring him down on everyone else.

Her suspicion was rewarded. A large group of men entered the building and took up stations. A handful of them broke off and approached their own group. Ash was startled when they presented their ID; they were FBI agents. One of the men introduced himself and spoke directly to Brand. He stated that the agency had received a tip informing them that one of Brand’s daughters had been kidnapped. Due to the sensitive nature of his work for the government—Ash gasped—they had been instructed to contact him. They assured him that they were devoting every resource to helping to retrieve his daughter but were also there to ensure that he was not pressured to betray classified information for her ransom.

Brand managed to signal to Ash to lose herself as they were all escorted to waiting vans. She took the hint and faded out of everyone’s attention and retreated swiftly. He had passed a few other things along, among them the interpretation of the facts. He was being placed under house arrest as a security precaution, and someone who knew more than they should know had set this in motion. She was standing alone, when she realized that her father’s order had been a test. Would they notice her as she slipped away, would they allow her to slip away, was she the real target or had it been intended to simply entangle her allies?

She realized that she had been noticed. A pair of agents stepped up to her and suggested she return with them to her residence. She was not being required to go with them, and when she said she had an errand to run, they allowed her to go. She had felt one of them probing her mind for ulterior motive, and she had done her best to think nothing suspicious. Psionics working in the government; it was a miracle her thoughts did not make him suspicious. But they were clearly not interested in her; she did not have any government secrets to spill. The only question that remained was whether or not they had been used simply to cut her off from her family and allies.

She was afraid to test the theory. She made a quick call home, leaving a message for her father with her mother. He would understand the brief note. She returned to her errand, meeting up with Lane, Heather and Aspen. She was half afraid to go near them, but she was not sure she wanted to be on her own with Dancer after her. The problem with being hunted was that it only ended in the closing confrontation. There was going to be a fight. No matter how long she ran, Dancer would pursue. She needed to pick the ground she wanted to fight on.

She needed to draw him to a place that favored her. Her only true advantage was she was more powerful than he was. She needed to go somewhere where the full expression of her power would offset his advantage in experience. She could compensate for his other advantages, being smaller, lighter, more agile and quicker. He could outrun her, but she could three times as fast as him if she tried. Even if she fought him as a boy, she was quicker than him, and in fact, she would be stronger than him too. She smiled. It was time to hunt the hunter.

She stopped and shed all her clothing. She was still obscuring herself from view and attracted no notice. A psionic learned that clothing was worse than useless. It was social camouflage, but it limited and constricted and bound. If she was going to fight for her life, she needed to be capable of uninhibited movement. Besides, if she were going to use her ability to shift in the fight, the clothes she had been wearing would have tied her in knots. She started stretching and warming her body up as she built a pattern of energy in her mind. Her power was the best clothing and armor there was.

She found her focus and started weaving her thoughts into the world. In the place of clothes, she built up a sheath, a layer of intense psionic activity covering her entire body, armor no thicker than an extra layer of skin. Once that was fixed in her mind and manifested as a sheer white body stocking that covered her from the neck down, she built up a second layer, a domain of attention and will focused on her and expanding as a sphere as broad as the horizon. Her mind could keep unfolding until it encompassed the Earth, but this was sufficient for the threat she faced. She began to look for a dueling ground.

As she tapped into and harnessed more of her power, it had become easier to manage the crowds around her. To become perfectly invisible to the naked eye. She moved the way she had been born to move, in a way that a psionic dreamed of being able to move. There were of course people who did see her, people who heard her silent command to ignore her and used their own power to resist. To other psionics she was a blinding beacon, an angel. It was so rare that a psionic felt compelled to use so much power, and it usually meant a fight. She smiled. This was her response to Dancer’s attacks. She would not allow him to sneak around in the shadows; she challenged him to fight her in the open, where their peers would see it all.

Dancer did not disappoint her. She had been forced to call on some of the things he had taught her to deal with his relentless stalking without exposing herself, and all psionics, while still being able to use her powers to fight him. She had trumped him though, calling on things Brand had taught her soul mate. She had realized she had twice as much experience as she claimed, and his advantage had narrowed significantly. He pulled himself together, drawing on the potential within him, while cloaking it as carefully as she. Once his song of obfuscation was as strong and compelling as hers, he started to move.

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It had been a couple of hours before dawn when Eric left to check Ember’s story. It was still an hour before noon when Eric had returned to Ember 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 Ember again. Her story had been easily confirmed; he had talked to Ash 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 Dancer 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. Shale 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 Ember 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. Ember’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 Ash and Dancer 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.

