Avatars - 4

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Opening her body was merely the beginning. Sex was not an act, but an activity, and it certainly did not lend itself to conversation. All communication was though touch, body to body or mind to mind. Any words they uttered were charged with meaning but phrased in passion, inchoate. Alex gave herself to the wonder of penetration, the almost unbelievable fact that another human being was actually inside her. Physically. Only pregnancy could enhance that awareness, and she was grateful that such a possibility had been arrested far short of conception, for she found that the consequence would have appealed to her in her present state of mind.

As appealing as the motion was, the mechanics of sex were simple. It was the consciousness of moving in tandem with another body, and feeling the awesome echoes sucking the mind deeper into the body as sensation thrust deeper into the brain, that transformed movement into music. A gentle teasing rhythm was endlessly tantalizing, alone worth pursuing forever, and yet the score could be so varied. A sudden crescendo, a plummeting surge, there were mountains and valleys upon rivers and oceans of tacit mystery to explore. It was primal and profound.

Alex embraced her “Alexander” with no fear of losing her manhood. Having sex finally opened her completely to the possibilities of being female, and allowed her to embrace it whole-heartedly. The boy inside her looked on in smug delight, not one whit discouraged. It finally dawned on her that her manhood was perfectly secure; supported and reinforced by long hours of training, sweet moments of adventure and repose, and harsh confrontations with other boys.

Aside from fatherhood, and old age, he had become all that a boy could be.

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

This epiphany came at the peak of her passion’s promise.

As she panted into Alexander’s shoulder, she confided her revelation. “I needed this. I needed to understand. It’s not about being male of female, but being whole and free to express myself.” She felt her friend carefully withdraw, and watched her assume her natural form. “I can be both,” Alex announced, seeing now that Alexandrea had realized the answer, and wondered if she even knew it. “I should be both, but,” she sighed. “Not yet,” she asserted, explaining what she believed she needed to do. “I realized myself as a boy. I need to realize myself as a girl. I became who I am by giving the male side of me my full attention. I owe it to myself to commit as fully to this.”

Alexandrea assured her, “I’ll teach you everything; anything you want to know about being a girl. At the same time,” she admitted, “there are a lot of ways my own development could benefit from your inspiration.” Alex smiled thoughtfully, as she realized what Alexandrea was confessing. Taking Alex had made Alexandrea more at peace, more fully integrated, with her own manhood.

“There is one exception,” Alex murmured, meeting her eye playfully. “I seem to recall a few things I never got around to as a boy.” Alexandrea raised an eyebrow, quickening to the suggestion that was coming. “I’ve never had a girlfriend, for one,” Alex drawled, pushing the other girl onto her back and leaning over her, “and of course sex was something I never found an opportunity to explore.” Alexandrea held her breath as Alex shifted before her. The look, which had been so appealing in the girl’s face, was devastating in the cast of a young man. He leaned further forward to kiss her forehead and finished, “But the most significant thing of all is, I believe I owe you.”

“I do believe you’re right,” Alexandrea agreed breathlessly.

To lie back and receive Alex—who found to his delight that arousal enabled him to be male without the raging headache—was bliss. Alexandrea was pleased to note that, once again, Alex returned her favor with interest. For all the times she had embraced herself, it had never been quite the touch of a man. She had always understood how to give herself what she wanted, but she had never guessed fully what a man’s passion might offer. Her realization, that sudden recognition of the man in Alex, was now fully substantiated. They hardly slept, taking each other in turns throughout the night. Eventually they noticed the early light of dawn and stopped to change the sheets. They even paused to air out the room before finally curling up in each other’s arms and falling asleep, an hour before the rest of the house woke up for the day.

Alexandrea cuddled with Alex in the late morning hours, while each came to terms with her own self-realization. At the same time, they were struggling privately with their feelings. Alexandrea was more familiar with sex, the experience of it, but not with the consequences. In that regard, she was in the same position as Alex. They now knew each other more intimately than they had ever known anyone before. An odd assertion, since psi opened doors to intimacy on an order that completely transcended physical contact. There were parallels, Alexandrea thought, between holding another’s mind in hers and holding another’s body in hers, but she had found that a mind was not truly vulnerable in that position. A mind had profound natural defenses, which could be bypassed by another mind only with great skill and finesse, whereas the body, in itself enticingly vulnerable, made the mind more vulnerable. The evolution of the mind-body interface had made it piercingly so.

