Avatars - 1

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A single, brilliant shaft of light suddenly pierced his eyes. The headache that had been growing steadily over the years tripled in intensity as he squinted in reflex. The world suddenly twisted in his mind. The massive columns of the redwoods seemed to sway and whirl. He had built up too much momentum approaching the edge. The foot he tried to plant, hoping to stop himself, landed in open air. The shock, as he began to plummet, was joined by an odd sensation. It was almost as if something inside his head had snapped, and his entire body was consumed by a surge of fire and ice singing along his nerves. He yelped in a startlingly high pitch; he could swear it felt like his flesh was flowing like water. Fear gripped him, as deep and embracing as the cold pool that broke his fall.

Had he just suffered some kind of stroke?

As he struggled to right himself and swim to the surface, he felt weak and light headed. He took in great gulps of air as he breeched, scrambling to the edge of the pool to cling to the rocks guarding the only manageable way out of the flooded cleft. His brain was already sorting out the scrambled signals it was receiving, striving to re-map a territory that had become subtly alien. At the same time, he was trying to establish whether or not he still retained his normal mental faculties.

It was hard to concentrate for the simple, stunning absence of that murderous headache. Mere concentration had always been achieved in the face of that unrelenting opposition. Without the suppression of that pain to mark it, he could not tell if his mind was truly focused.

Orienting himself as best he could, he told himself it was the day before his sixteenth birthday. There really was no way to name the place, but he was at the spot where he always went rock jumping with his friends. It was on a river tributary in the mountains of Northern California, near the town where his father was a guest instructor for a local martial arts dojo. No one knew they were out there. They had made their decision on the fly, heading for their favorite spot, with the huge boulders and deep pools, without bothering to go back for bathing suits or towels. It was a secluded spot, so they had felt free to indulge in a bit of skinny-dipping too. In all, it was not the best place for an aneurysm.

“Alex?” a voice called out from above, “are you okay?”

“Are you coming out?” another voice asked.

“I’m alright,” he began, an automatic answer he immediately modified, “I think.” The sound of his voice was off. It was clear, intelligible, but it seemed stuck an octave too high. Was his hearing distorted? He seemed to have no problem controlling his limbs, so he started edging his way over to the exit. “I’m coming out, uh,” he hesitated, and decided he had better confirm his suspicion. “Guys? Does my voice sound odd to you?”

Their answering silence alarmed him. As he passed through the narrow split, heading for the natural rock steps in the adjoining pool, he saw his friends scrambling down to meet him. They had been rushing up to make their next jump the last time he had seen them. Like Alex, they were naked. He could see the muscles flashing under their skin as they scrambled down the pile of rock. He assumed they had only been half way up when he had fallen. They looked alarmed, so it was obvious they had seen his fall, and since the last part of the climb was the hardest, it made sense that they would climb back down to check on him rather than continue on up and then jump down. About a third of the way down, they crossed over to the low boulder and jumped into the climbing pool.

He sighed and continued swimming for the steps. His friends had moved with admirable haste, but he realized that they would probably have been too late if his strange attack had left him senseless. They caught up to him as he reached the first shallow boulder. He turned back to look at them as they gasped in unison.

He looked at their blank expressions and demanded in alarm, “What!? What are you staring at, what’s wrong?” Was he bleeding? “Am I bleeding?” He reached up and ran a hand over his head, looking for a wound.

“No. You—“ one of them began then stammered soundlessly for a moment.

“You’re a girl,” the other one announced. There was shock, wonder, and disbelief in the boy’s face, but he spoke with the tone of realization.

Alex stared at both of them, “What!? What are you talking about, Chris?” His hand moved on its own. An instinctive, unconscious action to assure him that such an absurd statement was obviously false. It took a moment for the report of that reflexive touch to penetrate Alex’s consciousness.

Chris gazed back, “I have no idea. If I hadn’t seen it happen with my own eyes, I wouldn’t believe it.” Chris could see Alex did not understand. Then again, Alex could not see herself. How could she understand until she looked at what was so evident to his own eyes? His mind was full of questions, but he put them aside for the moment. In a calm voice, Chris instructed, “Alex, don’t think, don’t ask. Just get out of the water.”

Alex had begun shivering the moment Chris made that impossible announcement. Getting out of the water would only confirm what his words had asserted. One hand was cupped firmly over the only evidence a body needed. The other hand had found the supporting arguments, leaving doubt out in the cold. Alex could feel his mind trying to adjust to the shift in perspective. The last word Alex uttered, as a boy, was his response to Chris. “Sure,” he said, turning to climb up the submerged pile. Full realization came, and for the second time in moments the world slipped out of his… her… grasp.

