Avatars - 2

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All night long, a face had hovered between her and any hope of dreams. In her sleep, she had studied the image trapped in her mind’s eye. At best, she could only pick up the details peripherally. Her inner eye would be captured by those intense, opalescent, grey eyes, and the vision would flicker and vanish before she could bring anything else into focus. It would immediately be replaced by some other remembered glimpse of her face. As they flashed by, she had been fascinated to note how those eyes sometimes appeared twilight blue or emerald green, depending on the mood she was captured in. It just went to show how many different faces a person could show. Always changing, always the same—like an eternal flame.

All these memories, and yet her face remained as elusive as a dream.

A spear of light burned through the morning mist, bringing the room to life and disturbing her sleep. A flood of warmth caressed her face. Luminescence poured through the open window and pierced the thin curtains that shifted lazily in the breeze. Her eyes blinked open as the sun stretched itself into shape at the crest of the hill. Awakened, but not entirely wakeful, she gazed about the room, watching the blue tinged shadows brighten and then turn white, while the edges of things became highlighted in gold. It was so beautiful she immediately forgave the sun for coming up so very early. On another day, she would be as impervious to the dawn as her twin, curled snugly against her back.

All at once, the dream came back to her. It bothered her that her mind had found such a common sight as her own twin’s face impossible to grasp. She realized it was a symptom of her latest worries, but at the moment, she was still feeling the imperative which had spawned that unsettling experience. She rolled away from her sister, and sat up to study her. The other girl rolled onto her back and clutched the sheet to herself without waking.

Her mind embraced the image, as it would a word or name that emerged after eluding thought or speech, though the meaning had burned perfectly clear. She gazed at the face, reaching out impulsively to touch it. She traced her fingers over that smooth and gracefully curved brow—savoring the velvet softness of her skin, as she stroked the flawless, mother-of-pearl complexion. She extended that caress down to the round point of her chin, which softly united the angles of her jaw—integrating subtler angles suggested by the faint hollows of her cheeks, as they merged with the strong curves of her cheekbones. Her nose was straight and demurely sharp. Her mouth—it was exceptionally expressive when she chose, naturally hinting at an enigmatic smile—hid sharp, slightly pronounced canines very capable of piercing flesh.

A mane of fine and strong blood red hair framed her diamond-on-heart shaped face. Her hands came up to flow over her own features. Her fingers savored the texture of liquid silk, as she ran her hands on through her hair. Long, straight and sheer, it had a tendency to develop a curl from the ends rather than the root. Both of her hands met at the nape, and slid down the slender column of her neck. Looking straight into her twin’s face, she saw the exact opposite of herself. Her face as it appeared to others, rather than how it appeared to herself in the mirror. That subtle difference in perspective lay at the root of her worries. They were perfectly identical, but the truth was they were not sisters.

So how could they really be twins?

Alex—Alexandrea Virgin Morgan—had the power to split into two people, and for seven years, she had been living two lives. Only one of them knew why they had become divided. The other simply accepted it as a part of her evolution. She took advantage of her strange circumstance to be her own best friend, confidant and lover—a girl had every right to touch herself, but using two bodies went way beyond using two hands—which inevitably made it possible to keep secrets from herself. It bothered her. Originally, she had been protecting herself. Allowing herself to continue developing normally without trying to deny what had happened to her. Now that she was old enough to deal with those experiences, she discovered that there were secrets on her other side which drove the wedge between her and her other self even deeper.

It had started with nicknames, and with pretending to be twins. It was inevitable for Anne and Alle to become separate in people’s minds. Except for the secrets they kept from each other, they still shared a single mind. Unfortunately, they were big secrets, and she had gotten too close to cutting herself in half. Alle, the part of Alex that was presently awake, had been trying to pull them back together, to confess her own secrets, when she discovered something that had been kept from her. Anne held a secret from a time when Alex had simply been Alex. A couple of years before the split, Alex had discovered the ability to assume either the male or the female sex. The little girl had toyed with being a boy and got burned. She had buried the memories, but never quite forgotten what she could do.

Alle sat there looking at the girl who was well on her way to becoming another person, remembering what had happened when she attempted to merge with her. She had believed Anne was ready to face what had happened once Anne had embraced her sexuality. Alle had let her set the pace, encouraged by the fact that Anne had no fear of embracing herself. She was happy exploring and experimenting with the one person who was perfectly safe. Her healthy attitude and confidence had restored the confidence Alle had lost, once she could understand how she had been taken advantage of. She had been young and sensual, eager to participate, but they had been older. They had known it was wrong, but exploited her naïve curiosity to satisfy their own desires. It had been her own participation that left Alle feeling so ashamed, but Anne had taught her that sex *was* shameless—in the sense that sex was nothing to be ashamed *of*, ever. Alle had taken responsibility for the actions of others, but the shame of those acts belonged to those who had burdened her with guilt through their abdication of responsibility.

Realizing that she did not have to hide from herself anymore, she had tried to heal the rift. She had confronted Anne with her desire to go back to being one person, explaining that she had stayed apart to protect her secrets. She could not explain, but assured Anne that she would understand once she was whole. Anne accepted that and tried to welcome her back. It had not worked. In one body, she had still possessed a divided mind. Anne remained apart from Alex, wrapped around secrets of her own, and Alle’s secrets remained locked away. Alle had tried to tear down those walls, even managed to glimpse Anne’s secrets. Alle had been unable to reveal her own buried experiences. On an unconscious level, Anne knew and she still refused to confront them. Combined with her own secrets, her hidden desires, she could not bear to embrace the whole truth of her sexuality.

Anne had a healthy attitude towards sex, but there were grey areas within her she could not accept as healthy or normal. Alle thought she was being too hard on herself, but that was the whole problem. She had always been too hard on herself. No one was normal. Everyone had quirks and ghosts that haunted them. Alle had finally accepted that, but if Anne did not as well, Alle was going to lose a crucial part of herself. She shifted a bit, looking down at her other self again. She glanced up, peering at herself in the mirrored headboard.

