Avatars-6

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On Monday morning, Alle and Anne woke early to prepare for school. After listening to Alle complain the day before about how she was not a morning person, and how she dreaded anything that imposed an early start to the day, Anne was surprised at how easily Alle woke and slipped out of bed. Anne noted that her friend, twin, sister, lover, fiancée—her head spun a bit as so many descriptions struggled to attach themselves to the person she regarded—was distracted. They had given themselves time to relieve any sexual tension that gripped them prior to confronting the world outside, so Anne felt no need to hustle the other girl into the bath. She simply joined Alle as she stretched and toned her body out of life long habit.

Anne finally did say something when she noticed Alle was lost in thought. “Earth to Alle,” she nudged the other girl. “Your eyes are open, but it looks like you’re still dreaming. We have time, if we use it. If you’re not wound up, you can still get another hour of sleep if you need it.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Alle sighed. Alle had not been asleep. She had lain awake most of the night, silently debating whether or not to test what she had discovered near the end of the weekend. “But I’m too wide awake. Sorry, Anne, just have a lot on my mind,” she said, finally paying attention to her lover. She pulled Anne into her arms and warmed her with a kiss.

Anne relaxed into it, then parted, to ask, “What’s on your mind?”

Alle smiled, “The weekend. Last night.” Anne sighed with her. Alle hugged her and followed Anne into the bathroom. She gave her twin most of her attention, but part of her mind was still reflecting on the recent past. They had spent the weekend alone at the new house, enjoying the pool and each other’s company. They had been the two happiest days of her life.

Alle wished that was all the weekend had been. She wished that had been what she had spent her night thinking about. She also wished she had resisted the urge to test her suspicion. Unfortunately, she had not.

At some point during the night, Alle had slipped into the bathroom and turned on the light. She then confronted herself in the mirror and turned into a boy. It was no different than flipping a switch. She thought about it, it happened. There was no struggle. She stood there staring at herself for an hour and did not feel the least twinge of ache or effort.

A week ago, she would have celebrated. Now she stared at that familiar face and realized she faced a difficult choice. She had turned her life upside down to accommodate what she had believed to be a permanent shift in perspective. She had made deep, emotional commitments to embracing what she had become, and as soon as she was happy, she suddenly confronted the fact that she could turn right back around and walk away.

She could be a boy again. All she had to do was decide to.

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

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

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

As she bathed with Anne, Alle tried to distract herself from her nightlong vigil, focusing on the moment she was in, and reflecting on the less conflicted thoughts her weekend with Anne evoked. Anne and Alle had explored the entire estate again, wandering casually through the house, using the aquarium and atrium to crisscross the house in a maze of carefully planned shortcuts. They had delighted in seeing how the water hid the secrets they had noted Friday evening. Alle had particularly enjoyed the freedom of going about nude the entire time. She was perfectly comfortable with her body, and bothered to become male only to return the favor for Anne, when the two of them indulged in their new favorite pastime.

“We must have made love a hundred times already,” Alle gasped in the shower, as Anne recreated their first intimacy in the guise of Alexander. Anne had wanted to relive that moment without the restraint she had placed on herself then. Alle recovered from the shock of masculine fingers probing her delicate folds as the brush paused. Once again, a hand held her pressed against the wall to balance her as she quivered under an extraordinary sensation of simply being washed. Alle groaned, finishing her thought, “I still feel like it’s the first time.”

“It’s the nature of sensation,” Alexander smiled, as Alle spread her arms for balance, and struggled to ride out that first piercing jolt to her brain. He continued to rub her under a directed stream of water to rinse the genital region, conveniently prolonging the sensation that had floored her before. “Touch is so immediate, so now, that it has an almost eternal quality. It never becomes old. Because you regenerate, the friction doesn’t ever damage you. The pleasure never evolves into pain; the nerves never become exhausted and go numb. Either here,” he deliberately circled her clitoris in emphasis, “or in your brain.”

Alle yelped as the direct stimulation pushed her over the brink. Alexander pulled back, watching her sink down into to the basin. He squatted down, applying the brush again, lathering her legs and feet. “A girl normally has hours worth of endurance for sex, but combined with what we’ve got going for us, there is no limit. I wasn’t counting, but I would not be surprise to discover that we *have* made love a hundred times in four days.”