It was that vulnerability, the awareness that she had been touched so deeply, known so intimately, that turned each girl’s thoughts to the emotional fall out. They had protected their bodies, but had failed to grasp that their hearts were also vulnerable to impregnation. Each contemplated the seed that had been implanted within her by the other, and wondered what emotion it would grow to embody. As Alexandrea’s hand drifted wonderingly over her body, Alex remembered the last thing her friend had said to her in the bathroom.

“I think this is more than just sex,” she addressed it finally.

Alexandrea’s hand paused, “Do you want to talk about it?

“I think we have to,” Alex responded, twisting in Alexandrea’s embrace to look into her face. “As far as the situation we’re in, I suppose this is a good thing,” she began, with a faint smile. It was not like such intimacy was out of place. Without quite saying so, it had been fully endorsed by both families. “Being engaged,” she specified, “I think it’s nice that there is so much physical magnetism between us. It’s almost overpowering,” she traced her fingers along Alexandrea’s jaw, down her neck and to the hollow of her throat, “but I like it.”

“I love it,” Alexandrea asserted, catching her hand and kissing Alex on the forehead.

“But you don’t love me,” Alex countered gently.

“Well,” Alexandrea looked back, gripping Alex’s hand uncertainly. “I don’t know. I don’t know you very well. I want to say yes, emphatically, but I can’t say it if I am not positive that I mean it,” her eyes entreated understanding.

“I know,” Alex said, confirming it. “I want to say it. I want to feel it. I want to be in love,” her voice throbbed as the words brushed across her heartstrings, “but I don’t want to try and force it.” Alexandrea nodded, and closed her eyes. Alex studied her face, conscious of the fact that they were in deep agreement. She smiled and added in explanation, “I like you too much.”

Alexandrea opened her eyes again, and looked at her, “That’s funny.”

“It’s true,” Alex said quickly, blushing. For once, she was searching for words to express something she understood very clearly. “I am used to fast friendships, but I’ve never known someone I could be so utterly open with. I don’t know if that’s part of becoming female or if it’s this chemistry between us,” she paused to examine that. The words spoke of doubt, but this was one time when she felt no doubts. She felt very clear headed, and asserted strongly, “It’s more than chemistry. I don’t know you very well, but everything I do know about you I respect and admire.”

Alexandrea shifted her weight, and stretched her arms around Alex, “I feel it too.”

Alex heard her own understanding in Alexandrea’s voice, and asked, “Is this love?”

Alexandrea pulled her close, and considered the question very carefully. In all honesty, she believed that they had touched each other too deeply not to love each other. But love was a complex animal. Alexandrea loved a lot of people, her mother and father, her sisters, many of her friends, and people she had never met, but whose fame and accomplishments earned her respect and admiration. People who touched her and for whom she was grateful, merely because they existed. Among the people she thought of, whose feelings she regarded carefully, and whose opinions of her were critical to her own self-image, Alex had jumped to the top of the list. Alex understood that, and no doubt felt the same with regard to her. As a compassionate soul, such love was her stock in life. The confusion they struggled with was not whether there was any love between them, but whether of not they were *in* love. Her opinion of that was straightforward. “There would not be any question if it was.”

“Is this friendship?” Alex asked, running her hand down Alexandrea’s flank.

“It’s way more than friendship,” Alexandrea declared, thrilling at the sensation. She shifted her hand to the small of Alex’s back and pulled her closer, flattening their bellies against each other. “But, I’ll settle for being deeply in friendship with you,” she purred, capturing Alex’s mouth.

Alex replied through the kiss, “Deeply… madly… totally in friendship.” Alexandrea bit her lip before she could say more. Alex shut up and returned the kiss in full measure. After a moment, they broke for air and she added thoughtfully, “I think it can become love.”

“It’s certainly a good start,” Alexandrea commented in equal tones. In a silent voice, she invited Alex to share her thoughts of friendship. She had so many questions about the girl, and the life she had known as a boy, and verbalization was too slow to utter them without stumbling. It was a swift and stormy exchange, excited as the tides of two minds made contact on a broad front. Each offered up moments from her life, guided by the flux and flow of inquisitiveness in the other. Telepathic intercourse was as rich and compelling as any physical intimacy, without the consuming sensuality. Such intangible stimulation evoked strings of epiphanies instead of orgasms, but strangely, those climaxes of understanding were as riveting and intently sought. What the world witnessed as one drawn out kiss, they experienced as a testimonial tour of each other’s lives.

As they pulled apart, they could no longer say they barely knew each other. The admiration they had felt for each other was now a promise fulfilled. Their initial opinion of each other had not been based on a façade, but a natural, if guarded, face honestly supported by the underlying structure of their lives. Alex smiled; it had been interesting to relive so much of her life before a witness, at the same time witnessing as much of another’s life. It accented how much she had changed in but a week.

