Avatars-5

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By the end of practice, Alex had gotten used to the nickname Alle—and calling Alexandrea Anne. Being dressed differently enabled Jack, and the other girls present for practice and try-outs, to distinguish the two of them, and though the girls had explained sharing the same name and that both answered to Alex, everyone made the effort to keep them straight using their pseudonyms. As they slipped into the showers, Anne confided that the same thing had happened to her in school. She spoke freely, they had lingered long after the last girl had left for Jack’s additional martial arts instruction, which Anne had found interesting enough to sit in on. Anne explained that a number of people rebelled at the idea of calling both of her by the same name, even though there were numerous times when they were forced to simply because they could not be sure which of her they had been addressing. At times when she could get away with it, she added to their confusion by stubbornly addressing her other self as Alex, and she felt inclined to even more now simply because they were two people and both of them were rather fond of the name they had used as children.

Alex assured her that Alle worked for her, being the ultimate feminine abbreviation of the name she was used to. Anne admitted that she was used to her own nickname, and the idea of thinking of Alex as Alle appealed to her in the same way that her adoption of Alexander, when she was intimate with her new friend as a boy, had appealed to Alex. On her own, each of them still regarded herself as Alex, and for the most part she regarded the other as Alex too and addressed her that way by preference. Just the same, they trained their minds on being Anne and Alle. It eased the odd sensation that each was somehow thinking of and addressing herself in both the third and the first person. An unfamiliar feeling for Alle, and a too familiar and misleading one for Anne.

“Besides,” Anne pointed out, “our habits and mannerisms are noticeably different, and while we seem to be perfectly identical, we present ourselves differently. Unless we made an effort to dress and act the same, people who know us more than in passing are not going to confuse us for each other.”

“Fair enough,” Alle agreed. “I’m just trying to be me, I don’t see any reason to fool people into thinking I am you, except for that bit about convincing them I am your twin. I may have ‘read’ a large part of your history, but it doesn’t make up for experiences I never had with people who are going to assume that they know me.”

“Well, you got lucky on one count,” Anne informed her. “I spent so much time on gymnastics, I had to take martial arts as Alle. People will be surprised to discover how good you really are, but they will expect you to know martial arts better than me—and vice versa.”

Alle nodded, half smiling in relief. “So,” she went on, “how many friends do I have that I need to become acquainted with before I encounter them on my own?”

“I have two very close friends who are psionic, and of course I know a ton of psionic boys with whom I am most definitely not friends,” she began thoughtfully. After a moment she frowned, “Actually I would have quite a lot of friends if I did not have my secrets. It is hard to get close to people when you are hiding things from them. They don’t consciously realize you are dodging them or even lying to them, but subconsciously, they sense that you’re not on the level with them and keep some distance. So, really, there are only two people who know me well enough to trip you up. I’ll fill you in on them when we get home,” she promised. “They did not know about me being doubled, so I kept one of me away from them to keep them from catching on. They know your reputation; I was always more of a tomboy when I was being Alle, again your luck. I think if you’re just yourself, you’ll do okay with them. All of our other acquaintances won’t twig to the facts, and you can be reserved and get to know them at your own pace.”

“All right. Thanks,” Alle leaned, to touch shoulders. The two of them finished washing, dried and got dressed in silence, and then headed out for home.

It being a Friday night, they arrived home to discover that Anne’s older sisters had gotten permission to throw a party in the new house. While Anne and Alle had been about their own business, Kim and Naomi had learned that the construction, short of a few finishing touches, had been completed. In particular, the pool was ready to go into service and the landscaping was complete. Unlike the engagement, which was a private affair, the filling of the pool was an admirable excuse for an all out celebration. They had spent the day setting the empty house up. They urged the two younger girls to put on some style and meet them out at the site. In spite of their hunger, they put aside their empty stomachs and rushed to Anne’s room. Anne’s father lingered while they got dressed and made up and then drove them out to the remote property. Anne assured Alle that she would absolutely fall in love with the place once she saw it. As they arrived, Alle and Anne went in together.

“Hello girls, come to see my masterpiece?” Virginia accosted them as they stepped into the foyer. Alle was surprised at her voice; her head had craned up on entering, to take in the vaulting front hall.

“Hi, Mom,” Anne chimed in greeting, “Care to give Alle the grand tour?”

“An excellent idea,” her mother grinned. She quickly added, “An excellent excuse to keep your sisters from pouncing on you both and putting you right to work, too.” Virginia put her arms around the girls’ shoulders and escorted them quickly through the main level and back outside. They avoided the busy older girls for a while, touring the almost completed house and marveling at the unusual design of the entire property.

Virginia Morgan delighted in pointing out and describing the construction as she escorted them through the estate. She was the architect, and this was her dream home, as she had declared, the masterpiece of her chosen art. It was a palace, and brought Xanadu and Maxfield Parish to mind. The house proper was nested in a structure that used an atrium and aquarium complex to seamlessly blend indoors with outdoors, and one could almost think of the house itself as occupying the entire nine-acre plot. It was nested in a little meadow between steep hills, at the mouth of a narrow ravine. Set on a dramatic rise below the hilltops, the house was surrounded by trees. The hills themselves were a thin layer of dirt and sod grafted to solid humps of bedrock, cut in two by a stream with the patience and endurance of saints. The property would have cost a fortune, but Virginia had inherited it through her family from the original settlers.