Ash 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 Dancer. As he closed in to exchange blows, she smiled. The male and female forms had different strengths and weaknesses. Dancer 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.

Ash 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 Ember, 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 outsmarted her and overpowered 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. Dancer 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 Dancer 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 Ember through uncomprehending eyes, finding in his shock that it was easy to pretend the total autism of Ember’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 known 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 Ember, he had finally made the mental shift to being a girl.

It was a lot different being in Ember’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 Ember’s other power. Just keeping her telekinetically hog tied had proved disastrous, with his own corpse lying 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 Dancer 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 Ember. 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. Ember pulled back to look into her tear-filled eyes and was surprised when she said, quite clearly, *I’m so sorry.*

Ember did not have time to react. As the girl spoke, Ember 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.

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Dancer 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 Ash and jumped to her side. She felt his arrival and did not hesitate. She laid him out with a flying round house kick to the jaw and sprinted across the road and into the woods. Dancer 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 overconfident 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.

Dancer loped along after Ash, 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 Shale had taught her about harnessing and using it. Brand 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.

Dancer 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. Ash 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. Ash 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. Ash had been loping along unaware, then her body began to tingle. Ash 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 Dancer was dead and his last thought after killing Ember was telling himself that it was finally over. She was Ember now. As much of Ember 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 Ember 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 herself 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 Dancer brought light with him into Ash’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 Dancer had Ember, he was keeping her somewhere else. It would be such an easy way to torture them both, telling Ash nothing, while confiding to Ember 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 Dancer, 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 told her all the things she had done wrong. She was there because he had been better. One possible explanation was he either had Ember 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 Ember’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 Ember 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 on the problem of Ember’s abduction. If he did have Ember, 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.

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Alt had adjusted to the new world, after discovering that she could not trade places with Ember. 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 Ember. As he repeated back to her the things Ember had said to him, she had caught on. She thought of where Ember 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 Ember 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 Ember 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 Ember’s mind that prevented her psi from functioning normally.

Ember 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 Clay, 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 Ember, 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.

Shale squinted into the light as Dancer entered her cell. She was shocked to see who he had with him. Dancer threw Rain down next to Shale 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 Shale that they were buried under natural rock; using chi to break out would only get her, and now Rain, crushed.

Capturing Ash had not ended Dancer’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 Ember’s disappearance. Ash and Ember’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 Ash and Ember were both on ice, in not both safe, the adults had abetted the process. It was not until it was almost too late that Lane, Heather, Rain 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 Ember and Ash 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. Shale might have been the worst for that if Dancer had not gotten the drop on her so early. Shale was a real fighter, and what she had taught Ash had made him wary of ever having to fight her for real. Rain 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 everyone was, he could go back in and face Ash. The exercise was almost over. She had passed every stage, even to the point of anticipating the exercise itself and working on 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 Ash had both been able to do that, but Eric had cracked, and Clay and Ember ended up paying for Dancer’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 Ash.

Dancer jumped into Ash’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.

Ash 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 would 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.

Dancer and Ash were finally able to talk to each other about Ember’s abduction. Dancer quickly brought her up to speed on his investigation. He told her about Eric and what he thought about Clay. Eric had died, he had seen to it himself, but in Clay he seemed to have found a way to survive. As Clay, 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 Ember 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 Ember’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, Ash 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. Dancer 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 Ember proved it.

Once her eyes were fully open, she asked what Dancer’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 himself. 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. Ember 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 be 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 Ember. Ash reminded him that he had said Eric had moved to intercept a possible move on Ember by the underground. Obviously, since he had such an obsession over Ember, 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 Ember. Dancer 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 Dancer, for the way they had both betrayed him, in his eyes.

Dancer 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 Ember and Ash 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 Dancer’s way of verifying that they had not abducted Ember

By coming down on Brand as swiftly as they had, they had assured Dancer 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 Ember, it was safe to assume that Eric did, because Dancer 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.

Dancer had put the pieces of the puzzle together and eventually figured out how to track his brother down. With Ember at his side, Dancer went to all of the safe houses on the list beginning with the locations where her friends were incarcerated. Rain, Shale, Erin, Lane and Heather were with them when they eventually discovered Ember’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.

Ash, 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. Dancer 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. Ash restored the body, healing the fatal wound, but not even daring to try and reverse death itself. Dancer 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.