Chris moved instantly as she suddenly went limp and slipped under the surface. His arms were around her, pulling her against his body in haste. As her head lolled back on his shoulder, he felt another shock. He shifted his hand from her breast to her midsection in chagrin, while trying to regain his footing on the submerged rock. “Jon,” he called. Jon snapped out of his reverie at the sound of his name. Chris instructed his friend, “Help me get her out of the water.”

“*Her—*” Jon repeated numbly, as he started to move.

“Alex. Whatever. You saw it too,” Chris reminded him.

“I saw,” Jon admitted, “but I can’t believe it. How—?” he laughed unsteadily, aborting the question. “Impossible. Chris, this can’t be happening.”

“Jon!”

“Okay!” the boy rushed past his friend and found secure footing on a shallower rock. “I’m out, pass him—“

“Her.”

“—*her* up,” Jon swore under his breath and gathered Alex in his arms. “Uh, I’m going to need your help. She’s heavier than she looks, and it’s all dead weight. God, talk about your limp cats.” Chris let go, seeing Jon had Alex in a firm grip, and climbed completely out of the water. Together, the two of them were able to wrestle her slack body up to the big, flat shelf where their clothes had been left piled. Jon took the girl’s weight and ordered, “Quick, get something to use as a pillow.”

“Got it. Here,” he reached up and helped Jon ease their friend onto her back.

“Good,” Jon eased back and looked at her for a second. A few minutes ago, she had just been one of the boys, but now he felt awkward at Alex’s nudity. He pulled his own shirt out of the jumble of clothes and laid it over her, trying to cover her lap and chest. Chris watched him with amusement, heaving a deep sigh of feigned regret as Alex was covered.

“I can’t even pretend to understand what has just happened here,” Chris began, after a long moment of silence, “but it does force one to confront how sex affects perception.”

Jon sat back and looked at him strangely. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, this is Alex,“ Chris declared, bemused. “God, I’ve known this guy since we were both kids. I don’t see him for months or years at a time, but we always picked up where we left off without any complications. You know what I mean. I never had to wonder where I stood with him, but bam, he turns into a girl and I don’t know what to think. I can’t deal with it. I can’t get my mind around it. If I don’t keep telling myself that this is Alex, I would—God, I don’t know what I would do.” Chris knelt down beside her and looked at her face. “My instincts tell me I don’t know this girl. I have this really weird feeling, like I just rescued a stranger, and I am anxious for her to wake up, so I can introduce myself. Get to know her.” He studied her features, wondering at the strange impulse that had quickened the moment he touched her. He did not even realize he was saying the next part aloud, “I want to hold her, protect her. I am afraid she won’t like me.”

“Chris,” Jon looked at him in alarm, “You’re talking crazy.”

“I know,” he looked back with intense apprehension. “That’s my point. I don’t think it has anything to do with Alex. It’s me. It is the way I am programmed to react to girls. I would not have noticed it if it weren’t for the fact that it is so bizarre to have such feelings about Alex.” Chris looked at her again and added, “You felt it too. That’s why you covered her up. Would you have done that for a guy?”

Jon looked down at Alex. “No. I mean, not just because he was naked. If he were in shock, of course I would. In any case, it was the right thing to do. I mean, if that’s really Alex, then the guy has got to be in shock.” Jon leaned forward and leaned his arms on his knees. “But that’s not what you were getting at, is it?”

“No,” Chris admitted. “I can’t imagine why this happened. I wish I knew how it happened.” Chris reached out and moved a strand of hair out of her face. “Things like this don’t happen in the real world. What I know, what I believe, just doesn’t stand up to this. I know this is Alex—I have to keep reminding myself, but I saw. If I had not actually seen it, I would be running around looking for Alex, trying to figure out where this girl came from, where Alex went, things like that.”

“Yeah, but she’d wake up and tell us who she is and we would figure it out.”

“Would we?” Chris challenged. “I might believe she was Alex’s sister or something. I would find it easier to believe that and tell myself they were playing a prank. I don’t think I would ever believe it, no matter how convincing the story was.”

“Come on, Chris,” Jon laughed, “You’re not that closed minded. What are you getting all worked up about? Jesus Christ, man, we just witnessed a miracle. You should be ecstatic. Think about it, if this can happen, then what else could happen? God, the possibilities are unimaginable.”

“Oh, I saw that immediately,” Chris declared firmly. “I also saw the consequences.”

Jon met his eye and felt a thrill of panic. “Oh my God.”