She had waited to build on it until she felt her skills as an architect were equal to the challenge. It was obvious that she loved employing stone in construction, for the design was rife with columns and fixtures hewn from granite, for the exteriors, and marble, for the interiors. The entire foundation, and the pool system, had actually been carved out of—or into—the native bedrock. Tons of natural rock had been used landscaping the atrium-aquarium complex, skillfully mimicking nature in a fit of inspiration.

The atrium, and the house itself, was bounded by stone walls and a colonnaded walk. The columns supported a broad lip overhanging the walk. It was clear that Virginia had wanted to create more than a home, but an environment that begged to be explored. The living area had three floors, but the entire structure was built on nine levels.

The aquarium was, as they had been told, actually complete. It was a complex interlocking pool system that riddled the native rock foundation with connecting passages, and at the moment, it was still dry. They slipped off their shoes and toured the system, easily spotting all of the secrets that water would submerge. The veins, arteries and heart that would keep the water alive and circulating branched along the rims and bottoms under removable slabs of dressed stone that seated themselves almost seamlessly.

The aquarium had three levels, each accessible from its associated floor, the upper pools would clearly be connected to the lower pools by waterfalls and diving rocks—two short falls and one long fall. Because the pools provided alternate routes through the structure, each floor was offset from the one below, and safely undermined by waterways. Kim came out and accosted them. The party would be starting soon, she reminded them, so they were asked to try to finish their tour before guests arrived.

“I think that was a polite way to say she would like some help,” Virginia mused, leading the girls over to the steps leading out of the pool. “I’m starting to wonder how many people they invited.”

“You know them,” Anne laughed. “Even with almost no notice, people go out of their way to show up at their parties. Come on, Alle. Let’s go give them a hand.” They gracefully parted company with Anne’s mother and made their way back to the kitchen. Kim loved to cook, and from the look of things, she was expecting to cater to a hundred people. There was no question who would take charge of the wedding, if there was one. Anne and Alle presented themselves, asking what they could do to help out. They were roped into helping Kim and Naomi play hosts, as servants. People began to arrive, and the twins were left to mind the kitchen as the older girls went out to receive their guests. The three adults were also greeting people at the door, as the nominal hosts, and they seemed to know everyone. Alle commented on it, as she circulated with a tray of snacks, and her father explained that the older generation had attended the weddings of Virginia and Vincent, as well as his own formal union with Victoria.

For the most part, Alle realized, the guests were selected exclusively from the Avatar Families. She studied the people carefully, unfamiliar with most of them, as she handed out hors d'oeuvres. It was amazing how large the secret society of psionics really was. This large gathering represented the friends and families of Anne and her sisters within that community. In particular, she guessed, those with sons who had been presented to the Morgan girls. It took her a while to spot a few girls she recognized, who whom she had been presented to as a boy. They represented a small percentage of the associations she had within the families, and she noted that they were there in the company of boys the Morgan girls had rejected.

On the one hand, knowing other people her own age who had tapped and harnessed their psi potential was comforting and reassuring, but the pressure of that which drove them all tended to make those associations as awkward as they were comforting. As she studied the assembly, she noted the distinct clan resemblance. The mark of their selective breeding, time and the constant renewal of kinship had turned them into a race of their own. They were predominantly tall, healthy, redheaded, and attractive people. Beautiful, she could now say openly without feeling self-conscious. Alle was stopped frequently, her father or one of the Morgan’s catching her attention as they reminisced with friends, to listen to snatches of conversation. Apparently, the party also served as a debut for Alle, a way to acquaint her with a few distant relatives and a horde of family friends. As the trend became more marked, she thought she might be able to get out of indentured servitude. Almost, but not quite it proved. Between them, Kim and Naomi were a tough team to out smart and evade.

At one point, she was helping Anne hand out drinks when she was approached by a couple of strange girls.

“Well, well, well,” one of them began, slyly, “the other half finally rears her head.”

“I know one of you is Anne,” the other announced, “so the other has to be Alle.”

Anne straightened and turned to Alle. “I told you I would introduce you to my friends,” she smiled. Turning to the other two, she said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t see you two come in, or I would have said hi. Alex, these are my two best friends, Lauren Sinclair and Morgan Wildmuir. Lauren, Morgan, this is Alle.”

“Hi, Alle,” one of them held out her hand, “Actually the name’s Sinclair-Drake”

“Hello, you can call me Mew—my initials,” the other said, after Alle had clasped Lauren’s hand. Morgan took both her hands in hers and squeezed. “In this crowd, using my first name is almost as confusing as the two of you using your given names. People are always referring to each other by their family name, and I end up twisting my head around as everyone calls out for ‘Morgan’ to get them another drink!” she laughed.