“I have to do it,” she mouthed to herself in dismay.

The black silk sheet, stretched tight over the queen-sized mattress, released a sigh as she sprawled onto her back. The sound registered only distantly, in Anne’s slumbering mind, but the complex report of pressure, temperature, and texture, as her body rocked within its nest to the motion of the bed, triggered a shift in awareness. Her brain remapped her entire body to place the sensations into context. In the process, awakening her, and reminding her that she had a body.

Anne rolled onto her back, stretching her arms and legs as she sorted herself out. The top sheet clung to her torso. She must have wrapped it around herself and tucked it in place fairly tight at some point in her sleep—probably when Alle got up and exposed her to the cool morning air. She pulled it away from her body, and flipped it back over the heavy down comforter that straddled her hips.

As she sat up, Anne realized that she had thrown the sheet back over her twin. She grabbed the sheet and pulled it back slowly. “Sorry,” she smiled, ”I thought you were already out of bed.” Alle straightened her legs, so she was laying full length opposite herself. Anne studied her for a moment and then dropped her hand to Alle’s knee, and ran it teasingly up the inside of her twin’s thigh. “So,” she grinned, “since you’re not, maybe we should start celebrating our sixteenth birthday.”

Alle shifted her legs apart invitingly. “Maybe?” she challenged, looking up at Anne with a matching smile, wondering how to confront her other self with the fact that she had discovered one of her deepest secrets—a wish—and she intended to grant it. “Girl, I’ll make you scream if you don’t!” It started as something she had done for herself many times before, as sex play with herself, but somewhere in the midst of it, it became sex with the male version of herself. Again, Alle let Anne set the pace. Once they were both warm and tingling with anticipation, she tapped those stolen memories and shifted into Alex’s male form. Anne’s hand, which had been sliding down Alle’s belly, met with a proud and unexpected pillar of manhood. Anne gasped, and her hand wrapped itself around it, squeezing to confirm its solidity.

“Whoa,” Alle yelped. “Easy. That thing’s sensitive, you know.”

“But,” Anne stammered, “but—why?”

“I told you I had a special gift for your birthday,” Alle chuckled. Anne stared at her—him, she quickly corrected. Desire and apprehension warred in her face and Alle took her by the hand. “Look,” he said, “Everything we’ve done before has been wonderful, but we both know what we really want. Neither of us has gone looking for it, though. Boys our own age are too clumsy, or too arrogant. An older man is too risky. With us, it’s always been just sex. No questions, no complications, and no long-term consequences. I only want to satisfy my curiosity, and I’m not going to get this intimate with someone else just for that. If it’s true for me, it’s true for you. If I can satisfy my own curiosity, why the hell shouldn’t I?”

Anne looked at him in disbelief. “You peeked!” she accused suddenly.

“I stumbled onto it. I thought I was the only one keeping secrets from myself,” Alle modified. He sat up and pulled the girl into his lap, “Look, first of all, it’s isn’t healthy to keep secrets from yourself. I am you, remember? We could have talked about this, like everything else, and I could have listened to your fears—which are ridiculous, by the way—and helped you resolve them. If I had known I could turn into a boy, I would have tried so many things. Maybe I don’t really want to be a boy, but as a girl I think it can be useful, especially when it comes to sex,” he pointed out.

This time, Anne spoke with concern, “Maybe, but do you really want your first experience with real sex to be as a boy?”

“Anne, we’re not two separate people,” Alle stressed, “Before, I experienced sex as two girls, now I can experience sex as a boy and a girl. Why wouldn’t I want that? I am not exactly a normal person. I don’t have to accept the limitations of a normal person. This is a natural and normal evolution of my mind. Unlike most of the people in the world, I can truly evolve into a whole person,” he noted, smiling. Anne ducked her head acknowledging his point; he hugged her, and brought up the one question that really mattered, “Do you really want to deny yourself? I mean, why possess an option if you aren’t meant to experience it. Is there any reason for me to be ashamed—or afraid—to embody and embrace it?“ Anne did not answer. She thought for a moment, then laughed. Before Alle could say anything else, she turned and kissed him. From there, they proceeded to perfect the act of sex. There would be questions, and there would be consequences. Such was the price of any action. The difference was, no one but Alex could get hurt—and that, only if she was not careful.

Alex had not slept through her first night as a girl. After parting company with her friends, leaving them with her father to talk about psi, she had made her way to a bookstore and purchased anything that suggested help with the mysteries of being female. She had an abyss to fill any other girl would be horrified at. After stocking up on books to enlighten her about her body, she visited a seamstress and begged for advice on how to make her hand-me-down boy’s clothes fit that body appropriately. She could change the clothes herself, if she understood the proper way to put them together. She went home, started tearing apart her clothes and pouring through the books, and realized she had to go shopping again.

After purchasing a number of mandatory and elective feminine products, she returned home again in despair. The money Alex had saved for his birthday had been eaten up in an afternoon. Being a girl, she realized, was expensive. It was also full of inconveniences. The thought of actually buying clothes, struggling with cosmetics and—she almost gagged—enduring gynecological examinations, made her physically ill. The more she read, the worse it got. In spite of that, dry eyes and exhaustion, she kept reading until morning.

She could hardly focus her eyes when she realized that dawn had made the reading light too dim by comparison. She finally reached up, turned off the bedside lamp, and rolled onto her stomach. Her thoughts spun for a bit, but she was satisfied that she could cope with being a girl. She would have to learn a few new tricks, but with psi, she felt confidant she could meet the strange new needs her body presented and retain her accustomed independence.