Alle waited until Alexander had rinsed her off and started on her hair before asking, “Do you ever wonder if it will ever get old?”

“A person can’t devote all her time to just one thing, no matter how much fun it is. I suspect it has to get old at one point, but that point is reached through one of two things. It is either when we start to take it for granted, or when we have truly taken it to excess,” Alexander replied.

“Or when we take each other for granted,” Alle added apprehensively.

“Sex by itself is not sustaining over time. It needs a focus, a drive,” Alexander granted. “I found that I only needed sex once or twice a day when it was just me supplying the drive. I’d work it out of my system, and get on with the day. It took you to make me insatiable. You were the source of a new drive, a constant stimulation. I couldn’t manage it on my own. I had to turn to you to get a grip on it. Close your eyes,” Alexander paused. Alle complied and warm water rushed over her scalp. Alexander continued, “I thought it would be like my initial discovery of sex. I would be consumed for a few days and then I would find my pace. I hope that twenty to thirty times a day isn’t it—I don’t mind, but it’s hard to fit enough time in for it around all the other things we have to do.” Alexander finished rinsing her hair, and Alle turned around to face her. Alexander knelt down between her legs and pushed her onto her back, “Lie back. This is where we were when I knew what you really needed.” He leaned over to kiss her belly.

Alle struggled to sit up, “Wait.”

“Oh no, not again,” Alexander protested, pushing her back down.

“No,” Alle laughed. “I meant to ask, do we still have time for this?”

“There’s time for both of us, don’t worry.” They had a long day to get through. Alexander had no intention of allowing either of them to confront it all keyed up. He thought about Alle’s comments as he kept his hands and mouth occupied. There was no question the two of them were sexually compatible. Together, they became a dynamo, charging each other with positive feedback the closer they came to each other. The only way to compensate was for one of them to reverse poles, allowing the charge to pass through both of them and dissipate. The more time they spent as girls together, the more time they needed in private to trade off being boys.

Alle stopped trying to think. She abandoned herself to the sensation of his naked body against hers—in hers. She was exactly where she wanted to be. It could not last forever, but she could hold it in her mind as an eternal moment. Alle wanted to stretch the morning out as long as possible to savor the freedom of movement and expression.

Everything she put aside was waiting for her as they came out of the bath and returned to Anne’s room. She sighed at the thought of getting dressed. It was a symbolic act for her. It was like rubbing blue mud in her navel. It served primarily to remind her of the limitations she must adopt to disguise her differences. As a boy it had meant concealing what she could do. As a girl she seemed be giving up more, particularly with regard to the one person she loved most. The constraint placed on her by watching eyes, was not welcome. Not with the way those hungry eyes watched her, the way they undressed her in their minds. Especially not with the way she found she reacted to that attention. She would almost rather go out entirely naked, and at least be physically comfortable. Alle shrugged, as she admitted to herself, she was as yet far from comfortable with girl’s clothing and make-up. Anne picked out clothes for Alle from her own wardrobe. Alle watched her as she did her face. The minimum that Anne typically settled for put her good looks to best use with the least time wasted, and Alle acquiesced quietly to the same ordeal.

Alle had not been able to dispel her night long brooding. She remained subdued as she collected her schoolbooks and followed Anne to breakfast. Virginia had risen to cook them breakfast, but excused herself the moment the girls had been served. She wanted to get a bit more sleep before starting her own day at the office. Anne’s father was already gone, trying to beat the commute to his work at the medical center in San Francisco. Only Alle’s father joined them for breakfast. He walked in as she carried a pitcher of orange juice to the table and sucked in an audible breath. “Alex, I never imagined you would turn into such a beautiful girl.,” he announced, looking stunned at her transformation. He shook his head and sighed, “If this is what you really want, if you simply can’t go back to being a boy,” he emphasized, taking her shoulders in his hands and looking directly into her eyes, “I want you to know I’m proud of the daughter you’ve become.” He took the pitcher from her hands and set it on the table. She was too stunned herself to react as he hugged her. He pulled back, studying her face. Brushing a strand of hair back over her ear, and then lightly caressing her cheek and jaw, he smiled at her. “You will have exceptional prospects as a girl,” he complimented her warmly.