Alle laughed and squeezed her hands back. “That’s the problem with the Families,” she asserted, “everyone keeps reusing the same group of names, advertising their ancestry. I can see by your faces that you’re both near the head of the class.” She was studying them both. Except for some difference in height and coloring, they could be twins themselves. Either of them could pass of Alle or Anne’s sister.

Lauren turned to Anne and asked excitedly, “So, is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“We heard you have been engaged to Alexander Nevin,” Lauren announced, turning immediately to Alle, “poor girl, beat out by your own sister!” Anne traded meaningful looks with Morgan, and Alle bit her tongue as Lauren pressed Anne to confirm her engagement to the mysterious and wonderful son of Victor and Victoria Nevin. Alle listened to the girl’s chatter with a slightly pained smile. It seemed that their parents had made the announcement without clarifying Alle’s situation. As far as the world was concerned, she was still a boy. The way girls in the families reacted to that boy was apparently never going to change. It made her appreciate being a girl even more. Even Morgan, who was a bit more restrained, spoke Alle’s given name with stars in her eyes. It bothered Alle to find that she had made such an impression on a couple of girls and did not even remember when she had been presented to them. Since both girls immediately volunteered to help with the serving, Alle got to listen to a great deal of their wistful musings.

A short while later, the champagne came out and the water started flowing. Once the unremarkable spectacle of water spewing energetically into the uppermost pool had been toasted, the crowd scattered quickly through all nine levels of the estate. Now that the alcohol had begun flowing, the girls were kept pretty busy running around keeping it that way. Alle was trying to pass out glasses and bottles without quite going out of earshot of Naomi and Anne’s friends. Naomi had taken notice of the main topic of conversation between Morgan and Lauren and was capitalizing on the girls’ interest in Alex the boy, working them into a froth of envy and desire in front of Alex the girl.

“Not only has he devoted himself to the study of martial arts,” she was saying now, hinting at the wonderful things his life long pursuit had done for his body, she lowered her voice to confide, “I understand he has a keen understanding of girls and what makes them tick.”

“Wow,” Morgan giggled.

“I wish I’d met him more recently,” Lauren despaired. “We were so young when we met I didn’t think he had any interest in girls yet. He was totally immune to me.”

“Well,” Naomi mused, spotting Alle and pausing as the younger girl wandered back to try and turn the conversation before it got really embarrassing. She caught Alle in her arms and leaned over her shoulder to continue addressing the girls, “he’s not married yet. You might still have a chance to jump him if you’re quick.” Alle went stiff in Naomi’s arms.

“Is he here?” Lauren asked, glancing around her quickly.

“He must be,” Naomi assured them, pointing off in the distance, “That’s his father right there. He has to be around here somewhere. Take a break and go look for yourself,” she suggested magnanimously. “You can’t miss him. About six two, wears his hair in a braid like Alle here,” she asserted, lifting the rope of hair away from Alle’s neck to demonstrate. Both girls bounced in gratitude and melted away into the crowd. Before Alle could say a word, Naomi gripped her tight and asked, in a warning tone, “You’re not going to cause a problem, are you?”

Alle shrugged her off and turned to face her accusingly. “Who’s causing problems here?” she demanded hotly. Naomi laughed and melted away into the crowd herself. Alle glared and pursued her. For a girl who had given little thought to martial arts, she sure could move through a crowd. Alle lost her in a few moments and spent several minutes tracking her down. When she did, Naomi had Anne cornered in an alcove in private discussion. Alle paused, out of view and listened.

“It’s the perfect opportunity. They’ll believe you’re him, and I guarantee they’ll do anything you want to do,” Naomi was saying. Alle raised her eyebrows in surprise. Naomi had not been trying to set *her* up. She had, if she could believe her ears, been trying to create an opportunity for *Anne* to approach her two best friends as a guy. To have sex with them, she understood in amazement.

“I’m sure they would,” Anne was answering argumentatively. “I’ve listened to them go on about Alex for years. All I’m saying is that it would be wrong. I am not him, no matter how much I may look like him when I’m a boy. The fact remains, I am not the boy they both pine for.” Anne sighed. “Look, I appreciate you looking out for me, but I am not going to use my friends like that.”

“You’ve got it all wrong,” Naomi pressed, “They don’t know Alex from Adam. It’s not him they want, but a shot at the best genes they can get for their children. It makes sense for them to catch him now and make an investment in that possibility. I know father’s talked to you about this. He asked you if you were willing to loan him to them for that very reason. The fact remains, as a boy, you have just as much to offer them as he does, and they are your friends,” she asserted pointedly. “You wanted to confide your secret in them, so have fun. Give them a shock, but do it, don’t waste the opportunity. You can tell them afterwards, and trust me, they’ll see it my way. There’s only one man good enough for them, and he’s taken. They, and their families, will settle for what they can get.”

“There isn’t a boy in the Families who will marry a girl who plays the game that way, and you know it. They need to give their children a father just as much as they need to give them good genes. Use your head and stop being a trouble maker!” Anne demanded.