As long as she did not allow herself to become too upset, she actually enjoyed confronting her altered state. Everything was becoming new to her again, and even the world changed dramatically when viewed through her new perspective. She wriggled around until she was comfortable, sprawled full length on the bed and meditated for a bit. Her body needed to regenerate, flush out fatigue toxins and restore its metabolic equilibrium, but she did not want to take the time to sleep. She had a lot to do, and it was her birthday. She was not about to miss it just because she happened to be a girl or because she had worn herself out trying to figure out what that really meant.

When she felt refreshed and alert again, she jumped out of bed and padded down the hall to take a shower. Jean met her in the hall and did a double take.

“Alex!” he exclaimed in shock.

“What?” she gazed up at him, noting that she was shorter than him now.

“You’re naked!” he declared, blushing.

Alex looked down, and then shrugged in chagrin. “Mm. Yeah,” she commented, “I pulled all my clothes apart to alter them and got distracted. I sleep in the nude, so I wasn’t worried about it. Anyway, it’s not like you haven’t seen me naked,” she observed.

“Me? No,” he admitted rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. “But if my mother sees you wandering around like this she’ll have a fit.” With an effort, he brought his eyes back up to her face. “You know, you’re up awful early, now that I think about it,” he noted.

“I haven’t slept,” she informed him, starting to edge towards the bathroom. He looked toward the door and frowned slightly. “Don’t tell me,” she guessed, “you’re headed for the shower too.” He nodded. She grinned, waved him on as she stepped out of the way, and said, “Ladies first.” He was smiling and reaching for the door when he stopped and glared back at her. “What? Was it something I said?”

“You,” he shook his head. “Get in there. And don’t take too long or I’ll come in and join you. This girl thing will only get you so far.”

She stuck her tongue out at him and slipped past him as he held the door. She stopped in surprise when she noticed someone else in the room out of the corner of her eye. She turned to excuse herself and found herself staring at the startled stranger.

Then she did a double take of her own.

She was facing the image of herself, a stranger standing in a full-length mirror. It took a moment to get used to the odd familiarity of her own reflection. The perfection of her recreation as a girl was clearly demonstrated as she struggled to find some difference between the face in the mirror and the one she remembered. Alex had been a young boy, his features uncomfortably androgynous. Those features had not changed, but some subtle shift had perfected them into a girl’s face. She studied it as intently as she had studied her books. The answers she had searched for all night, even a clue as to what she really wanted and needed as a girl, were no closer to surfacing. What did surface was alarming. The boy in her was stunned at her beauty. Alex was in love. Her gaze dropped as he tried to drink her in. Her mind split into two levels—one purely worshipful, the other calm and critical. It was the critical view she found herself trying to cling to, pointing out similarities that extended below the neck, but she had to look a very hard to notice them. That was not surprising. Naked as a frog, she could not avoid confronting what she had become.

Even from a distance—twice the length of the bathroom, thanks to the miracle of optics—she caught the eye. Her appearance, deceptively plain at a glance, was understated and elegant. She stood at exactly five nine—she had measured it—a young, well-sculpted female with contours suggesting agelessness, solid and sleek. Her ribcage tapered into her waist in a subtler curve than the arc over her hips. Tall, trim and feline, to her male trained eye, she possessed an unconscious poise—demure and predatorial. Her height was made elegant by the length and proportions of her limbs. Her arms and legs were athletic—slender and powerful from a lifetime of martial arts—ending in long fingered hands and dancer's feet. Her muscles, highly defined but smooth and unobtrusive at rest, had remained toned to a fine balance of strength and suppleness. Her belly was smooth and taut. Her breasts, full enough to suggest ripeness, were not underscored by creases. The shallow rise of her mons—dipping into her new vocabulary—was graced with neatly tended blood red curls, drawing the eye to what was otherwise out of view. That for which “out of sight” was never “out of mind”, and she was not at all ashamed to give it due regard. It was amazing, but true, that one of the most erotic parts of a woman’s body was no part of her body at all—just a space between her pubic arch and inner thighs, created by the wide shape of her pelvis. Her vulva, eclipsed to an impeccable hairline seam by taut labia majora, could just barely be glimpsed, framed in that classic—and maddening—triangular gap.

To the touch, her skin was a silken envelope radiating a high characteristic body temperature. She turned her eyes, as the hand that had strayed slid down to her belly, and stopped over her womb. It took a great deal of effort to simply leave it at that. Exploring with her eyes was safe, but exploring with other senses would arouse her—and that aroused her fear. The nascent girl in her did not want to be exploited by her predominantly masculine curiosity.

Victor paused at the bathroom door as he opened it. Just in time, he heard the shower spit to life. Easing the door closed, he continued down the hall. Jean was sitting at the table, eating a bowl of cereal. Victor joined him as the boy’s mother urged him to sit down, promising eggs and bacon in a moment or hot oatmeal right away. He gratefully accepted both, and greeted Jean. The boy nodded silently—his mouth full—with a rueful smile. Jean had impressed Victor, as had Chris. After assuring himself that the two boys had gotten over their shock, and were apparently able to return to their normal lives, Victor had turned his attention to his tour schedule. The question he was trying to resolve was whether or not he and Alex could get back to their usual routine.

Alex obviously wanted to. She had been adamant about avoiding her mother, and insisting that they continue on as planned. Victor could understand her impulse; Alex had been traveling with him since he was six years old, devoting himself to mastering his body as well as his mind. All that time he had been a boy, and he had reached the point where there was not much Victor could teach him anymore—as a boy. As a girl, there was quite a lot for her to learn. The female body had different strengths and weaknesses, and a girl required greater skill and ran a far greater risk in martial arts than a boy.

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. The girl in question was one of three girls who had the potential to he his equal—perhaps not in martial arts, but as psionics, those girls were the most promising he had ever seen.