“Exactly. How the hell do we explain this?” Chris asked. “I am hoping Alex has a few ideas. If she cannot explain this, then her life is going to become impossible. Who’s going to believe she is really a boy named Alexander Victor Nevin? She can’t use her own identity, or Social Security Number; even her birth certificate is no good. How will she ever get a job without one? How can she prove she isn’t an illegal alien? What will she do if no one will believe her story? We’re the only ones who can back it up, and who’s going to believe us?

“Or worse,” Chris added ominously, “what if people do believe us?”

“Stop,” Jon pleaded. “We’re getting way ahead of ourselves. God, if you stack it up like that you’d never be able to cope. One problem at a time, okay?” Chris took a moment to breathe and calm down. He nodded. Jon looked at him until Chris gave him a reassuring smile. “Right,” he said, clapping his hands together. “Our first problem is Alex. Let’s see if we can get her to wake up. We need to know if she can cope with the fact that she is a girl before we worry about the rest.”

“What?”

“You know, how much of a change was it?” Jon elaborated. “Was it purely physical? Does Alex still have the mind of a guy, or did his mind change too?”

Chris laughed nervously. “I didn’t know you knew the difference.”

“Isn’t it obvious? Sex is as much a state of mind as it is a physical state. I knew a girl once who thought like a guy. Total tomboy. When she grew up she had such a hard time with being physically female,” Jon sobered, considering his next words. “She killed herself. I think she could have been fine if she had gotten help. Instead, she got raped. I think that’s why she did it. Sort of the final straw.”

“I didn’t know you knew a transsexual,” Chris said in a small voice.

“She hated that label, but I suppose it’s a useful to be able to identify people who, as a group, had the misfortune be born in the wrong body.” Jon glanced over at the megalith, the towering boulder they had been jumping into the cleft from. “I think some people have the kind of minds that could deal with being the opposite sex, but until now there was no reason to believe that a person would ever need to. I hope Alex can cope with this. Male or female, Alex is still one of my best friends.”

Chris looked at his best friend and confessed, “You know, every now and then you manage to really surprise me.”

Alex stirred, and the two boys turned their attention to her. The sun was stabbing her in the eyes again, having risen nearly to its apex while she was unconscious. She sat up, and then looked down at the shirt that slipped down into her lap. With a sharp gasp, she brought her hands to her chest.

“Alex?” Jon attempted to get her attention.

Alex ignored him, dropping a trembling hand to her lap. She pulled the shirt away and spread her legs apart to see what she already knew was missing. Her legs snapped closed and she brought her knees up to her chest in one motion. Her arms wrapped around her folded legs and she started rocking back and forth. “Ohmygod! It wasn’t a dream,” she cried into her knees. After a moment, she realized that both of her friends were talking to her. She pulled herself out of her trance and finally looked at them.

“Are you flipping out?” Jon asked her calmly.

She blinked, and said what was at the top of her mind. “My Dad is going to kill me!” Alex jumped to her feet and started pacing, talking out loud but talking to herself. The boys followed, keeping her in arm’s reach. “What am I going to tell him? How am I going to explain this? Would he believe me if I said I did not do it? God, who else *could* do this to me?”

“Alex? What are you talking about?” Chris grabbed her, forcing her to look at him. On the surface, what she was saying made no sense, but on a deeper level the words made frightening sense. “Do you realize what you are saying? Do you understand what has happened to you?”

Alex was so wrapped in thought she answered the question automatically. “Well, yes. I turned into a girl. Isn’t that obvious?”

Jon interjected, “You’re talking to the person who pointed it out to you.”

Chris shrugged that off and went on, “I mean, do you understand how this happened? Why would your father think you did this?”

“Yes,” she replied in exasperation. “*I* *did this*. He’d suspect it at once. I don’t know why. I certainly never thought about it. I am sure I never tried to do it before.” She stopped and realized what she was saying. Who she was saying it to. Both boys were staring at her, full comprehension dawning in their eyes. Her hand came up to cover her mouth. She closed her eyes, reminding herself that they had seen everything. There was no reason, after that, to hide the truth from them. In fact, it would be better for her to explain everything.

Alex took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Opening her eyes, she committed herself.

“I can’t say why this happened,” she began calmly, “and I would have to guess at how, but I can tell you what made it possible. Until I figure out what I did, and maybe even why, I can’t just change back to demonstrate. But there is something I can show you which will help explain a lot.” Even kids knew the proper order of such things. Show and then tell. Both of them turned in alarm as the calm water of the pool suddenly started seething.