“Oh, that reminds me—“ Alex jumped up suddenly. Alexandrea protested at the sudden disengagement. Alex apologized and explained herself, as she mentally tracked down her duffel bag. Their thoughts of friendship had reminded her of the two boys who had witnessed her change. Alexandrea reviewed the scenes she had witnessed pertinent to the event, and realized that Alex had made promises to call them as soon as she arrived at her destination, or write to them with all the details of her adventures as a girl. As there was not much she felt at liberty to discuss on an open line, she told them to expect a letter. Unless she got that letter in the mail that morning, it would not arrive at the promised time.

Alexandrea slipped out of bed and guided Alex over to her desk, providing an assortment of pens and classy, if feminine stationary. As Alex thanked her and sat down, she announced, “I’m going to start a bath.”

“Okay, I’ll be right there,” Alex promised, as Alexandrea slipped into the bathroom. Caught between her duty to write and her desire to follow Alexandrea, Alex asserted, “I’ll write quick.” Alexandrea smiled and shook her had before closing the door behind her. Alex quickly focused her thoughts, and composed a letter to them describing the high points of the preceding day, and an assessment of her adaptation to life as a girl, editing anything that struck her as confidential or erotic. The truth about psi was never written down, and the truth about herself would simply shock the boys and betray Alexandrea’s confidence.

Alex suspected that the bathroom rules accounted for Alexandrea’s sister’s expressed opinion of the girl. The two seemed disappointed, as they joined them, watching Alex and Alexandrea scrub each other down efficiently and soak innocently in the tub. Alex wondered if either suspected how much of the night had been consumed by their efforts to work their intense attraction out of their systems. An air of restrained amusement possessed Kim and Naomi, suggesting that neither had gotten much sleep for eaves dropping on the whole affair. It gave Alex a sense of being a character in a book, her thoughts and actions open for the world to muse upon. It was one thing to be shamelessly unaware of such omniscient observation, but confronting it so consciously, she asked herself if perhaps she ought to feel some shame.

Rejecting the notion at once, she understood why the older girls had revealed their amusement and disappointment. Remembering what Alexandrea had said about girls, particularly about sisters, Alex understood they had felt a duty to observe. They were testing Alex, and not simply just standing by ready to intervene on their youngest sister’s behalf. Alex had avoided the easy banter, the bathroom conversation between the girls. It was shameless and friendly, and Alex had simply tried to absorb the rules of discourse. Considering her present thoughts, she matched the tone they had set and announced that she was still far too aroused to go out in public.

As Alex had suspected, no one batted an eye. Kim simply turned to Alexandrea, observing that she had made Alex her concern; she had first right of refusal. Alexandrea suggested that they all had some tension to work off, dismissing the established order of precedence. It was another intimacy motivated by Alex’s need, becoming acquainted with the friendly physical intimacy Alexandrea enjoyed with her sisters, and which her memories had detailed. It was not, as the boy in her initially suspected, an orgy of sisters. The girls approached the subject of sex structurally, as an art or a practice, and aside from the level of stimulation, Alex might have been in a classroom. Even the intrusion of a masculine form did not shatter that image, for the girls clearly used the form as a tool both necessary and appropriate to practicing the art. Only Alex did not assume the aspect, since she had resolved to approach everything, with the exception Alexandrea, entirely as a girl.

The integrity of her commitment had earned her acceptance into their coven of womanhood. The regarded her, from that moment on, as the girl who had mastered the mystery of being a boy. They did her the courtesy of accepting her entirely as a girl, never imposing on her the assumption that her life had made her a boy, and a boy forever more she must be. Alex finally felt able to express her curiosity, about herself, about girls and being female in general. Kim told her that the practices she had instituted were not universal among girls, but had been established many times in history. As psionics, an enlightened approach to sex was necessary for both health and survival, particularly for females—however they happened to come about being female. Alex considered that as she followed Alexandrea back to her room. Alexandrea filled her in on her plans for the day, making suggestions as they dug through her wardrobe and got dressed.

Bathed and clothed, they agreed they were suitably armored for public appearances. Their erotic impulses were still simmering in the background, a low, hot tension they could at least bear in a world not governed by Kim’s Bathroom Rules. Clasping hands, they led each other out to breakfast.

“Good morning,” Virginia Morgan greeted them cheerfully as they entered the kitchen. Both of the girls were bright eyed and smiling. Virginia found herself staring at Alex. The girl positively glowed. Cued by their responses, she correctly identified the two of them and addressed Alex, admiringly, “You look chipper. Is that one of Alex’s dresses?”