By turning into a girl, his son/daughter had complicated things, but she had quickly redefined herself as a tomboy—accepting her female body, but retaining her male outlook. There was a good chance that meeting a real girl, a girl with serious mate potential even his son/daughter could recognize, might provoke her to revert back to being male. Or at least project her male side. Alex and her intended did not know it, but everything their families had striven to accomplish weighed on their heads. If they could not marry and have children, a thousand generations of sweat and labor would go to waste. Passing their genes on to others would begin the unraveling of the most complicated breeding program ever undertaken. Victor sighed and reminded himself that all was far from lost. From what he had heard, his son had better chances with the promised daughter as a girl.

Victor set that aside and turned to Jean—the boy seemed to have finally come up for air. “Jean,” he began, “I have some bad news. News you won’t be thrilled to hear, at any rate.”

“What’s wrong?” the boy asked, giving the man his full attention.

“Well, nothing’s wrong,” Victor corrected, “but I’m afraid I have to leave you and Chris hanging for a bit. You know that I am always on the move, and I intended to be here only for a couple of weeks.” Jean nodded. Victor went on, “Well, the couple of weeks is over, and Alex and I have somewhere we need to be. I cancelled part of our itinerary, to free a couple more days to stay here and work with you and Chris, but a little short of a week is all I can spare. That’s not enough time to help either of you begin to study what Alex showed you.”

“Oh,” Jean said, controlling his disappointment. “Well, Chris and I are fast learners, and we’re both disciplined. I am sure if you can leave us with something to work on we can get by.” Jean glanced over at the kitchen, and lowered his voice, “Does my mom know about Alex yet? She was wandering around like she owned the place this morning, Mom’s too sharp not to recognize her if she meets her.”

Victor smiled, “I appreciate the concern, but Alex bears a strong resemblance to someone else your mother has met. A cousin, you might say. She even has the same name. Don’t say anything to Alex; she assumes I made something up to cover for her. Mention it and you’re just ruining a hell of a joke. I’ve been waiting ten years to spring it on her,” Victor chuckled mischievously. Jean, who was something of a practical joker himself just grinned conspiratorially and nodded.

“I still think we should have brought them with us,” Alex declared, breaking the long silence. Victor and Alex did most of their traveling under their own power. Under other circumstances, they would have walked all the way down from Northern California, but working with Jean and Chris had delayed them. They had made up the time by surreptitiously teleporting most of the way to their next port of call. For a while, Victor said nothing, and Alex sighed, shifting the weight of her duffel bag. She had been surprised to find that her strength had not been greatly depreciated by becoming female, but her stature made the load a bit more unwieldy than it used to be.

Victor watched her hiking along beside him. They had had this conversation several times during the week, and again on the journey. Now, as they crossed into his fiancée’s home town, it came up again. He sighed, then responded, “I agree, but I am not entitled to invite them into someone else’s home.” Alex glanced over her shoulder at him, then stared at the trees bordering the road. She had to keep her eyes open, as they sprouted in the middle of the sidewalk at regular intervals. She skipped ahead to pass one then waited for Victor to catch up. As he came back along side her, Victor added, “They’ll be fine. They can use the time to think, and the exercise will help them in the long run. The important part is getting them to open their minds to the possibilities.”

“It has to seem unfair, though,” she objected, Jean and Chris had been polite about it, but they had given them both mournful looks as they headed down the highway that morning.

“We’ll go back as soon as we can,” Victor promised. “Right now, we have other important business to attend to. I did offer to cancel our tour so you could go home. You wouldn’t have it.”

“I remember,” she admitted. “I also remember agreeing to cancel so we could stay and help them. If my well being is important enough to cancel for, theirs is too,” she asserted, with a mild glare. Her father frowned at her expression, and she tried to be more reasonable. “I realize our visits are often a matter of obligation. But this is a matter of obligation too. Surly one dojo can understand if a greater obligation detains us while we are at another dojo. No?” she challenged gently.

“Yes,” he allowed. He shrugged, adjusting his own load, “That is in fact the reason why Jean and Master Macallister gracefully accepted our departure. As great as our obligation to your friends is, we have an even greater obligation to Master Morgan.”

“Morgan?” Alex quizzed, her face scrunching up as she searched her memory. She had been to a lot of places with her father, but they tended to follow an established circuit. She shook her head, “I don’t remember ever visiting a school run by a man named Morgan.”

“He doesn’t run a school,” Victor asserted.

Alex stopped and faced him, scowling with suspicion, “We’re not visiting a school?” she repeated inquisitively. Her father stopped, he would have bowled her over if he had not. Alex stared up at him, demanding an explanation.

“No,” he exhaled, preparing for her outburst, “We’re visiting a family.”

“No,” she rejected at once. She kept her calm, but her head churned through a catalogue of awkward and uncomfortable scenes where he was exhibited like a prize stud at the fair. Oh, it was, without doubt, a matter of exceeding obligation, but one that she had always objected to. It was also something she had believed she had become immune to, “I don’t believe it. Under the circumstances, don’t you think *that* obligation is invalid?”

Victor smiled. At least she had not assumed he was about to pawn her off on a husband. She would have bolted at once if she had suspected that. Still thinking like a boy, Victor noted with pleasure. “Not at all,” he replied confidently. He leaned down to her level and confided, “Being a girl doesn’t change your obligation. You’re still capable of being a father, and thus you are still capable of fulfilling your obligation to the Families.” His eyebrows rose as her expression changed. His heart jumped, and he noted that a girl’s face could be more powerful than a man’s. “Stop pouting,” he ordered, “you owe that fine body of yours to the Avatar Project,” he reminded her. “Such perfection does not come by accident. You don’t own your genes, Alex. You hold them in trust. You have to pass them on, and you have to do so in a manner that enhances, rather than dilutes their promise.”

Alex composed her face and absorbed what he was saying. He urged her to start walking again, and she complied silently. The argument he made was something she had heard at length, and she understood the obligation the fact placed on her. “Fine,” she acceded softly. At least this time, she would not have to stand there and burn while her father extolled her manly virtues. Only now did it occur to her that her intended could just as easily be a man, and she swallowed in fear. In a hesitant voice, she asked, “So, who am I meeting this time?”