The calm surface churned madly as something moved under the surface. At the center of the disturbance, they could see a ghostly form resolving in the murky depths. As it came closer to the surface, they could make out the broad surfaces of a massive rock. It breeched and kept rising, a boulder about the size of a mini-van, shaped roughly like an egg. The top was smooth and laced with algae fronds, while the base was stained dark with mud, and jagged with the irregular facets of calved stone. The monolith slowed to a stop a few feet above the water, which giggled under the rain of water and debris.

“Oh. My. God,” Jon panted, managing breath only for one word at a time.

“It starts with simple things,” Alex stated, matter-of-factly, “and then evolves with the understanding of scale and complexity.” As she spoke, the rock shivered and then began to flow. It took only a moment for the rock to turn into crystal and metal. At first glance, they could not have guessed at the boulder’s composition, but now it was a massive chunk of quartz heavily veined with gold. “Mind over matter,” Alex smiled, and the rock sank majestically back into the aqueous depths.

“And I thought I had secrets,” Chris whispered with awe.

“It has to be a secret,” Alex responded. “Most people still aren’t ready for this.”

“A purloined letter,” Jon said thoughtfully.

“That’s true,” Alex agreed, seeing at once where his thoughts had wandered. “Hidden in plain sight. It is not a secret in the sense that no one has a clue about it,” she noted. It was something she felt she should explain, but her thoughts were racing and she just said what came to mind. “I think a fair percentage of people don’t know the word ‘psionic’ and the last time I checked it was not in the dictionary, but the concept has deep roots in every language and culture. But it doesn’t explain anything just to tell you it is psionics. That doesn’t begin to explain what it really is, or how it works, so in your perspective it can only be magic. Or perhaps even a miracle. I was raised to consider the matter from a scientific point of view—and if you know how to approach it, there is a science to it—so I can’t call it magic.” She sighed, “I personally think of it as an art.”

“How did you get this power?” Chris asked almost painfully.

“It’s not a power,” she corrected. “What I have is what everyone has. What I was born with, a mind. I simply had the good luck to be born in a situation that helped me to recognize my potential and then develop it.” She paused for a moment, sorting through her pile of clothes. None of it would fit her, but she did not want to alter anything. Instead, she resorted to her art. On a deeper level, she was manipulating the fabric of space and time, weaving an object together on a level of almost infinite complexity. As far as Jon and Chris could see, a mirage danced across her skin. At first, the image confused the eye, then focused and resolved into an elegant, single piece bathing suit. “I think that neatly defines the problem,” she resumed explaining. “People immediately grasp it as a power; an objective quality that can be pursued and seized. A person who is more aggressive often imagines that it can be taken. I could write book describing how to tap and harness the potential of the mind, and the book could be stolen, but the book would be almost worthless. Like cheating at a test, you can have the answer, and fail to possess it.

“There was a time when people published such books. A person who was willing and capable of thinking, and committed to learning and applying such knowledge could always benefit from such things. Of course, a person who realized his potential became a power in himself, a man capable of work on an awesome scale, immune to the dictates of others. He, along with every work he produced, became a threat to emperors and kings, to priests and politicians; to all men who imagined power to be a thing which could only be given by or taken from others.

“What little of the truth that survived those dark ages is only an echo. Myths and magic,” she said sadly. “That’s the funny thing about the truth. It is not really a secret, but a wise man keeps his awareness of the truth to himself. The truth doesn’t belong to anyone, you see. It simply is. If you look for it, you can find it—even under the cloak of lies.”

“What is the truth?”

“I can’t really tell you. It is magic the first time you encounter it. A miracle. It changes the nature of reality, and once you see it, you need to understand it. Apply it to your own life. The problem is, it can’t just be given to you,” she laughed ironically. “I can point to it, even demonstrate my understanding of it, or describe it in depth. You would have to understand the truth to understand my interpretation of it. To answer the question you are really asking, all I can say is you’ve seen it. It is up to you to understand it. To *get* the ‘power’ you have to *give* it to yourself. It sounds simple, but it’s amazing how difficult it is for people to give themselves power.” Alex stopped and got a hold of herself. “I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I got carried away. Read too much into the question. I assumed you were asking… well, you know.”

“I do,” Chris smiled. “Maybe I was, deep down, but really I am just trying to understand the problem.”

“Problem?” Alex reposted. “That’s an understatement. There I was thinking I had myself fully under control. Now I am confronted with this,” she gestured at her body. “This is a disaster. I certainly didn’t do this on purpose. Not consciously. I didn’t even suspect I could do something like this unconsciously. I’m lucky I’m not dead!”

“Is there any danger of that?” Jon asked, in sudden alarm.