“I am at peace with the world,” Alex declared happily, and then whirling around to flair the skirt in delight, answered interrogatively, “Yes, do you like it?”

“Very nice,” Virginia beamed approvingly.

Victor entered the kitchen at this point, drawn by the exchange. He quickly identified his daughter by the familiar, long braid. He kept his thoughts in check as he noted that his daughter was apparently feeling quite female this morning. “I see you’re expanding your boundaries,” he mused aloud.

She stopped whirling and bounded lightly towards the table. Alex picked up his concerned undertone and responded quickly, covering for her behavior, “Just a normal part of being a girl. You know, blend with the natives.”

“You look far too happy with yourself to be merely under cover,” he shot back, nailing her in the broadsides. The bounce went out of her step and she visibly deflated. As she opened her mouth, he quickly interjected, “I am not criticizing, I think your mother would be thrilled. “

“You think?” she begged for assurance, grinning quickly. “Too bad she’s missing this.”

“Well,” he began, following the girls to the table and sitting down, “I’ve made other arrangements, so she’ll have to come here if she wants to see you blooming.” Alex raised an eyebrow, sliding into her seat while fixing him with her curious look. Virginia came up behind them, utensils in hand, to set a place for each of them. Victor declined, having eaten with the rest of the family much earlier.

“What’s up?” Alex asked, as the woman floated back to the stove.

Victor picked up a large envelope, which was lying on the table between them, and opened it. Pulling out the contents and passing them over to Alex, he announced, “As of this morning, you are now Alexandrea Virgin Morgan, Alex’s twin.” Alex gave a surprised look and took the offered stack. She flipped through the forms and papers in amazement. A driver’s license and social security card fell out as she leafed through the rest. Medical records, birth certificate, report cards for at least nine years worth of school, she spread them out in front of her. Noticing that the birth date was the same as her own, she quirked an eyebrow. Alexandrea and herself practically *were* twins. Studying the material, she had some notion how such a detailed background had evolved. Her father had not simply wished it up and handed it to her. A large chunk of Alexandrea’s life was being handed over to her, her father explained, for the duration of her evolution as a girl.

“Wait,” Alex interrupted him, as she realized, “isn’t that Alex’s name?”

“Yes,” Virginia answered her protest, leaning over her shoulder to deposit food on the girl’s plate. Virginia moved around to serve Alexandrea and explained, placing a hand on her daughter’s shoulder, “She inherited it from her big sister.”

Virginia obviously did not mean Kim or Naomi. Alex blinked, and studied the papers before her, certain that there was an answer right there but it would not resolve. Instead, she looked to Alexandrea and asked, perplexed, “You have another sister?”

“My real twin,” Alexandrea murmured sadly. “She died as I was being born.”

Victor turned Alex’s attention away from the girl’s remembered grief. He shuffled through the papers and singled one out for attention, pointing out, “The death certificate was rescinded seven years later.” Alex asked why, and Virginia surprised her with the answer.

Virginia pointed out that Alex’s transformation had been instinctive, and then said she had endured an instinctive translation too. Like Alex, she had fought it without understanding what was going on. Too late, she discovered the answer. A few days before Alexandrea had turned seven, Virginia had spontaneously regressed. She explained it as a kind of regeneration, what she called regenesis. Her husband had acted quickly, seeing she needed an identity to cover her transformation until she could figure out why she suddenly became seven years old at the same time as her daughter. Vincent had engaged in a bit of historical revision, taking advantage of the fact that Alexandrea was a twin, and they could clearly see how closely she took after her mother. Virginia used the name for a while. It took her a few years to figure out how to regain her adult stature without having to go about it the hard way.

When Alex split, they added, she took it over and kept the identity alive. Alex asked why Alexandrea had split, and the girl confessed she did not know. As a young girl, she had been remote. She sort of lived in a dream world and played only with her imaginary friend. She suspected that she had suffered a schism and embodied that imaginary friend to compensate for her loneliness. Alex tucked that thought away and considered the present consequence of Alexandrea’s schism. The name they had given Virginia, and were now offering to Alex, was identical to Alexandrea’s given name—and virtually identical to the one Alex grew up with. Alex pointed out that sharing the same name would lead to problems, since she was not in fact Alexandrea. Her point was acknowledged and they suggested the two of them use the nicknames Alexandrea had given herself, Alle and Anne.