She had turned her life upside down to accommodate what she had believed to be a permanent shift in perspective. She had made deep, emotional commitments to embracing what she had become, and as soon as she was happy, she suddenly confronted the fact that she could turn right back around and walk away.

She could be a boy again. All she had to do was decide to. This must have been what Ember had confronted when she faced this ordeal. For a few days, she had been forced to be a boy, but once she adjusted, the imperative evaporated and it was simply a matter of deciding if being a boy was worth the trouble it got her into. Ember had gone back to a girl and all but forgotten she could be a boy.

Ash looked in the mirror, asking herself if she had gotten all she wanted out of being a girl. Had she achieved all she needed as a girl? Nine days, plus change, was that all it took for the girl in her to equal a boy she had lavished sixteen years on being? All she had really explored in any detail as a girl had been sex. At that, she had spared as much attention of sex as a boy. Was that all there was to it? Compare and contrast, decide who she needed to be on the basis of sex? Well, sex was the question. Somewhere deep in her mind it must seem a simple question. Male or female, try them both, and them pick one.

On the basis of which side of the act she preferred to be on, female was the obvious choice. The boy in her endorsed that decision easily. She refused to choose on that basis. Boys and girls lived in two entirely different worlds, she was learning. She had no idea which world she belonged in, the commitment she had made to herself had been to find out. Putting on her female guise, she had gone back to bed and wondered if she had just made her decision, or if she would have the chance to confront it again armed with a better understanding of the choice she was trying to make.

Ash had particularly enjoyed the freedom of going about in the nude the entire time. She was perfectly comfortable with her body and bothered to become male only to return the favor for Ember, when the two of them indulged in their new favorite pastime.

The night Ember used the ring.

Their friendship almost did not survive the first night. In the course of the day, Ash had developed a rather strong attraction to Ember—she still retained her male perspective, particularly in matters of sexual orientation, and interest. Ember was identical to her, was so very much a girl, and so friendly and inviting that she really did seem to be the girl of her boy-dreams. She had confessed so much to her father. The girl had such a profound effect on her she seemed certain she would simply have to revert to a guy or else go crazy. They had stayed up to talk, and Brand finally smiled and sent her to bed.

Ash slipped quietly into the room, expecting Ember to be asleep. She had undressed and slipped into the bed before realizing that there were already two bodies in that bed, and that they were obliviously wrapped around each other. In the dark, she had thought that Ember had noticed her and was thrashing about to make room in the bed. She discovered otherwise and stared in mute shock and disbelief as Ember finished having sex with herself. When they were disengaged, and one of them rolled on top of her, she suddenly snapped. She was out of the bed in a flash, but her mind was stuck in that eternal instant.

His body pressing hers down as he rolled onto her. The way he fit against her. The immediate response of her own body. The awareness of his manhood brushing her thigh and dropping so perfectly between her legs. Stiffening as it sensed where it was, resting on the opening to her body, it pressed against the threshold, and teased her folds apart. He almost entered her as he pushed himself up in surprise to gaze into her face. She had not even adjusted to the fact that Ember had a guy in her bed, but at the sight of his face, she knew who he was, and she sensed in that instant that he did not know who she was. He was aroused and interpreted her flushed and anxious face as matching arousal—and she was aroused, no doubt, but aroused in fear as well. As he gathered himself to thrust, she moved. Both of them became instantly aware that there had been a third in their bed and turned to confront her.

In shock, in fear, she spoke without thinking. *Your sisters were right. I am perfect for you. You can marry me and pretend you are still doing it to yourself.* There was no way to take it back, and Ember’s pain was so obvious she simply slipped out of the room.

As she stormed through the house naked, she calmed down. It had been a close call, but it was her own fault for going into a stranger’s bed naked. For that matter, she had gone in hoping to have sex—just not anticipating she might find herself in the receiving role. She thumped her head against the wall and went back to apologize. Slipping into the room, she found Ember alone, crying in her pillow. When she tried to touch her, Ember sat straight up and slapped her hard on the face. She stiffened and admitted that she deserved that. Ember almost told her to get out of her room but stopped as she sensed Ash’s profound remorse.