“The girl of your dreams.”

“I am the girl of my dreams,” she laughed instantly. Part of it was relief that it was a girl, while the other was an embarrassing memory of how she responded to her own reflection. If she ever dared to let the boy in her out, he would practically rape her. She throttled her laughter and demanded amiably, “Be serious.”

“I am serious,” her father said, sounding it. “This isn’t just a courtesy visit. This is the girl you are going to marry,” he finally declared.

The laughter died out of her eyes. She squinted at him and snapped, “What?”

“Don’t bark,” Victor reprimanded. Alex clearly understood that she had no say in the matter this time. This time, things were very different, and he explained it very carefully, “It was decided before you were born. The match is perfect. The offspring of that match will be perfect. All the other introductions were to give you a chance to consider the alternatives—and to be quite frank, you did not show any particular interest in any of those girls.”

She looked at him, eyes wide and demanded, “How could I, not only were they thrown at my feet, they got wet at the very sight of me. I am not interested in a girl who has been *conditioned* to desire me.” Her eyes started to water, as her emotions twisted into knots. The whole marriage obligation thing was too much for her. Even as a boy, she had wanted some hope of love in a relationship, and certainly a bit of free will. All her life, she had been a prize dangled before others. It was the one experience as a boy that had really prepared her for being a girl. Alex hated to be made to feel like an object.

“Well,” her father returned compassionately, “you won’t have to worry about that with this girl. She’s faced the same thing with all of the boys. You ditched the last girl on your list last year, but she didn’t get through her list until last month.” Something in her father’s eyes revealed that he knew all too well what she was feeling. After all, his own destiny had been plotted out too. Alex’s personal angst suddenly made contact with his, and through greater association, she felt incredible sympathy for the girl she was about to meet.

“God,” she wept, pity and pain wringing her distressed heart. It was nothing like bawling, which she had once felt being a girl might make her prone to. This was a silent rush of absolution. She just let it flow as silent as her tears. It was amazing how intensely she felt things now. Her father walked beside her quietly, waiting respectfully for her to get it all out of her system. When she stopped and took a deep breath, he pulled out a handkerchief and carefully blotted her face dry. She looked at her father in surprise, amazed that he had such a gentle, compassionate gesture in him.

He cleared his throat and made a peace offering, “I know this sounds absurd, but try to be a man about this.” She sniffed, and shook her head clear. If her emotions had not been bled out, that remark would have stung. After her release, she simply appreciated the strength in that assertion. She did not have to like her fate, but she certainly wanted to be able to meet it with her head held high and her shoulders square. Whining and whimpering did not fit her self-image well. She followed him in silence the rest of the way, telling herself to think, and begging herself not to get in the habit of bickering and complaining. She was surprised when he came to a sudden stop. “We’re here,” he announced when she looked at him inquisitively. “Let’s see if anyone’s home.”

Alex followed him up the front walk, looking up at the big house. They were in an older neighborhood nestled close to what appeared to be the heart of the town. She reached out with enhanced senses and felt through the walls for signs of life. “I don’t think anyone’s home.” she remarked, as she picked up nothing. Victor spared her a glance and rang the bell. They stood there for a moment before she chirped, “Oh well, I guess we have to come back another time.” She said it humorously, but on a deeper level, she meant it. There was too much relief in her voice.

“You know,” Victor glared at her, “I don’t hit girls, but I’ll be happy to show you how much I enjoy spanking them if you don’t behave.” He doubled back and went around to the side gate. As he peered over the fence he asked her, “Why can’t you look at the positive side? Give the girl a chance; she might make a man out of you yet. Or are you resigned to abandoning that hope for good?”

Alex looked up at him as he hopped the fence. “If she’s anything like the girl of *my* dreams,” she aired lightly, almost wistfully at the unlikely prospect, “I assure you she’ll bring out the man in me.” It was as close as she had come to telling him about her recent ordeal with mirrors. He made no comment, as he dropped on the other side of the fence. Alex shrugged and made her way back to the front porch and sat down. It was a relief to drop her duffle and stretch her back. She thought about his absurd suggestion, but the fact remained, she missed being a boy. If meeting the right girl could help her recover her manhood, she should at least give it a try. Of course, it would take the girl of her boy-dreams. On the other hand, she would also welcome the chance to just become friends with a girl. An honest girl could do a lot to set her straight, help her adapt to this evolution of her mind, and become normal again.

A few moments later, her father reappeared and instructed her, “You stay here. I’m going to find a phone.” He grabbed her duffle and stashed it behind the porch wall with his. “If they show up before I do,” he added, “be polite, introduce yourself. They won’t be shocked at your appearance. I can assure you they’ve seen far stranger things.”

She nodded limply and waved him off, “Sure, see ya.”

Alex watched Victor walking away and pulled herself back to her feet. She was in an unfamiliar place, and she was a girl. In spite of the fact that she was a psionic, and an exceptional marital artist, she felt uncomfortable at being left alone. She wandered out to the sidewalk to see where her father went. Her eyes stayed glued to his back until he vanished around a corner, and she noted the street he turned on. She sighed and took a turn around the yard, admiring the landscaping before she returned to her perch on the front steps to wait.

She had moved up to the low wall bordering the porch, laying back to gaze up into the sky, when a car pulled up and a woman and older girl got out. They were overwhelmed with baggage, Alex noted, as she sat up to greet them. The older girl returned her casual wave, and the woman smiled at her in obvious relief.

“Alex,” the woman addressed her, to her surprise, “give us a hand, will you?”

“Uh, sure,” she responded energetically, surprised that a stranger identified her so quickly and casually. Both of them watched her as she hopped down and approached them. With a casual thank you, they loaded her arms with their shopping mall bootie, and led her into the house. As they climbed the front steps, Alex was startled to hear the girl remark:

“I told you she needed new clothes.”