“Same to you, little sister,” Naomi replied nonplussed. “They’re your friends. Have a little faith in them. Besides, they don’t have to marry a boy from the Families. In the real world, they can have any man they want simply by batting their eyes at him. They have an *obligation* to produce the best offspring they can, and their best chance of doing that is through you. I seriously doubt Alex will do it, even if you begged him.”

“Why not?” Anne demanded, “She’s flexible and open minded.”

“If you don’t know the reason, then you’re doing him as much of a disservice as you are doing your friends,” Naomi excused herself with that parting shot. Alle ducked out of sight until she was lost in the press of bodies, then edged around the corner to confront Anne.

“I’m sorry,” she said at once, “I overheard.”

“Oh, Alle,” Anne grabbed her and hugged her, “I thought all this crap would be over. I apologize for my sister. I can guess why you were hot on her tail.” Anne added an additional clench then swayed back to regard her, “Since you did hear, tell me what you think.”

“I didn’t hear it all. It sounded like she was trying to push you to have sex with your friends. I have no idea where she got the idea, however,” Alle confessed.

“Well, it was partly my own damn fault. Bathroom talk, and she was the one who started it. When I started practicing sex, you know, both of me, I confided in Kim and Naomi got wind of it. She was curious if I was interested in experimenting with the male side further. I was only doing it so that I could have sex without getting into a tangle with someone else. I don’t know, I guess I like sex too much to be dependant on someone else to provide the means and opportunity,” she sighed.

“You don’t have to explain that, just tell me why she thinks you owe it to your friends to sleep with them.” Alle was able to understand a girl turning to her self for the freedom to express her sexuality without any strings attached, but it seemed that accusing a girl of wanting to screw her friends sort of crossed the line.

“Again,” Anne confided, “that was my fault. Once I really thought about the idea, I confessed that there were only two girls I knew whom I trusted enough to share my secret with—and experiment so intimately with. The rest of her notions are simple Family politics.”

Alle grunted. “I’ve see her assert her male side, why doesn’t she approach the girls herself if she really feels that way?”

“Dad has a genetic assay on each of us in his private files. Naomi knows that I have the ideal genes, and that she does not. The truth of the matter is, I could get a girl pregnant and her family would accept it in stride, a gift of the gods, you could say. If Naomi did it, the family in question would put pressure on her to remain male and marry the girl. It’s happened before, I’ve been told.”

“Oh,” Alle pondered that in silence for a moment. Clearing her throat, she asked softly, “If it hadn’t been presented so badly, would you want to?”

“What? Fuck my friends?” Anne demanded incredulous. She shook her head, “It doesn’t strike me as all that desirable right now. As a boy, thinking with my dick, I’ll admit the notion appealed to me for a moment, but it doesn’t stand up to reality. I could probably do it as myself, but I’ve been intimate with both of them before. I’ve never really been comfortable as one of the boys, and I would not want to jeopardize my status with them as a girl. I could hide behind you, indulge that male fantasy of mine without risking my standing relationship, but I’d feel dirty if I deceived them into sleeping with me like that. Besides, as far as that kind of curiosity goes, you satisfied me entirely.” Anne turned away and looked out into the crowded room. She sighed, “I’m not Naomi. I don’t get my kicks playing with other people’s heads. Nor am I particularly keen on playing this obligation game our families got us into. Let’s go find Lauren and Morgan and tell them that Naomi was screwing with them, and that Alexander is up north with his friends.”

“Good idea,” Alle took her arm and they started searching.

Lauren and Morgan dealt with the disappointment well, and returned to serving guests with restrained glares for Naomi. By this point, everyone had had a chance to tour the house and voice their admiration. It seemed certain that Virginia would be busy for years to come building palaces for the wealthier members of their set. That accounted for most of the people present. A psionic had too many advantages not to be financially successful. The only trick was using those advantages without getting caught, either by witnesses, or by the IRS. Organized games and dancing, presided over by Naomi, preceded dinner. Anne, Alle, Lauren and Morgan took the opportunity to sneak into the kitchen and serve themselves, certain that they would be too busy serving others to eat with them.

“Actually, I’ve been starving since practice,” Alle announced as Kim handed her a plate. She had spotted them heading for the food and intercepted them before they could touch it. “Thank you, Kim. I’ve been snatching hors d'oeuvres off my own serving trays all evening, but that’s only blunted the edge.”

“If you didn’t have such an active lifestyle,” Anne commented, “and a regenerating metabolism, your appetite would bury you.” She looked at the huge serving Alle had coaxed out of Kim with envy. She could eat as heartily, with no more consequence, but she had been trained to eat like a lady, and meet her quota of calories by ingesting small portions throughout the day. Snacking off the hour d’oeuvre trays had fully curbed her appetite. “Even if I was still hungry, I don’t think I could pack that in.”

“Hey, I’m impressed,” Morgan sighed, “maybe I should trade swimming for martial arts and gymnastics. I’d love the excuse to cultivate an appetite that healthy.”