Ash swallowed her pride, closed her eyes for a quick prayer, and spoke her peace. *I had no right to say that. To be honest, I was just scared. I was that close to being nailed, and it spooked me. I am an idiot. I should have just let it happen. I wanted it. I needed it. I thought it would cost me every hope of going back to being a guy. I was so mad at myself for stopping you I could have strangled myself. I opened my mouth and—I guess I spoke the truth, but in a way that could only hurt. What I meant was I liked the idea. I understood what you had, and I only wished I could be that for myself. I mean—if you want me—if looking like you makes you want me… I am yours. If it pleases you, if it excites you, if it interests you at all, it pleases me. If that is what you want, it would make me happy to give it to you. If you want more than that, I hope I can give it to you. I want to give myself to you.*

Ember stared at her in surprise and answered. *Oh, I want you. I did not think I could possibly keep my hands off of you. You had such an effect on me, I had to do this. It was the only way to keep my hands to myself. I never expected you would come in here and see. If you had not stopped me, I don’t think I could have stopped myself. I don’t know if I could cope with that. I would feel so bad if I ruined you forever being male again and feel so guilty because it would not change the way I feel about you if I did. I don’t understand it. I have only known you for a few hours, but if you never changed, or if you changed entirely, I would still feel this way about you. I mean, I feel like this because you are you. It was something in your eyes. I don’t know if it’s love or what, but I can’t get it out of my head. I just broke down and cried my heart out because you left, and I did not know if you would ever really come back. I am sorry for hitting you.*

Ash and Ember were in each other’s arms at this point. Ash asked Ember to take her. Ember hesitated, and Ash told her flat out, if she feared losing her manhood so much it might very well be that it was never hers to keep. Ember accepted her as she was, for who she was—Ash felt it was time she did the same. There was of course one thing Ember needed to do first. Ember taught Ash how a psionic girl protected herself and saw to it that she did it and did it right.

As they recovered from the first thrust, Ember confided—she had taken her own maidenhead, but only now could she say she was no longer a virgin. Ash was a virgin, and she confided—she had always meant to get her start from a girl with more experience.

Ash embraced her with no fear of losing her manhood. Having sex had finally opened her to the possibilities of being female and allowed her to embrace it whole-heartedly. The boy inside her looked on in smug delight, not one whit discouraged. It finally dawned on her that her manhood was perfectly secure; supported and reinforced by long hours of training, sweet moments of adventure and repose, and harsh confrontations with other boys. Aside from fatherhood, and old age, he had become all that a boy could be.

Confronted with the possibilities to which a girl was heir, she understood her need to make up this deficit in her being, and she was man enough to give herself free reign. She would not think about the boy she was, or worry about becoming the man she could be until the girl in her was his equal, and able to become the woman she could be.

Taking Ash had made Ember more at peace, more fully integrated, with her own manhood. To lie back and receive Ash—who happily returned the favor—had been bliss. They had hardly slept, taking each other in turns throughout the night. Eventually they noticed the early light of dawn and stopped to change the sheets and air out the room before finally falling asleep an hour before the rest of the house woke up for the day.

In a story, he could just erase their memories, but in truth, messing with their minds at this point would only guarantee that the potential within them would be awakened. They would be expecting it and would certainly try to fight it, and that was all it took. Instead, he invited them to stay and listen and learn.

He always knew that his mind possessed untapped potential, but he never imagined it might express itself so physically.

She was evolving and this was how that evolution expressed itself. The mind had tremendous potential, and social and biological factors often cheated it of its full development. Once the mind began to open up, however, there was no way to stop it from exploring and expressing the potential it could apprehend.

She had become a girl because she needed to be a girl. When she finished evolving, she might not feel any reason or need to be a boy again since, as a girl, she already possessed a fully developed male side.

The change itself was not that difficult, once the means to achieve it were in place. She could shift back to her male body at will—and stay that way for as long as she willed it. The only thing she could not do was change herself back into a boy. It took her a bit to understand the subtle difference. Being male was no longer her natural state. It was simply an ability she possessed. With great effort, she focused on being male again, and her body flowed like water back to its previous shape—and her headache came back. That was what finally opened her eyes.

That headache had been with her since she was seven years old. She had awakened to discover that her penis had disappeared. It was a simple mistake for a child to make. Having never seen a girl naked, it never occurred to her that she had become one. She had panicked and willed it to reappear, and it brought the headache with it.

That really shook her confidence in her assumed manhood. She had not, just now, become a girl; she had been one for nine years and never even known it. Worse was the sudden realization that she had lived as a boy at the expense of what might well be her true nature. If she really was supposed to be a girl, she had cheated herself out of her own girlhood. Even so, she asked herself, could she have done it if being a guy were not very important to her? Until she figured out what she really was—what she really needed—she wanted to hold onto her one tie to her life as a boy, her father.