“The idea, originally, had been to name them both Alexandrea and call the girls Alex and Andrea,” Virginia explained, referring to the original naming, before giving birth. “I wanted to have a name I could use for either of them if I could not tell them immediately apart. Vincent argued against it. One of you,” she looked at her daughter, ”had to be named for the founder of your bloodline, Alexander the Red. If your sister had lived, you would have been named Elizabeth.” Virginia smiled at the girl’s shocked look, and she turned back to Alex, “When she died, Alex ended up with the name entirely to herself. Until I turned into a girl. I used Andrea, since she was already used to being called Alex. When she split, she insisted that using Andrea made her feel like she was trying to be me. It made more sense to her to abbreviate both names and adjust to them at the same time.”

Alex fingered the death certificate, lost in thought. If not for that poor lost twin, things might have been a bit more difficult for the Morgan family. She looked over at Alexandrea, thought about her “other” and wondered hard for a few moments. She cleared her throat, and resolved not to voice her thoughts. No one else had even hinted at it. Instead, she tapped the document pointedly and looked at Virginia. “And no one ever caught you at this game?” Alex demanded, incredulous.

“As I said,” Virginia reiterated, “Officially, the girl—you, now—was abducted at birth and recovered when she was seven years old. The abductor, it turned out, had used a false identity, but criminals do that.”

“The abductor never existed.” Alex protested.

“Except on paper and in certain people’s memory,” Victor asserted. “You know that cover identities are one of the things we are allowed to use our powers to obtain. There are too many of us who have been alive too long to get by without such measures.”

“Really?” she looked at them suspiciously, “How old are you guys, anyway?”

“It’s a question that is not asked, young lady,” Virginia reprimanded in that tone Alex remembered from the previous afternoon. She flinched and Virginia gave her a forgiving look, “As it happens, I am sure your father was speaking more in general than about any one we know specifically.”

“Anyway,” Victor continued, “since you have a ready made cover, Alex, you can accompany your ‘sister’ to school. You’re scheduled for testing and last minute admission.”

“School?” she cried in dismay, “It’s summer.”

“Yes,” Virginia intercepted, before Victor could lash the girl. She finally sat down and then reached for the girl’s hand. “Summer classes at the University Annex start July first. Don’t be like that,” she requested, softly and firmly squeezing her fingers. Alex composed her face, wondering how much distress she had conveyed. Virginia spoke encouragingly, “The annex is an excellent social environment for you to observe other girls and sort yourself out before regular classes start in the fall.” Again, Alex’s face betrayed discontent. She bit her lip, suspecting that her opinion of public schools would not earn her any points.

“But I already have my equivalencies,” she appealed to her father.

“Actually,” Victor smiled wickedly, “Alexander Nevin has his equivalencies. You simply have a superior private education that will make your senior year of high school a breeze.”

“Uh,” Alex paused.

“Think about it,” Virginia urged, with another warm squeeze. “Cliques, clubs, dances, parties, sporting events,” she sighed and rolled her eyes. ”That’s what these over grown day care centers are really good for. Take advantage of it.”

While Alex was thinking it over, Alexandrea reached over and pulled out one of the report cards. She slid it in front of Alex and placed her finger at the bottom of the course summary. “Technically, we both have enough credits to graduate already,” she noted cheerfully. Alex weighed her endorsement. She reminded herself she was a girl, would be attending as a girl. She would not necessarily be plagued by fights and confrontations with petty tyrants and chronic bullies who vowed eternal warfare upon him after publicly failing to cow or subdue a slender, androgynous boy who just happened to be smarter and better trained than them. She looked up to meet Alexandrea’s eyes, silently asking her why she wanted to risk one more year of hell. Alexandrea sensed the question and shrugged, “I wanted to compete in gymnastics one more year, and enjoy the social life.”

“Alright, I’m sold.” She picked up her fork and prepared to take a bite. Before she could, she remembered what she had needed to see her father for that morning. She caught his hand as he rose, and asked, “Dad, do you have the address for the Macallister’s place?”

Alex got the address of Jean’s father’s dojo from Victor and mailed the letter she had written before breakfast on the way to the main campus of the university. She also carried along the envelope containing the massed records supporting her new identity. She would need it, since she was going in to take a battery of tests, and make a last minute enrollment for summer classes. She could hardly believe that she would be starting the next week. The classes she would be taking were all out at the satellite campus, located within walking distance of the Morgan home. The main campus was on the other side of the hills, in Berkeley. Virginia drove them, dropping them off together. Alexandrea could wander off campus and shop for a couple of hours while Alex was tied up in the testing center, and then come back to collect her. There was a shuttle bus connecting the remote sites to the main campus, which she and Alex could take back to the annex.