Lauren laughed, “Mew, a contortionist such as yourself doesn’t have the ligament tension for either of those. Your body has to have some snap to perform those maneuvers.” Alle glanced at Morgan and raised an eyebrow, and Anne poked her in the ribs. “You wanna give up your flex for a big appetite?” Lauren challenged her seriously.

“It’s not my fault I’m double jointed,” she protested. “I could cultivate a different body state, give myself an alternative with tighter joints, right Alle?”

“I don’t think you would need it for martial arts. A true martial artist uses her natural gifts to best advantage, and being double jointed won’t weaken her if she has strength, speed and sufficient control over her body,” Alle replied thoughtfully, looking for a place to set down her plate. The folding tables and chairs Kim and Naomi had rented were scattered about the estate, but none had ended up in the kitchen. As the last girl received her plate from Kim, they followed her to an alcove where a lone table had been overlooked by the swarm of guests. “As for gymnastics,” she went on, ”you’d have to ask Anne.”

“Oh, I’ve kept an eye on Mew,” Anne put in immediately, “and she is remarkably flexible, but it’s mostly they way she relaxes her muscles and how her joints are articulated. I think her ligaments have the necessary snap for gymnastics. All she really needs is good muscle control and a lot of practice. I’ve seen her dive too, so I know she has the coordination for the acrobatic elements.” Morgan beamed with pride at the twins’ assessments.

“What about you?” Alle turned to Lauren. “What kind of athletics do you favor for keeping the body a fit home for the mind?”

“Yes, tell her how you keep your mind from wandering off and detaching,” Anne urged. Lauren caught her little smirk, and sniffed. Anne laughed, and turned back to Alle, “If you can believe it, Lauren has done a little of everything. Enough to keep her body fit, but she hasn’t found her discipline. I’m always finding her entranced, mind over the horizon and body all but discarded. She scares me sometimes.”

“Life is just a dream,” Lauren responded lightly. “It’s all in our minds. That’s the whole philosophy of the Avatar Project, isn’t it? That all of this is just a dream and that the right body will capture the mind of the dreamer?” The others stopped eating, glancing around to see if anyone heard Lauren’s comment. “Oh, come on,” Lauren chided them, “we’re all Family here. If you spent more time awake, aware of the world around you, you would know that. That’s my biggest complaint with psionics today; our eyes are open but so many of us keep them closed pretending we’re no different from anyone else.”

“I can’t argue with you, I was a dreamer too,” Anne reminded her. “The problem is I got so caught up in exploring the universe I forgot about myself. One day I paid the price. I still don’t know what happened to me, but I could have died and never known it. My mind would have returned and my body would have been dead, and I wouldn’t be here right now.”

“You give death too much power,” Lauren criticized. “Life and death are illusions. The truth is a dream. We can dream it together and call it reality, or we can be dreamed into it and call it life. A body is just an anchor, an avatar. Nothing but mist given form and function. Death is no threat to the mind. It’s nothing but waking up from a dream, we do it every day. The only threat is a sudden shock, a shattering confrontation with the unknown. The longer you deny the truth the greater the risk that dying will blow your mind.”

“I’ll tell you what else would blow my mind,” Alle confided suddenly. “Imagine what happens if the Avatar Project succeeds. Here’s this kid, born in this perfect body, growing up like one of us, and then one day every one comes forward to tell him *he* is God. He’ll understand it, he would have been taught the same things we have. Instead of being just a dreamer in the dream, he has to deal with being ‘The Dreamer in the Dream’. What happens if the shock wakes him up?” Alle shivered.

“They would not confront him unless he had proved he was ready,” Morgan asserted.

“Besides,” Lauren pointed out, “It’s not his own private universe. It won’t just suddenly dissolve with the realization that he’s God. God’s just the one who understands it all, this is, after all, the embodiment of his understanding of the Absolute. The dream is just his interface with us, and because we are in it, we contribute to it, we help realize it. In theory, the same is true for all of us. We’re all familiar with the Point Paradox. I’m sure you’ve interpreted it far enough to see how it applies here. In the depths of an unconscious mind lies an understanding of the Absolute, an understanding as elusive as a dream, which can only be expressed through realization.”

“Has anyone ever proven that theory?” Anne asked.

“I have heard that it can be proven,” Lauren told her. “I don’t know the exact story, but I heard part of it when my parents were talking. My dad is not from the Families, you remember. He woke up on his own and my mother took him in hand and brought him into the fold. I was pretty young when he asked her that same question. She told him that there was proof, and if he demanded it, she could take him to those who could prove it. She warned him to think about it carefully, since the only way to prove it was for them to help him realize the truth in himself.” Lauren shrugged, “Dad’s the smartest person I know, the first person to build a machine that possessed psi potential. I expect he would take the risk. I never heard more about it, but it seems to me that we know exactly what *they* would have done. I don’t think the Avatar Project is unique to this universe. I suspect that it moves through people like us, people who become involved and hear the truth, and then ask for proof. At that point, we become the focus for a new Avatar Project, which is enacted within us.”

“Have you ever asked your dad if he’s convinced?” Anne asked.