“My mind can alter reality. Can you imagine possessing that kind of ability and discovering you’re not entirely in control of it?” Alex challenged. “The instinct for self preservation is one of the main reasons most people never tap into this potential. It is as easy to realize a nightmare as it is to realize a dream—and nightmares have a more profound impact on our minds.”

“Jon,” Chris announced in an unsteady voice, “remember my list of worries? Well, I’ve just added a couple of chapters to it.” Chris met Alex eye to eye. “I was worried about the little things, like the fact that you really *are* a girl—but not officially, if you follow. I am afraid to stand around worrying about things like that if you are *that* worried about losing control. This is enough of a mess to deal with. Is there anyone who can help you? I mean, Jon and I are your best friends in the whole world, but I don’t think we can really help you with this.”

“I am just as shocked as you are, Chris. And to be honest, it seems like my abilities are working better than they ever did, but—“ Alex paused. After what she had just said, this was certain to cause extreme alarm. “Chris, Jon,” she addressed them very seriously. “When it happened, I thought I was having a stroke. There has been this pressure building in my skull since I was a child, and today I had the worst headache of my life. I am afraid there is a very real, very bad explanation for what happened to me. It really felt like some part of my brain snapped, and while the headache is gone, I don’t know if I am better or worse.”

The boys swore under their breaths in unison.

“I may have turned into a girl in response to serious brain damage. I may have, well, switched over to female to utilize a different set of neural pathways. You do know that girls’ brains are wired differently. Their brain functions more widely distributed, connected with greater redundancy,” she explained, before answering the question Chris had asked. “I need to see my Dad. I don’t trust myself to examine my own brain right now. He’ll be able to find the problem, and hopefully fix it.”

“Let’s go,” Jon said, wasting no time. He resisted the urge to ask the obvious questions about her Dad. It seemed likely enough that whatever she had learned, her old man had mastered it first. He went over and started getting dressed. Chris and Alex joined him. She slipped her old clothes on, making an extra hole in her belt to keep her pants up around her waist, and stuffing her socks into the toes of her shoes so she could walk without kicking them off with every step. She was the last to stand, after rolling her pant legs up to slip on her shoes.

Jon offered his hand and the boys escorted her back down the winding trail to where they had parked. They made haste, each mulling over private thoughts and still somewhat in shock. They maintained their silence when they reached the car. Alex presented a calm face, but on the inside she was afraid. On one hand, she hoped she had not really suffered some neural catastrophe. On the other, she wished for an explanation that did not suggest a fault in her mental discipline. That was more frightening to imagine.

The car turned off of the access road onto the highway, accelerating toward town. The grove of redwoods and the misty tributary valley were now far behind. Spruce and pine dominated the high hills and low mountains as they followed the winding way east. Jon pushed the speed limit, even on the turns, jerking the wheel occasionally to avoid an oncoming car. On the east-west passes of Northern California, a two-lane road without stop signs possessed all the honors and few of the graces of a real highway. Alex just set her teeth and braced herself. She had too many other things on her mind to worry about dying in a car accident. Her thoughts had whirled non-stop, but she had not made much progress with the problem itself.

The idea that her transformation had been to avoid brain damage was safe. With the right help, the problem could be fixed and her body returned to normal. In itself, that was a calming thought. Unfortunately, it left little more to dwell on. Her mind kept veering into the dark shadows of fear and apprehension.

It was the same loop she had been stuck in since she had regained consciousness. As far as she knew, psi was not prone to spontaneous manifestations. Everything had to be devised, designed and developed. An ability she researched, practiced and then applied regularly could be exercised instinctively or triggered to execute spontaneously in response to certain circumstances. Her change had happened with that kind of efficiency.

It was not something she could ever remember having tried, let alone integrated. The fact that it had happened so naturally implied that her memory did not account for all of her actions. There was no question she had done it. The question was, had she been her—well, at the time, him—self when she was doing it?

She could not answer that, and her breath and pulse quickened.

The cycle of panic and doubt was eroding her nerve. To cope, she began to talk. Again, she was voicing an almost pure stream-of-conscious monologue. In spite of that, she was able to explain a few more things to her friends, modifying what she had already said about the unconscious mind and psi. For the most part, the faculties of the mind functioned so smoothly and seamlessly they operated almost invisibly. An efficient mind performed operations on an instinctive or unconscious level. Contrary to the impression she had given her friends, not only could a person trust the unconscious mind with the awesome potential of psi, she had to. The conscious mind functioned best as a pilot or captain with the subconscious and unconscious minds making up the crew and the ship. As the captain, following that metaphor, she was responsible for command—issuing orders and maintaining discipline. As the pilot, she was responsible for actively leading—executing her own orders personally while counting on her subordinates to follow her lead and provide all necessary support. Her present situation was one in which the entire ship, so to speak, executed a directive perfectly—but she had no memory of giving the order or leading the execution herself.