As planned, Alexandrea was waiting outside when Alex came out and announced, with immense relief, “All done.” In spite of having no preparation, she had found the tests simple enough, but the testing process itself had been arduous.

“Great,” Alexandrea smiled. She took Alex by the hand and led her to the bus stop. They sat down and leaned against each other while they waited for the bus. They did not talk much, mostly Alexandrea responding to Alex’s comments as people twisted their necks to stare at them as they walked by. She was adjusting to the world looking different to her, but she was still becoming acquainted with how differently the world now looked at her. It was a relief to slip into the back seat of the almost vacant bus. Alexandrea put her back to the window and pulled Alex back against her. Alex relaxed into her embrace and dozed through the ride out to the annex. She was actually startled when Alexandrea woke her to announce their arrival. “We still have some time before practice,” she announced as they got off the bus. Alex took her hand and accompanied Alexandrea to the gymnasium. “I like to go in early when all the equipment is free,” she confessed, when Alex asked her why she was in a hurry, considering what she had just said about being early.

Alex tilted her head at that, sensing a level of commitment in Alexandrea which Alex held towards martial arts, and then asked, “How long have you been doing gymnastics?”

“I think I started when I was nine. I needed something to focus my mind on my body,” she confessed. Seeing the look of sudden appreciation on Alex’s face, she added proudly, “I was in serious competition for a few years before I started getting my height.”

“That’s the problem with gymnastics,” Alex frowned. Like martial arts, gymnastics had the potential to be a life long commitment, one that kept the body and mind young, but the competition was so intense that adolescence excluded the majority of girls and often concluded their athletic careers. “But you’re still competing,” Alex observed.

“I never stopped,” she asserted, “I just lost my sponsorship. No one would believe I could compensate.” She ducked her head and shoulder and executed a flying cartwheel, without even breaking stride. As she came upright, she had a vengeful grin on her face, declaring proudly, “I took my high school team to the state championships twice and last year we made it to the national finals. That’s how I ended up here,” she pointed out. “The university started a special program, to justify keeping its athletics funding, and I got scouted.” She quickly ran down the details of the event and the period of courtship as the university tempted her to join. Along with a number of other girls, she had held out until the school confirmed that they had acquired a renowned gymnastics trainer who would take the young program seriously. “I started in the spring,” Alexandrea told Alex, outlining the program and its evolution, “and arrangements were made to keep the gym open to us through the break.”

Alex put together the schedule she must have been bound to for the level of activity she was describing, and whistled, “Where do you find the time to fit this in with school, and everything else?”

“Hey, there were two of me, remember?”

“What’s it like?” she asked after a long pause. “I mean, being twined.”

Alexandrea studied her for a moment, considering her answer. “At first,” she began, “it’s a bit disorienting. I mean, my awareness encompasses both of me, but my consciousness is divided.” It was rare that a psionic tried to put into words the incomparable experience of a psionic phenomenon. There were those who argued that a language for such things needed to be created, but with a little effort, the experience could be expressed in plain English. At least to someone who had experienced psi, and who could draw the necessary inferences. She trusted Alex to fill in the blanks and gave it her best shot. “On an unconscious or subconscious level, I am always synchronizing, but at first, I was confronting myself a great deal, trying to bridge the gap. It’s strange to stand outside of yourself,” she remarked. “You find it hard not to constantly touch yourself, physically and mentally.” She paused and considered what she had learned from seven years lived side by side. “If I don’t fight it, I can perceive what my other perceives, and my mind starts operating in tandem. That’s when I really am in both places at once. Most of the time,” she asserted, “I just focus on my immediate attention, being both places but not consciously confronting it. That’s when I am really twinned. When I am like that, I am two people. I found that the most helpful approach. When I am like that, it’s like I’m my own best friend, or like real twins.”

Alex considered that for a moment then confided her own thoughts. “I think I’d have to be like that to take my father’s suggestion,” she said softly, almost to herself.

“What do you mean?” Alexandrea inquired.

“My dad suggested I be both, a boy and a girl. That way, the girl side would not consume the boy side.”

“I’ve only done that for sex,” Alexandrea contrasted thoughtfully. When she had tried to walk on the other side, she had not possessed her present duality. She had found that it was far easier to be a tomboy than a boy with feminine habits or characteristics. In any case, the difference in how she had been treated had shown her a side of boys she had despised. She shrugged her shoulders, “I guess I didn’t want to really develop a boy side. Do you think you’d really consume Alexander?”