“Dad never gives answers to questions he feels a person needs to figure out for herself. I am sure he only asked my mom about proof out of intellectual curiosity. In any case, I suppose I was afraid to bring it up,” Lauren confessed.

As they had expected, the four girls were kept busy serving the huge gathering when dinner was finally announced. A number of boys were also roped into helping out, moving all the tables together in the sprawling, open arcade roofing the main floor. People crowded around twenty or thirty tables, chatting idly and enjoying Kim’s gourmet cooking. The meal was timed for the sunset, making it a late affair on a warm summer night. After dinner, the party thinned out a bit. The adults left, taking the youngest children with them. What remained was a predominantly younger crowd age sixteen to twenty-one. Many of the older youths had driven their own cars to the party, and arrangements were made with them so that those who had come with their families would have a ride home. The music changed and people began to break off to claim the little nooks and crannies they had spotted earlier to talk, neck and do a little horizontal dancing.

Alle noted in amusement that some of the boys were now girls. Her initial fear that there were so many boys at the party she would not be able to avoid being propositioned eased. She blamed the isolation of her childhood for her surprise at how many were free gendered, as comfortable being female as male, and openly sexual. It should have come as no surprise, given how much of an investment a psionic had to make in the body to off set the detachment of an open mind. A profound devotion to some athletic discipline could keep a psionic in tune with her body, but she could dispense with that if she simply embraced her sexuality and indulged it in frequent expression. In all honesty, sex was more important to a psionic than eating or drinking. Her mind could sustain the body’s material needs, and sex was the best return on the investment. Feeding that appetite was a more gripping experience.

Still, not everyone was having sex. Most of the people still present were out on the dance floor. Alle and Anne danced together with Lauren and Morgan, the four of them avoiding boys their own age out of habit. Lauren and Morgan, because they had their sights set higher. Alle was surprised to feel some attraction, but she knew boys too well. Anne ignored them entirely, she knew *those* boys too well and she was tired of having to chase them away from her constantly.

“The sad thing,” Morgan confided to Anne, “is that you’re the only one of us now who can afford to snub them completely. They heard about your engagement too, and now they know that Alle, Lauren and I have to start taking them seriously. Everyone always looks up, so of course they’re looking up to us. Not just because we’re born female, either. I’ve seen some of them go after *boys* with better genes and try to seduce them into a relationship, tempting them into exploring their female side. They’re also the ones who chase after us the most insistently. They are too proud to consider being female themselves.”

“Too bad, the ones who take the other option and go after boys as girls seem to be snapping up a lot of the better boys. Did you see the way some of them were pairing up? You’d think they’d been born female,” Anne declared. “Until recently, I would have thought a boy would never be able to really *be* a girl. Now I can see that those girls have an advantage over us,” Anne smiled.

“Who have you met recently that could give you that idea?” Morgan asked pointedly.

“Look around, they’re all over the place,” Anne asserted, deflecting the probe.

Morgan was not distracted. “I know how you are with these boys,” she accused. “If one of them had tried to use their girl side to get closer to you, you would have scratched her eyes out,” Morgan guessed. “It has to be Alexander. He’s the only boy you had left to meet, and you’re not frothing at the mouth over it like you did with every other boy.”

Anne did not bother to even answer.

Lauren had her head bent talking to Alle a few feet away. Alle had been laughing as both of them tried to lead, finally giving in to Lauren on account of her additional three inches and greater experience as a dancer. “I like to move, and the music gets inside me, but it drives my fighting instincts wild to have so many bodies flailing about around me,” Alle was explaining during a slower dance. “This is closer to the kind of dancing I’m okay with, but again, I don’t really know how to dance, and most people our age aren’t much better. I could pick up real dancing if I bothered; it’s so much like learning a new kata,” she smiled.

“I’ve never known a girl who was so into martial arts she resorted to it as a base of reference for dancing,” Lauren chuckled.

“I guess I put more into it than anyone realized. I just remember learning very young that a fight between psionics is almost inevitably decided in a physical contest. It sort of fits what you were saying earlier,” Alle looked up at her. “A mind is unbelievably tough, I’d even say indestructible, if it weren’t for the fact that the body makes it so vulnerable. The mind-body interface bypasses almost all of the mind’s defenses. Great for sex, not so good when you’re in a fight,” Alle observed.

“Interesting parallel, that,” Lauren mused, “dueling for pain and pleasure.”

“I guess sex and fighting do have a lot in common,” Alle commented as Lauren’s words put the two most common intimate engagements she had known into her head in close contrast. “I’ve known guys who chased after a fight like they were trying to get laid. A fight can arouse feelings so intense, so passionate, so intimate, that winning can be almost orgasmic. Adrenaline and endorphins, an all-natural high. I wonder if it’s a crossed wire between the two modes of behavior that produces men who abuse women?” Alle posed.

“I don’t know,” Lauren shrugged, “bring it up to a guy and see what he thinks.” She tensed and moved the two of them over to Anne and Morgan. “We’re gonna get broken up in a minute here if we stay. I can feel the boys thinking out their strategy now,” she informed her friends.