It raised a question, after the fact, but in all honesty, it seemed a natural and normal evolution of her mind. Unlike most of the people in the world, she had truly evolved into a whole person. Why possess a quality if one was too ashamed—or afraid—to embody and embrace it?

However. He had been ready to cut the boy loose and had made plans to finally introduce him to a girl he had been promised to before he was ever born. Actually, the girl was one of three girls who had the potential to be his equal—perhaps not in martial arts, but as psionics, those girls were the most promising people he had ever seen.

his daughter finally asked what dojo they were visiting now, and he finally clued her in. He told her that they were not going to a dojo this time, but to meet the girl of her dreams. She retorted that she already was the girl of her dreams, admitting to herself that as a guy she herself would have been the one he could not resist, and told him to be serious. When she realized that he was serious, she balked and almost ran. The very idea was absurd, but at his suggestion that meeting the right girl might help her recover her manhood, she had to at least give it a try. It would take a girl—the girl of her boy-dreams—to set her straight, help her adapt to this evolution of her mind, and become normal again.

When they arrived,

All three girls raised their eyebrows at that. They were used to being courted by prospective mates within the Families, but the very notion of having the matter decided for them was quite offensive to them. Asserting that Ash was the most promising prospective mate in their generation, perhaps the only true equal to any of them, sort of backfired with the evidence that Ash had failed to develop that potential properly.

The older girls asserted that they were rather set on marrying older men, as opposed to younger girls—but of course there was no real conflict, since she was perfect for Ember. Ember surprised them all, however, suddenly lighting up, and grinning. She announced that her sisters were right. As far as she was concerned, Ash was perfect, and she was happy to take her exactly the way she was. That seemed to settle the matter for the parents and elder sisters, but Ash was not entirely sure that the matter had gone well.

It seemed she had been told a few things about her and shared an interest in martial arts—if not her level of obsession.

It seemed more important, when confronting someone who truly was one’s equal, to make that person one’s friend. Since she really hoped Ash would be her friend, she was not about to ruin that hope by placing great expectations of love, or marriage, or children in the way. She figured that the best way to make Ash her friend was to accept Ash for herself.

Ash had not yet been introduced to her other, and she wanted to know if she was out and about elsewhere. Ember had come a lot closer to unifying herself in the week following her birthday. Her mind still turned away from whatever secrets she had tucked within her other, but those were the only secrets remaining. She had pulled herself together, and her family had accepted that there was often only one of her around. In spite of that, they were always prepared to see two of her wandering around. That had contributed to the misunderstanding that greeted Ash’s arrival.

Ember asserted that she was spending more time in the singular. She promised to reintroduce herself to Ash, but she had been collected when they first met. Her mother agreed that it would be best for her to remain singular to prevent outsiders from confronting a third twin. Ember assured her she was comfortable with that. Considering the resemblance, it made sense to allow people to mistake Ash for Ember’s twin. She rushed to her bedroom, as soon as she could excuse herself from the conversation, to work off the frustration aroused by her bath with Ash in privacy.

The fact that they were born on the same day and were identical helped. The identity had been created when Ember was seven years old to accommodate Rowan’s regenesis. An instinctive ability, it had turned her into a seven-year-old girl. A bit of sleight of hand had produced the necessary paperwork to explain a twin sister separated at birth and reunited at the age of seven with her family.

The name they had given her, and were now offering to Ash, was identical to Ember’s given name—and virtually identical to the one Ash grew up with—so they suggested either using their nicknames or using Ash and Ember. They explained the name by shocking Ember. Her elder twin had been named thus, and when she died minutes before Ember was born, the name had passed on to her. The birth certificate had been real, the rest fabricated on that foundation—and a plausible story about her twin’s abduction at birth. When Rowan had figured out how to assume a more appropriate age, Ember’s other had kept the identity alive. If not for that poor lost twin, things might have been a bit more difficult for their family. Ember thought about her other and wondered hard for a few moments.

The reason why this subterfuge was undertaken stunned Ash. She was being enrolled in school with Ember, effective immediately. Brand, who had handled Ash’s education, had the credentials to assert that she had been privately tutored for the past ten years, and with summer classes, enter high school with her “sister” for their senior year. In truth, Ember had enough credits to have graduated a few weeks earlier, at the end of her sophomore year, but was squeezing in a number of extra classes to remain in school for social reasons, and to compete for one more year in gymnastics.

They had spent the weekend alone at the new house, enjoying the pool and each other’s company. They had been the two happiest days of her life.

It was no different than flipping a switch. She thought about it, it happened. There was no struggle.