“I already am. I *am* Alexander,” she asserted pointedly. “Becoming a girl didn’t change that. The more I adapt to this body, this perspective, the further I go beyond who I was,” she confessed. She took a few steps in silence, once more reviewing the option. There was a strong appeal, and she truly envied Alexandrea her duality, but the boy in her did not want to withdraw from this strange evolution. “I don’t know,” she shrugged. “Dividing myself up seems more like denying part of myself the benefit of this new experience.”

“But you said—“

“I know,” Alex cut her off gently. “My point was: I need to develop fully. The only way I could continue to be Alexander is if Alexander understands me as well as I understand him.” She froze for a moment, then blinked and shook her head, “Wow, that bent my mind.”

“That’s okay,” Alexandrea grinned, throwing her arm over Alex’s shoulders. “I understood what you meant. I am used to the dichotomy,” she rolled her eyes and giggled in sympathy. She shook her head and urged Alex back into motion.

“The problem is,” Alex went on, “I am one person, but there are two different forms to express myself. I almost have to be both to really be myself. I just don’t have the experience to be a girl equal to myself as a boy.”

“I wonder,” Alexandrea began, running through the progression of their conversation from their initial meeting. As Alex expressed her thoughts on her evolution, Alexandrea had found herself agreeing with Alex’s instinctive wisdom. At the same time, she was reevaluating herself, “By your understanding, I am neglecting my boy side. Do you think I should do what you are doing?”

Alex made an uncertain objection, “I kind of like you the way you are.”

“So do I. But that’s beside the point. I am not the man you are. By comparison, you’re closer to being a girl than I am to being a boy, even though I have had the option for nine years and ignored it. It’s sort of upsetting to see that.”

“I don’t know.” Alex reviewed her own experience and wondered if she would be so committed to her new existence if it had not imposed itself on her so profoundly. Alexandrea had already faced that, and she had clearly made her decision with regard to who she needed to be. She seemed to be integrating her masculinity rather than specializing her understanding of it. That was the point she needed to emphasize, “If you really needed it, it would express itself unquestionably. I can’t just switch back and forth with impunity. I get headaches just from thinking about being a boy. Whenever I am, my head is in a vice. I think the truth is, girls have more freedom to be androgynous. You can express the male side of you freely, even as a girl. Sex is the only thing you have to actually change for.”

“Maybe. Still, there is an opportunity here, and I don’t want to miss it.”

“What?”

“Well,” she almost hesitated, “right now, you’re using my spare identity to be a girl. You’re not using your male identity, and I have an extra body I have to stuff in a closet to avoid causing problems.” Alex conceded that point. After years divided, suddenly, forcefully being reunited had to be a little uncomfortable, even if she wanted it. Alexandrea pursued her point, “I could use your identity, and my extra body, and follow your example,” she observed.

“I suppose, but that still presents the risk of schism I would face if I split myself up to maintain my own identity,” Alex warned.

“That, and I would probably be competing with myself over you,” Alexandrea predicted with an odd lilt of humor. Alex was rather enamored of her friend in both forms, and the notion of taking Alexandrea on in both forms at once sent a pleasant chill up her spine. Alexandrea actually saw the hair stand up on her arms and neck.

Alex shivered in delight and offered generously, “Well, I wasn’t planning on splitting up, so if you want it, it’s yours.”

“Thanks. Here we are,” Alexandrea closed off the discussion by announcing. Before ducking into the locker room, she quickly oriented her friend, “I’ll be in the gym, the pool is through here and up on the left.”

“Thanks,” Alex smiled, squeezing Alexandrea’s hand as she pulled away, “I’ll have a look around while you’re getting ready. I might want to watch you for a bit.” Alexandrea returned her smile with interest, delighted that Alex expressed the interest. As Alexandrea went through the door to the girls’ locker room, she paused and smiled. A posted notice had caught her eye, reminding her of something she had forgotten. She announced to Alex that she was in for a treat. Some of the candidates for the summer session were going to be trying out that day. Alex slipped over to read the notice and put her hand on her hips. She screw up her face trying to decide whether to indulge in a short swim first, or wait and possibly encourage Alexandrea to join her when her practice was over.

While Alexandrea was changing in the locker room, Alex wandered into the gym. She was wearing just a bathing suit under a light cotton dress, since Alexandrea had suggested she could use the pool during practice—their pool, like their new house, was still under construction. One way or another, Alex was going to go swimming that day, she had not been in the water, save for bathing, since the day she had changed. As she swept her eyes over the large mat and surrounding equipment, Alex was struck by another temptation. There was no one else in the gym. Alexandrea had noted how she liked to arrive early and get in a little extra time warming up and trying out bits of choreography. Finding herself alone, she kicked off her shoes, slipped the dress—like a big, oversized shirt—over her head, limbered up a bit, and worked through a few katas on the big mat.