“Wow, you really do keep you mind open,” Alle grinned, stretching her feelers and feeling the pulse of intent in the clamoring tapestry of thought. The minds around them were more disciplined than those of latents, but they still broadcasted in the declamatory mode of conscious thought. “I vote we split up and meet at the pool,” she proposed, reminding them that they had one other overriding interest for remaining at the party, taking a dip in the pool. “The water’s been going for a while, there simply has to be something to swim in by now, and I’ve been waiting for a swim all day!”

The bulk of the water was going in at the top, waiting for the upper pools to fill and spill over the falls to the ones below. They slipped up top and stripped down when they found that the water was already about chest high in the deep end and no one else had bothered to venture up. Alle could not help shaking her head, she had worn a bathing suit all day, but now that she needed it, it was abandoned back in Anne’s room. It did not bother her; she preferred the feeling of water coursing over bare skin. The system was designed to pump a tremendous amount of water to the upper pools to sustain the waterfalls. In no time they were swimming free as they pleased, watching as the level gradually buoyed them up to the lip. When the water was creeping over the lip, they climbed out on the diving rocks and shouted a warning to those below.

Only then, seeing their wet and naked bodies, did anyone realize that the upper pools were open for business. The four sighed and accepted the intrusion of dozens of naked bodies in their little sanctuary. As they were all psionics, clothing was irrelevant, so no one made a fuss over mixed sexes and ages. Those who wished to be intimate staked out a private pool, more for courtesy than because it could stop any voyeurs among them. Of course, the most likely perpetrators had their eyes firmly glued to the Anne, Alle, Lauren and Morgan. Eventually the four had to climb out of the pool and leave the party altogether. The explicitly sexual undertone of those boys’ thoughts, and the manner in which they subtly pursued their interest finally got to be too much for them to cope with. Alle burned bright red all the way home. She wished she could call what they had done offensive, but their fantasies were healthy. It was normal, masculine interest, and it provoked an entirely different reaction from offense. She had been a guy, and knew that a guy could not be blamed for those kind of thoughts. If anything, it was her own fault for leaving her mind open to such intrusions.

“I already feel like I’ve slept with them all,” she confessed to Anne as they entered her room. “I’m half afraid that if we hadn’t left I would have. Is that normal, or am I turning into some kind of nymphomaniac?” she asked her fiancée.

“All girls are nymphomaniacs,” Anne laughed. “That’s why we ride each other so hard, and why men hate us as much as they love us. You’re just finding out how arousing a compliment is, and having a guy panting over you is one hell of a compliment.” She slipped off her dress and ran her hands down her body to smooth out her shift. “Would you really have let one of them get his hooks into you?” she asked playfully.

“I’m still getting by on instinct as a girl, so it would have been a matter of one of them getting past my guard. I’m too cautious to play a game I’m not too familiar with, I probably would have had a fit and run away before that could happen. Still, if one of them pushed the right button, I might have found myself unable to say no,” Alle said, slipping off the clothes she had borrowed, and handing them back to Anne. As she slipped out of her underwear, she turned to Anne and asked, “Bath or bed?”

“Both,” she grinned, “don’t expect to get a lot of sleep tonight.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Alle matched her look. As she followed Anne into the bathroom, she thought to herself that it would probably take a house fire to get the two of them to leave the comfort of their bed and bath before Monday morning. She had decided she did not like being trapped in public, unable to express her feelings for Anne. The kind of sisterly affection that girls were able to indulge in before others did not begin to satisfy the kind of urges that had struck Alle so suddenly through the day. Sometimes, it had been Anne, who had touched her with a gesture or a pose or an expressed thought, but occasionally it had been a heat inspired by the way people had looked at Alle. She had nearly taken her frustration at the pool out on Anne, damn the witnesses. As Anne started the shower, Alle cuddled up to her back and announced her intentions, “I hope you don’t have any plans for tomorrow.”

“Actually,” she replied, “I do.” She laughed when Alle stiffened at her back. “Don’t be like that. I made a deal with Mom; we get the new house to ourselves for the weekend. I told her that we needed an opportunity to get acquainted after all, and suggested that a bit of privacy might help us become more comfortable with each other.”

On Saturday afternoon, Chris went by the dojo to see Jean. He had arrived home, after a trip to Eureka to buy some books, to find a message telling him to see his friend. Curious, he picked up his books and wandered back out to his car. Jean’s mother let him in and told him Jean was back in the spare bedroom. Chris went to the back of the house and stopped in the door to stare in amazement, Jean was sitting in the middle of the floor, a box of books beside him and many more scattered around him. Jean was not much of a reader, but there he was, nose in a book, rapt with attention.

“What are you reading?” Chris asked without preamble, staring at the title in disbelief.

“What? Oh, hi, Chris. I am just packing these up,” Jean snapped the book shut and dropped it into the box. “I promised Alex I’d ship them to her as soon as she gave me the address. There was no way she could drag them along on foot when she left.”

Chris entered the room, squatting down to retrieve one of the books. They were all books on female anatomy, physiology and reproduction mixed in with treatises on the more esoteric female approaches to life, men and other women. “Not your typical reading, but I can see how you’d get sucked in,” he chuckled. “Did she call you?”