“If I don’t know what I am telling myself to do,” she concluded, “I am not fit for command. If I am actually doing something and don’t even realize it—I am a danger to myself and others.” Alex sighed and stared back out the window. They were entering the town, slowing as the risk of cross traffic increased.

Alex was jumping out of the car almost before Jon parked. The boys rushed to follow as she flew directly to her father, on the edge of a screaming panic. The dojo was a tall, broad structure fronting the lot where Jon’s family lived. Alex had enough presence of mind to kick off her shoes as she ran through the foyer, but she had apparently forgotten Jon’s father ran a traditional school. As she burst into the main room, a number of youths turned, jumped up and raised their guards. Alex was so determined to reach her father, she did not even slow down.

In a traditional school of martial arts, the apprentices were charged to defend the school from outside attack. While such things rarely happened in the modern age, the discipline instilled in them brought the assembled students into the engagement, in reverse order of seniority. Jon and Chris came in behind her and watched as the first student tried to engage her. Alex brushed past him and the next dozen or so without even pausing. Bodies converged on her and then went sailing away. Jon and Chris advanced cautiously in her wake.

Jon scowled, helping a boy to his feet and then loudly cleared his throat. As the master’s protégée—and son—he had the presence and prestige to claim everyone’s attention with that simple interruption. Everyone, including Alex, paused and turned to look at him. Before he could say anything, another voice spoke out.

“I thought that was you, Jon,” the man said. The students faded back to allow the guest instructor to address the school’s heir. Victor Nevin was kneeling in front of the back wall. He had not even batted an eye when the commotion interrupted his lecture. “Students,” he addressed the assembly, “I am proud of the speed and commitment you have displayed in defending your dojo. However, one normally should not assume that the school’s champion or his guests are a threat. Do not confuse haste for animosity.”

The group chorused an acknowledgment.

“Good. Now, Jon, Chris,” Victor addressed those two and inquired, “Are you just passing through, or is there something I can help you with?” Victor was preparing to politely ask the two boys—the premier students of that dojo—and the wild eyed girl to go right back out the door and wait until the class he was working with was dismissed—when he recognized the girl. It was not the hair or the face; he had seen both on another individual. It was the clothing, when he finally looked the three of them over, which revealed the girl’s identity. “Ah. I see,” he added quickly, before any of the three could respond.

He looked her in the eye. She paused, then nodded.

This was clearly an emergency. “Students, I am afraid something urgent has come up. I am afraid I need to ask you all to leave. Expect the remaining time to be added to our next session,” he dismissed the class early. Victor rose and pulled the three youths aside, while admonishing his students to get in extra practice at home. As they filed quietly out of the building, Victor took his son turned daughter by the shoulders.

“Yes,” she answered an unspoken question. She frowned and then added, “No. I don’t really trust myself. Besides, they’ve already heard enough.”

“Very well,” he sighed. Victor could see he had a serious problem on his hands. He quickly assessed the state of mind Alex and her friends were in. All three of them were stunned. Alex was almost at her wit’s end, but she was keeping herself together. “Just tell me what happened.”

She told him exactly what had occurred and what she had already confided in her friends. She had openly confessed her fears, and the fact that she could not explain her condition. One detail stood out, perhaps the only thing which might lead to an explanation. He focused on it when she mentioned it the second time. The absence of the headache that she said had always been there, growing worse each day. “I always thought it was just part of tapping into psi,” she elaborated. “It wasn’t pain so much as this incredible pressure. I stopped feeling actual pain from it when I learned to focus my thoughts. When it kept getting stronger, I assumed that it meant I was getting more powerful.” She laughed nervously and added, “Now that it’s gone everything’s so simple. It’s scary! I grabbed this little rock to demonstrate, and it turned out to be this huge boulder!”

“It doesn’t sound like you had a stroke to me,” Victor mused. “More like you cleared a mental block,” he guessed. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment. “So, you couldn’t explain what happened, but you showed your friends what you were capable of?” he confirmed.

Alex nodded, and Victor turned to look at Jon and Chris. He did not have to read their minds. It was written all over their faces. In addition to Alex’s problem, he was dealing with two boys facing a crisis of their own. They had just discovered that the mind did possess the ability to alter reality, and it was sinking in. He let his breath out carefully. 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 a move like that and would certainly try to fight it. And that was all it took.