“I heard,” the woman replied gently. Alex glanced at both of them, but they shoed her ahead before she could comment. They accepted her presence among them so matter-of-factly that she realized, belatedly, that she had not even introduced herself. When she unloaded her burden on the couch, she was surprised to see them sizing her up. “Hm,” the woman commented critically, “I am sure we got the right sizes, but if you don’t try it on at the store you’re gambling. Okay. Alex strip down and try this stuff on real quick.”

She could not believe they actually bought her clothes, “If you don’t mind, I’d rather not,” she tried to protest.

“Alex,” the woman silenced her rather soundly, “I said strip. This is not a debate. And be quick about it. We’re expecting company. You can be a tomboy to your heart’s content, but not on my time. Chop-chop.”

“Excuse me,” Alex begged, startled, “I meant to say ‘Yes, Ma’am!’”

“That’s what I thought,” the woman replied sternly, but smiling.

Alex shook her head in chagrin. The strange scene made sense if she assumed that her father had told them she was coming, and they had prepared for the arrival of a hopeless tomboy. Lord only knew what her father might have actually told them. So, she simply acquiesced to their commands. She squirmed out of her recently altered clothes and stood waiting further instruction.

“Kim,” the woman told her daughter, while Alex stripped, “hand me my purse, I want to see if I can do anything with her hair.” The woman accepted the bag from Kim, and produced a comb and brush. She turned back to face Alex as she kicked her clothes into a pile, and clucked in sudden dismay, “Oh, Alex, Alex. A bathing suit is not underwear.” She snapped her fingers a few times and pointed imperatively to emphasize her command, “Off, now.”

Alex went pale and tried once more to protest, “But—“

“Not a word,” the woman cut her off. She turned to her daughter and pleaded, “Kim?”

“I thought of it,” the girl replied, moving with haste to shuffle though the bags. She found the one she wanted and approached Alex with it as she struggled out of her one piece. “Here,” she said, giving her a hand pulling the tight suit off, and placing a stack of dainty looking garments on the arm of the couch next to her. “I know these will fit. We’re the same size in the hips.”

“Uh,” Alex was standing naked in a public area of a stranger’s home, and her nerve was failing her rapidly. She stared at the undergarments before her and tried to stammer through her helpless plea, “excuse me—“ She was cut off before she could even ask what to do with the foreign articles.

“You keep quiet young lady. Kim,” she turned to the older girl, asking her, with almost as much dismay in her face as Alex, “lets make sure of those. Alex, try them all on, quickly now.” Alex gritted her teeth and set her hands to the awesome task before her. The boy inside her was going wild as she tried on a number of “bedroom” outfits, parading them for their approval. Alex almost jumped out of her skin when another strange person suddenly barged in through the front door.

“Hey,” she greeted Alex succinctly. She then nodded to the two members of the household and addressed them in greeting, “Mom, Kim. Cool,” she declared with excitement as she saw what they were up to, “a lingerie show. Make it quick, Dad’s on his way home.” She dropped into a chair commanding a full view of the proceedings.

“Hi, Naomi. Thanks for the warning,” the woman said. Naomi sprawled in the chair, and joined the critique, showering Alex with all kinds of friendly sarcasm. Some of her comments cut pretty deep, particularly in a girl who was so new to everything female, and she turned deep red between restrained anger and profound embarrassment.

“Alex?” she sat up asking in obvious amusement, “Are you blushing?” Alex gritted her teeth and remained silent. She was almost half way through the assortment, and determined to bull her way through it. As she was winging it, she proceeded on instinct, posing playfully to offset her growing embarrassment. At one point she almost lost it as Naomi declared passionately, “Oh, those are nice; you could really convince a guy you’re a girl in those. Put those back on when you finish with the stack.” Alex swapped for the next items in the pile in haste, and earned an even more cutting remark, “Um. Well, that’s interesting, but those really should be on the other way.” The entire time, as the girl prattled impishly, she was clicking a pen feverishly in her hand. At one point, they all heard the click, but noticed that Naomi’s thumb was not on the button.

“Naomi!” Kim cried, snatching the younger girl’s bag out of her lap and demanding, “Are you taking pictures?” Alex froze and stared as Kim produced a small camera from the confiscated bag. Kim showed the offending device to her mother, who gave the other daughter a look that promised mayhem.

“Busted,” Naomi smiled slyly. She then jumped up to intercept the camera before Kim could pass it to her mother. “Hey, I’m pretty sure they’re all decent. Alex, for a girl so short on style you really do know how to pose.” Naomi tucked the camera in her pocket, and returned to her seat. Alex finished the underwear and then sat down with a mute sigh. As she was prodded to move on to the next stack of items, she paused quickly to change underwear one last time. Naomi might have verbally cut her to ribbons and gone over the top with that bit with the camera, but Alex took her advice on which undergarments to stick to.

“Mom,” Kim interrupted, calling the woman’s attention away from Alex for a moment, “all of these are cut the same, so she only needs to try on this one and those three. I think these will look best, so save them for last.”

Naomi leaned forward to see which items Kim was referring to and again voted her opinion boisterously, “Oh, that’s perfect! Alex, your dad won’t even recognize you when we’re through with you.” Alex smiled at the idea and rushed through the stack, anticipating wearing that last outfit. She finally seemed to be in the spirit of things, amazed to discover that clothes could be fun. Even Naomi, and her cutting comments, proved after all to be entertaining. By the time she got into the dress Naomi approved so heartily, the woman, who Alex was surprised to note reminded her of her own mother, had figured out what to do with her incredible mass of hair. Her father had infected her with some of his marital arts mania, and Alex had resolved years ago never to cut her hair beyond the minimal necessities of maintaining it, so it flowed down her back majestically when the woman finally released it from its braid*.*

She was whirling around, proudly displaying her transformation when a third girl caught her eye—and stopped her heart. Alex could not believe her eyes. For a second, she imagined she was standing across from herself. A perfect reflection, but one neither reversed by optical mechanics, nor confined to her own startled pose. Only the face was a plausible reflection, being fixed with the same stunned look of disbelief. Alex noted that the reflection would have been more accurate if she was still dressed in her comfortable old clothes. Before she could find her voice the other girl demanded fiercely:

“What the hell is going on here?”