“Um, no,” Jean reached into his pocket and handed an envelope to his friend, “She sent a letter. I called your house so you could come over and read it with me.” Chris took it from him. He had been waiting expectantly for such a letter to arrive from Alex. He turned it over a few times, admiring the stationary and noticing that it was still sealed, slid his finger under the flap. He poked his nose inside, wondering if there would be perfume too, and controlled his face. His sensitive nose picked up the distinct odor of sex. He realized it came from the torn seal, from where she would have licked the adhesive to activate it. As he pulled out the two sheets of stationary, he folded the envelope and stuffed it into his back pocket. Chris and Jon shared the missive updating them about Alex and her adjustment to her new life.

Dear Chris and Jean,

I promised you’d receive a letter from me by Saturday. I hope you’ll forgive me if this reaches you later, but I was too busy to write the night we arrived. I’m writing Friday morning, and dropping it in the mail right away, so there is still a chance it will reach you in time.

I really am sorry I had to leave just as things were getting interesting. I miss you guys, and I’ve been thinking of you both. I didn’t find out until I got here that it was a matter of family obligation. Would you believe I’ve been engaged to get married? No, it’s not what you think. Scary thought! This was something that was arranged when I was born, so that should give you an idea of the awkward situation I am in. It’s enough to make anyone forget to write a letter, I can assure you.

I got suckered into posing in my underwear in front of the camera. I’ll have to tell you the story some time, you in particular will love it Jean. One of the girls in the family I’m staying with has a sense of humor even more bent than yours. Still, it wasn’t a bad experience. I’ve discovered that clothes can be a lot of fun under the right circumstances.

Jean, you asked me at one point how I feel about being a girl.

I’ll admit I’m a hopeless tomboy, but I have to be honest. I have the right instincts for being a girl. I’m happy with my body. I’m comfortable in it. It suits me. I have accepted who I am and what I have to be. I’m not at odds with myself like your transsexual friend. I guess I’m one of those people you mentioned, who could be male or female if the option presented itself, but I’m not hung up on being a guy. I have an androgynous mind. I think I got what I needed out of the part of my life you’re more familiar with, but now I need to concentrate on being a girl. Presenting myself as a boy—it’s just cross-dressing, you understand? I might be able to fool others, but not myself.

I wish you were here. It would be easier to talk about what has been happening. I can’t explain very easily how I am coping with this engagement and my own realizations about myself. It would also mean I could continue helping you cope with your own revelations. I have made friends with my fiancée, and there are no unreasonable expectations between us. My fiancée understands what I am going through and is being very supportive. It’s amazing how friendship can solidify almost overnight.

So, don’t worry about me. I have someone to look out for me, someone who can show me around and help me figure out how to be a normal girl. It makes me a little guilty, since that’s what I was supposed to be for both of you. A friend, a guide, someone who knows the terrain better. In your case, it’s not realizing you’re a girl, but realizing your own potential. I’m still not happy about leaving you, and I don’t know how long I will be tied down here. As you can see, it’s a bit more complicated than I assumed.

I am thinking of you, wishing I could be there. I’ll write again next week and bring you a bit more up to date. Gotta rush! Take care of yourselves, alright?

Love,

Alex

“Alex really has turned into a girl,” Chris observed aloud. *And, I suspect, she has been exploring it more adventurously than I would have imagined her doing,* he thought. The letter was straightforward, but the other message it had contained, one he suspected Alex of sending unwittingly, simply baffled him. What he had seen gave his imagination too much to work with, but he was certain that she had sex on her breath when she sealed that letter. He did not want to mention it to Jean, who had confessed his attraction after Alex left. Instead, he commented on the written message, “It’s not just what she’s saying. It’s her phrasing, the cadence of her thoughts. She’s being careful about what she says, but even restrained is *sounds* feminine. Can you believe it?”

“If I suddenly woke up in a female body,” Jean returned, “I suppose I’d either hate it, or I’d let my hair down and let myself go with it. Alex may have changed, but she is still Alex,” Jean reminded his friend.

“Well, I’m not saying she isn’t, I am just amazed that she is adjusting so well. I’d expect a guy to hate it, or at least resent it. A girl doesn’t have the kind of freedom and opportunity a boy does. Even today, a girl is virtually a second-class citizen. I suppose I should be impressed that Alex can cope with it and is actually happy with herself,” Chris shook his head. Jean noticed that Chris kept the envelope as he gave back the letter Jon had received. Chris helped Jean finish packing Alex’s books, and took them out to his car, promising to take care of shipping them to her. Before leaving, Chris gave Jean the extra copies of the books he had gone shopping for; books from a list Victor had recommended to help them revise their worldviews. They worked out in the dojo and then Chris left, saying he had a few more errands to run. By the end of the day, Chris had vanished.

Jean had tried to call him, to make plans for the next day, and discovered he had left town. He had told his parents he was going to visit a friend for a while, gotten in his car and driven off. Jean could easily guess where he had gone, but was puzzled about why.