“I am sure you both have a lot of questions. You’re welcome to stay,” he invited, “and listen and learn.” They would have to, now that Alex had confronted them with her psionic abilities. He smiled to himself. If only he could have seen their faces. “I need to have a look at Alex, but if you two will just sit tight for a moment, some of your questions might answer themselves. Alex,” he gestured for her to turn around, “let’s make sure you’re whole and sound before we go on.”

Alex had given Victor the answer to her problem when she asserted that her abilities worked better than ever. The man had watched Alex grow up, and of course knew things about their family history she did not. He had some idea why she would suddenly turn into a girl, without knowing how or why it happened. All the same, it did not hurt to make sure that there were no faults with the translation she had performed. As he probed her physical structure, he probed her on a deeper level, assessing the complex of psychic attributes like attitude and disposition, perspective and identity.

Alex could feel him moving silently through her and started talking to distract herself. Her father’s attention was making her extremely conscious of the fact that she was female—and she had no idea how to deal with it. “I have to apologize,” she began, “even though this was an accident. What you saw is going to change your life.”

“Probably for the better,” her father interjected.

“In time,” she agreed. She was facing the boys, her father at her back. “Ever since I was little, I have heard people telling themselves and each other that certain things were impossible. I knew from the start it wasn’t so, but I can imagine that most people accept the limitations imposed on them. Knowing the truth was so frustrating, but I imagine that discovering the truth after living for so long with those limitations you would feel abused or even angry,” she guessed. “Particularly with me, since I left you in the dark when I was supposed to be your friend.”

“I don’t think I am over the shock enough to be angry,” Chris replied, “but I can see that I would be once I had some time to think about it.”

“And the first thing you want to know is why,” Alex asserted. Chris and Jon both nodded. She nodded too and went on, “That’s the point I was trying to address at first, but I wasn’t thinking too clearly. I don’t think anyone who understands the truth wants to keep people in the dark. I never did. I just did not know how to tell you without, well, shattering your beliefs.”

“It is shocking,” Jon admitted, “but we can handle it. That can’t be the entire reason. You may have been babbling, but you said some things that made a lot of sense. About how people perceive the power, and covet it.”

“Yes,” she admitted, “There is that, but that is just a symptom of the real problem. One of the primary motives for seeking power is a desire to make things easier. Psi appeals to that desire because it appears to be effortless, and that is so far from the truth. Tapping and harnessing it requires a mind to learn an entirely different way of thinking and acting. It confronts the mind with paradoxes and absolutes that challenge or contradict our most basic acquired assumptions. When you take into account the sad fact that most people can’t be troubled to master the tools of thought which are available to them, the demands of psi become an unspeakable burden to place on them.”

“In other words,” Chris said, “it’s a lot of work. The initial anger and resentment a person feels at being confronted with the truth ‘too late’ becomes intensified as the person realizes that the power they seek eludes their grasp.”

“Because they lack patience or commitment, or can’t take responsibility. Because they never bothered to learn how to think clearly and effectively in the first place,” she added. “It doesn’t matter what the cause is. There are as many reasons as there are people. Without the proper tools, a mind is powerless. The only way to acquire those tools is to provoke the mind into creating them for itself.”

“Do we strike you as people who are too lazy to think?” Jon demanded.

“Jon,” Alex retorted, “Think back on the conversations we’ve had. How many times have you changed the subject or told me outright that you don’t want to think about it—whatever ‘it’ happened to be at the time?”

“Uh,” he stalled while he tried to think of an exception, “that’s different. That’s just talking. If you can’t do anything about something, it does no good to dwell on it. Keep it simple, that’s what I was taught.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about,” Alex said gently. “If I did anything more than talk about things, I’d be changing your life. If I keep bringing up new ideas and different view points and you never show any real interest in pursuing them, if you always stick to what you know, how am I supposed to guess that you would embrace a major and irrefutable change in your life?” Chris and Jon looked confounded, then thoughtful. “I would never say either of you was too lazy to think. I just did not feel you were prepared to face the truth. It’s not a gift. It’s a burden you learn to bear, and in time it teaches you to bear the greater burden of responsibility for yourself.”

Victor interrupted at this point to announce, “Alex, you’ll be happy to know that there is nothing wrong with you.”

Alex sighed and slid gracefully to the mat. “That’s a relief,” she declared. “Wait a minute. Are you forgetting I turned into a girl? I didn’t do it, so there has got to be a problem somewhere.”

“No,” he countered, “The problem you are confronting yourself with is the fact that you don’t remember devising or executing the translation. The truth is, there is nothing to remember. Psi functions best when an ability is developed to an instinctive level. You assume that this applies solely to training, but natural instincts have the same authority.”