The others turned at the sound of her voice. “Huh?” Kim piped as she turned around. She saw the other girl and smiled, “Oh, Alex. We’re getting you ready for our guest’s arrival.”

“But—but that’s not me!” the girl stammered.

“What!?” the woman gasped.

“I think I’m going to faint,” Alex finally managed.

“If you’re not Alex,” Naomi queried suspiciously, “who the hell are you?”

“I—I am Alex,” Alex quivered, shaking her head as she realized that that was also the other girl’s name. All of them were so shocked at the resemblance between the two girls—none more so than Alex and Alex—they came close to populating an entire cardiac ward. Confronted with the fact each of them had accepted a complete stranger as her daughter or sister, they all paused, and Alex finally got the chance to introduce herself fully. “Alexander Virgin Nevin, I thought—I don’t understand.” All of her assumptions had been completely off, and certainly, the same was true for them. She had the horrible suspicion that her father had set them up for some insane practical joke.

“My God. Nevin?” the woman repeated, “You could be Alex’s twin!”

“Just what I need,” the other Alex mumbled, “another twin! What,” she turned to confront her mother, “do you know this girl?”

“Ahem,” the girls’ mother cleared her throat and quickly sorted the situation out. After a moment of thought, she smiled and answered. “Alex, this girl is the boy—“ She cut herself short, remembering who she was talking to. She revised her explanation almost without missing a beat, “this is the company we were expecting. I’m terribly sorry,” she turned to the Alex she had terrorized into dressing up, and granted her her full name, awkward as it sounded “Alexander. You can, um, take those off if you want to.”

Alex looked down at herself, and said in a small voice, “I just got comfortable in them. But,” she caught herself and acknowledged, “you didn’t buy these for me.” She, sighed, shook her head and began peeling down again. Even the underwear, which she was already somewhat fond of.

“Oh, this is just perfect,” Naomi purred, clicking her pen to make Alex jump. She was placing the garments on the arm of the couch and reaching for her bathing suit when another voice intruded in audible shock.

“Alex!” a strange man’s voice snapped. Alex stood straight in shock, clutching the suit to her chest as she whipped around. “What are you doing stripping down in the living room?” the man demanded, looking so much like her father Alex winced. He turned to the woman standing beside her and exclaimed, “Virginia, have you all gone mad, we’ve got company!”

Virginia took a deep breath and then smiled a weary smile. “Vince,” she replied taking him in hand and pulling him forward, “let me introduce you to Victor’s daughter, Alex.” He gazed down at her, scowling, and Alex shrank away from him.

The man turned and shouted out the open front door, “Victor! You rotten scoundrel! You told me you had a son!” Alex bit her lip as her father appeared in the door, clutching his sides in laughter. As soon as Virginia Morgan had spoken, Alex had realized that her father had told these people both far more and far less than she had expected. One, Alex and her father had been expected. Two, the Morgans had not been informed that she was no longer a he, but assured that Victor was accompanied by his *son.*

Virginia scolded her husband at once. “Vincent, be polite. This is his son; she translated. You of all people should be familiar with that.” Alex rolled her eyes and added: Three, they knew exactly what her problem was, without being told.

“You’re kidding. At that age?” Naomi asked in surprise.

“Shouldn’t you have dealt with this when you were younger?” Kim turned and asked her directly. Alex’s eyebrows shot up. She was surprised they would expect that. She looked at Kim and realized she was honestly curious to know why the problem had not been resolved when she was still a child. Alex glanced at her father, and Victor handed the question back to her.

Alex burned brightly, as she confessed, “I—Well I guess I could have, but it didn’t understand what was happening at the time so I panicked, I blocked it off. No one ever told me I could become a girl. I didn’t find out really until my control snapped and, well, now I am sort of stuck like this.”

“So you’re really a girl now?” Vincent asked intently.

Alex shied back again, compelled to assert, “I’ll get over it. I hope. I really don’t know the first thing about being a girl. I’d be perfectly happy to go back to being a boy.” On one level, she was sure she meant it, but the immediate relief that filled his face made her feel strange. The way he smiled at the prospect of her reversion made her wonder if she really wanted to throw away what she was becoming. On her assurance, that she had every intention of reclaiming her manhood, Vincent, Victor and Virginia released their breath and laughed.

“Well,” Vincent cheered, clapping her on the shoulder, “that’s good to hear. If you were set on being a girl, it would pretty much nix any kind of marriage.” All three Morgan 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 dropped on them like this raised their hackles.

“Marriage?” they challenged in unison. “Is that what this is about?” Naomi demanded.

“Girls, we’ve talked about this before,” Vincent countered sternly.

“I seem to recall we were supposed to have a choice in the matter,” Kim glared.

“What I want to know,” Naomi added, “is who is getting set up here?”

Vincent gave her a quelling look as he escorted Victor to Alex’s side. Victor gestured for her to sip something on. Vincent addressed her, as she was squirming back into her bathing suit, “Alex, you’re the same age as our Alex, but my other daughters can both fulfill the obligation of our families.” As Alex straightened, he took her by the shoulder and turned her to face his three daughters. One by one, he pointed them out. “This is Kimberly; she’s nineteen. Naomi is seventeen,” both girls bowed their heads as they were named, resigned to the familiar routine. The third girl threw her head back and regarded Alex intently, as she was named, “and Alexandrea just turned sixteen.”