He slipped up on her completely unnoticed and clapped a hand on her shoulder. Surprised, her reflexes took over. She grabbed his hand, twisted and threw him to the mat—just as she would at any unprovoked attack. Her guard was up, ready to meet his reply as he bounced off the mat and came at her feet and fists, elbows and knees. Initially, she had the full confidence of her exceptional experience and training, but she quickly realized that her styles had picked up many flaws and lost much of their effectiveness, thanks to her change. It had not been so obvious when sparring with Alexandrea, but it glared at her now. Her opponent, however, moved flawlessly, breaking through her guard repeatedly, and landing blows solid enough to really hurt if she had not known how to deal with them.

She made some quick adjustments, and managed to penetrate his defenses at least three times before he took her down and delivered the killing blow—the blow that would have killed her, had he not stopped a hair away from her throat. Alex gulped in air, as the realization sank in that she had been soundly defeated. In such a vulnerable position, it took her a moment to work up the nerve to look up into her attacker’s face.

He was smiling and looking pleased as he offered her a hand back up.

Alex took the hand cautiously, trying to decide what had just happened. He regarded her with familiarity, but she was certain she had never met an artist like him. Still, he was an artist, a true master, she acknowledged immediately. She understood suddenly that he had simply tested her, like a real master would, without preamble. It was in fact a professional compliment to be attacked in such a way by such a man. She bowed at once and grinned at the two things his opening comment revealed.

“You surprise me, Alex,” he finally spoke, “hiding that level of ability. I always suspected you could fight. What a shame you were trained by someone who only knows how to fight like a man. It puts you at a disadvantage.” She blinked at him, and he quickly added,” I would assume your instructor was a man, and that he did his best with you. A man who could modify his teaching, but neglected to, would be a monster.”

He obviously mistook her for Alexandrea. That he found it disappointing that a master with so much skill to teach had failed to adapt it to a female body was hardly offensive. Her father had tried to address it, but only now did she finally get it. She agreed with him, and then pointed out, “When I started I was built like any other child, boy or girl, and well,” she chucked good naturedly, “I guess you could say I physically grew out of my skills.” She let out an easy breath and smiled up at him, it was essentially the truth. Fortunate, since she was not fond of lying to people.

He returned her bow, and offered magnanimously, “If you wish to correct this deficit, I suggest you stay after practice.” He was visibly startled as Alexandrea spoke up from the sidelines announcing that he would have to convince her sister to join the class first. He did a double take, and Alexandrea introduced Alex as her twin sister—Alle—whom, she asserted, he had been introduced to before. He gave Alex a strange look, and then commented aloud, “I wondered why you would wear a single piece bathing suit instead of a leotard for practice.”

Alex quirked an eyebrow. Until recently, she would have found it difficult to tell the difference between the two garments. She looked over at Alexandrea, who was approaching them. “Are you suggesting I should try out?” she asked playfully.

“Hey, I’ve seen the way you move, you could at least give it a try,” she answered.

“You certainly have the strength and coordination,” the man mused. The first question, however, was whether or not Alex had the skill for that gymnastics program. Martial artists often developed some gymnastic ability, but applied it so differently that she might not. He put her through a second test, following Alexandrea’s lead, and Alex was surprised at the agility and range of motion her new body allowed her. As a boy she had tried gymnastics, but only as a girl did it come naturally to her. She was no where near Alexandrea’s level of ability, but was limber enough, and coordinated enough to adapt the abilities she *had* to perform at an exceptional level with a little training.

As she caught her breath, she caught his attention, confessing, “I think I know when we were supposed to have met, but I don’t remember your name.”

He straightened and held out his hand, “I am sure if we had been properly introduced, we would have remembered each other. I am Jack Hunter, and you’re welcome to join the team if you wish. That is not a prerequisite for my previous offer, you understand, but I believe it would benefit you to include this in your repertoire.”

“I would be delighted, I accept on both counts. You already know my name, our name. If you can tell us apart, though,” she smiled, “you can call me Alle.” They shook hands and began their formal association. As Alex abandoned her hopes of going for a swim, she made up for it by learning. It was an easy trade. She was so delighted, to quote herself, at the discovery of her gymnastic ability, that the prospect of joining the gymnastics team was suddenly as attractive as the prospect of retraining in martial arts. Jack Hunter seemed just as excited at having her join. Alexandrea had been scheming to get him to accept her school’s invitation to coach their gymnastics team, he confided at one point, and on the condition that both of them be on it, he had finally decided to accept.