“Natural instinct?” Alex posed in disbelief. Her father rushed to explain. After examining his neo-daughter, he confessed, the other possible explanations were ruled out. He reminded her of his initial assessment of her “stroke”. As he suspected, she had lost a mental block. The change had been triggered to accommodate a perspective shift, and there was nothing he could do to reverse the process. Once the mind began to open up, there was no way to stop it from exploring and expressing the potential it could apprehend.

“You are still evolving and this is how your present evolution has expressed itself,” he stated sympathetically. “The mind has tremendous potential. It is not limited to anything as simple or complex as sex or gender, and the specializations that go with them. If you really think about it, social and biological factors can cheat a mind of its full development. You were bred to be a perfect human being—and of course, humans come in two primary forms.” He knelt down beside her and looked her in the eye. “Do you want me to take you to your mother? She’s a lot better equipped to help you deal with this than I am,” he offered, adding quickly, “You know, to oversee the development of this side of you.”

“You mean, she’s really turned into a girl?” His friends asked in amazement. “Permanently?”

“Yes, she has,” he answered, to her shock, “Oh, her mind is fully developed as a male but the change is already permanent in one sense. Her perspective, her gender, I should say, has shifted to accommodate a female identity. She became a girl because she needs to *be* a girl. When she is finished evolving, she might not feel any reason or need to be a boy again since, as a girl, she already possesses a fully developed male side.”

Alex swallowed hard. She could not speak. They boy in her had realized that his mind possessed untapped potential, but he never imagined it might express itself so physically. She asserted in near panic “If I allow Mom to have anything to do with it, that will almost certainly be the case.” She pleaded with her father not to send her to her mother, who had pined for a daughter since the day Alex was born. She was frantic, she had liked being a guy, she had been perfectly happy as a guy, and could not stand the thought of losing that forever. Just being a girl was sort of terrifying. She did not know the first thing about it, but she knew enough about boys and men to feel extremely vulnerable.

Her father held her until she stopped trembling and offered her one hope. “Alex, you have to remember, the mind is the most flexible and adaptable part of a person. The change itself is not that difficult, once the means to achieve it are in place. You could easily learn to shift back to your male body at will—and stay that way for as long as you willed it. The only thing you can’t do is change yourself back into a boy.” It took her a moment 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. In a flash, she remembered the frightening moment she had struggled so hard—and so successfully—to forget. She had awakened one morning to discover that her penis had disappeared. Her mind was not sophisticated enough to recognize that her entire body had changed; she only perceived the loss of that part. 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.

It was a swift realization. The shock broke her concentration, and her body snapped back to its new and default sex. Her face paled and her head swam for a moment. Her confidence in her assumed manhood had just taken a severe blow. She had not just now become a girl; she had been one, deep down, for nine years and never even known it. Worse was the sudden comprehension 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.

Victor misinterpreted her reaction. “I know, it’s not easy to maintain, but there are other options.” She shook her head and asked him what he meant. “Well,” he scratched his head, “You’re not the first to confront this. I’ll be honest with you and tell you that you are more likely to remain the girl you will become than revert to back being the boy you were. Shifting back and forth presents a number of problems. The way to avoid those problems and retain the male side of yourself is to project it. You have the capacity, you just haven’t tapped into it yet.”

“What, you mean be a boy and a girl at the same time?” Jon asked.

“My God,” Alex laughed, “If I did that, I’d never be able to get out of bed in the morning!” Everyone looked at her in surprise, then laughed with her. Who could resist the temptation, given the opportunity, to have sex with his or her other self? “Is that really possible?” she asked when she stopped laughing. “I would think that being in two places at once would be too confusing.”

“That’s because you have only experienced being in a single body,” Victor observed. “Your mind is used to having only one set of perceptions to work with. The mind body interface is what we call attention, and you should know the mind can pay attention to an infinite number of things. A second body, aside from the legal problems, is an asset not a deficit. But, as I said, it’s only an option. If you are afraid you might lose interest in being a boy, I suggest you consider it. An insurance investment, if you will.”

“I’ll think about it,” she answered thoughtfully. “I know myself too well to feel comfortable around myself—outside of myself and as a girl. I need to figure out who I am now, and what I want and need, before I—“ she cut herself off. That joke about having sex with herself had a dark side. It came out of her experience as a male adolescent, but it did not seem funny when she realized that she was the girl in that scenario, not the boy who dreamed it up. She swallowed and finished her intended joke, “Before I become my own birthday present.”