“Girls,” Victoria came up behind them and advised motherly, “Alex is the only boy in your generation who can offer your children an enhanced genetic profile. He’s the most promising prospective mate the families have to offer.” She looked at Alex and smiled as she asserted, “Perhaps the only true equal to any of you.”

“He’s a girl,” Naomi protested ironically.

“He’s so young,” Kim added in dismay.

“Dad,” Naomi turned to her father and disputed reasonably, “I realize you want the best for us, but Kim and I really need to keep our eyes open for men our own age—or older, preferably—as opposed to younger *girls*.” Alex, in spite of the fact that she was not keen on marriage, still was stung. Too much a boy, her manhood stirred in resentment. “I know you made arrangements to marry him to Alex. I don’t think we should compromise what really is the best match. Besides, she’s *perfect* for Alex.” Alex raised an eyebrow as she saw Alexandrea twitch and glare at Kim as she nodded enthusiastically. In one shared assertion, the elder sisters managed to sink axes into both girls—though Alex could not imagine how Alexandrea could be quite so upset at their remark about her.

Alexandrea’s parents were staring at her, begging her mutely not to make a scene. Her sisters looked on in anticipation, expecting it. Alexandrea surprised them all, however, suddenly lighting up, and grinning. “For once, Naomi,” she announced, “you’re right. She is perfect. I’ll take her just the way she is.” She turned to look at Alex; her scowl was replaced by a warm and welcoming smile. Alex returned that smile uneasily.

“Wonderful,” Vincent beamed. His youngest daughter’s firm assertion seemed to settle his doubts. The other adults and the two older girls also breathed in relief. “I’m so glad that went smoothly,” he asserted, clapping Victor on the shoulder and shaking his hand. Alex was expecting to hear the gavel slam down, and a voice shout out, “Sold!” Her limbs felt weak and watery as the man grabbed her hand and pumped it up and down enthusiastically. He smiled down, looking even more like her father and crowed, “Congratulations, Alex.” He reached out and pulled his daughter to his side in an abrupt hug, adding to her, with a tear in his eye, “And, of course, you too, Alex.”

Alexandrea just shook her head wryly, and eased back onto her feet as he went on to hug his wife and announced a round of drinks. People were filing out and Alex was still quivering and mute in the center of the room. She was not entirely sure that the matter had gone well. She blinked and then protested faintly, as the absurdity of the situation really sunk in, “Are you all forgetting that I am a girl?” Her query met a wall of backs, drowned out by their own excited chatter. The wedding plans were already being discussed. A hand stopped her before she could catch them and repeat her question.

“Hey,” Alexandrea, gave her a searching look, advising, “Let it go.”

“But this is ridiculous,” Alex protested. “This is all a bit premature. Maybe I was born a boy, and maybe that’s what I am used to, but right now,” she stressed, waving an arm in front of herself, “I am a girl. It’s not worth the headache to fight it, and I don’t think it’s good for me to try and deny it. I might have to stay this way, and that would make marrying you impossible.” Alex huffed in agitation and then swept her pile of clothes off the floor.

Alexandrea smiled in sympathy, and prodded her gently, “They’re happy. If this arrangement satisfies them, I’m satisfied. I think that neatly closes off the topic of arranged marriages.” Alex paused and searched her face, wondering what she was really thinking, but not daring to peek. She tugged Alex in the other direction, and confided, “I really have had enough of this, haven’t you?”

“You know,” Alex mused slowly, finally absorbing the fact that this engagement did indeed rid her of the constant nuisance of unwanted suitors. More, it neatly intercepted any thoughts of farming her off on a boy. Having had no end of trouble with families trying to pin their daughters on her, when she was a boy, she decided she could agree perfectly with that sentiment. “You’re right about that,” she finished, allowing the girl to drag her out to the back yard. Alexandrea took her firmly in hand and continued making friendly overtures. It seemed she had been told a few things about her, and shared an interest in martial arts—if not her level of obsession. While they were warming up for a little practice bout, she asked Alexandrea if she was really so indifferent to the possibility that Alex might not regain her manhood. “I mean, they can push this wedding through on the grounds that I can father a child. I can hold form long enough to make it through a wedding, and perform stud duties. That seems to be all they really want. In that case, you would pretty much have a girl for a husband.”

Alexandrea glanced up and replied while continuing to stretch, “No offense, but I am actually relieved you’re a girl.” Alex raised an eyebrow at that. The other girl sighed and smiled reassuringly, “Alex, just be yourself. Don’t worry about it.”

“I have to worry about it,” Alex persisted, “I’m in way over my head here!”

Alexandrea stopped and faced her squarely. As far as she was concerned, the whole business of seeking an equal or a better for marriage was absurd. It seemed more important, when confronting someone who truly was one’s equal, to make that person one’s friend. Since she really hoped Alex 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 Alex her friend was to accept Alex for herself. “Look,” she said, after sorting out her thoughts, “I hardly know you. This has been dropped on us by our parents, and I am not going to add to our problems by heaping great expectations on you. I meant it when I said I’d take you just the way you are. We both have a bit of growing up left to do, so there is no need to rush into anything. For right now, let’s just get to know each other, alright?”

Alex tilted her head and considered that. She sniffed and let the matter go with a nod.

Alexandrea grinned at her. “Besides,” she pointed out, “I’ve been through what you’re going through, and could just as easily be male to compliment your female.” Alex looked startled. It was the first time she considered what kind of relationship free gendered psionics could actually embrace. It made her wonder how open minded she was about the girl who was so accepting of her. Alexandrea had gone on to add, “But that would be only out of love, not duty. If there is no love in the matter, I’m not marrying at all. I don’t care what they say. Obligation does not outweigh love. For now,” she suggested, “we should not even worry about it.” Before stepping onto the mat and attempting to beat each other up, they shook hands and made an agreement to give friendship a try first.