Alle dropped into her chair and struggled for her voice. “I can’t believe you said that,” she breathed. Her mind jumped back to her discovery, and a voice accused her of lying to her father. She had vowed that she would go back to being a boy if she could overcome the resistance. At the same time, her heart leapt at the acceptance he had finally expressed. “Are you really saying you’ve given up on me as a boy?” she asked suspiciously, as her emotions ripped at each other. It was devastating. When she had set aside her manhood, she had unconsciously left it in her father’s trust, believing he would never want her to discard it. In an odd way, he was forcing her to take it back, or truly let it go, and she was torn. “What is it, the clothes, the face, the hair? This is all her doing, not mine,” she gestured at Anne, silently begging him to remain the custodian of Alexander a little longer. “I’m nowhere near making a final decision.”

“I’m so sorry,” Anne’s voice cut coldly across the table. Alle turned to look at her, startled at the cold fire in her eyes. Anne dropped her face, staring at her plate, and added, “I didn’t realize I was putting so much pressure on you. Don’t worry; I won’t make that mistake again. You can take care of such things yourself from now on.”

“Anne?” Alle appealed fearfully, wondering what had set her off.

“I’m not hungry,” Anne announced in a dead voice. Her utensils clattered to the table as she stood abruptly. She stormed out of the room without looking at father or daughter. As she passed out of the kitchen she turned halfway, addressing Alle without meeting her eye, “Let me know when you’re ready to leave.”

“Anne!” Alle jumped to her feet to follow, but her father’s hand caught her.

She turned to stare at him and he gave her a warning look. “Alex, you better leave her alone, son,” he advised compassionately. Victor had cringed at the mental frostbite Anne’s sudden freeze had given him. Alle could easily lose her head if she tried to pursue her fiancée.

“Now I’m your son again!” Alle snapped in an odd voice, turning her face in Anne’s direction and pulling against her father’s grip.

If possible, Alle’s tone disturbed Victor even more than Anne’s had. Alarms were ringing in his head as he pulled the girl closer and turned her face to his. “Alex, is there something you need to talk about?” he pressed, gently but firmly. Her face simply shut down. The world echoed faintly in her mind, but she had withdrawn suddenly and completely, leaving no thought or feeling to betray her state of mind to the most expert probing. Victor was startled that his question could provoke such a profound defense mechanism. Before he could try and shake her out of it, Anne’s head popped back in the door way.

“Oh, Alle,” she opened. Alle turned her head woodenly in her direction again. Anne glanced at her for a second and then looked past her, declaring, “You know the way. I don’t want to wait, but please, take your time.” Again, she darted out of sight. A moment later, the front door slammed shut. Alle twitched, and started to wriggle out of her father’s grip.

“Alex?” he asked edgily, fighting her for a moment.

“I have to go,” Alle declared, in words dredged from a fathomless abyss. A tremendous force seized Victor’s hand, gently but inarguably opening his grip. Alle slipped free and shot out the door after her twin. Victor sat there in shock. Never had the child used her power on him in such a manner. He wondered if she even realized what she had done.

Alle ran down the street, calling out as soon as she spotted her double, “Anne?” The other girl stormed on, ignoring her. Alle pressed harder, asking breathlessly as she came alongside Anne, “What’s wrong? Why are you acting like this?” On the long walk to the campus, Alle tried to chip through the ice between them. “Anne, talk to me,” she persisted. “You said you weren’t a pillow,” she reminded her friend, finally daring to grab her arm. “Are you going to tell me what I did to piss you off?”

Anne stopped, glaring at Alle, and shaking her hand off. “Think it over,” she instructed, and turned once more to walk away. Alle still refused to leave her alone. She tried to guess what was provoking her friend’s cold rebuke. Anne just got madder at the fact that Alle had no clue why she was angry. She finally growled, “I’m not talking to you. I’m mad enough already.”

Alle sighed in frustration, beginning to feel a bit of anger herself, “I know what I said, but, God, girl, I don’t know what you’re mad about. I meant it as a compliment to you. I certainly could not make myself look this good. Please explain it to me.”

“It’s not just what you said. Do I really have to spell it out?”

“I’m not stupid, Anne, just clueless.”

Realizing that she was not going to relent, Anne sighed and started to explain, “Well, at least you recognize that I *am* mad—“

“Look out!” Alle suddenly grabbed her and whipped her around. Anne’s brain tardily processed Alle’s warning shout. Alle had moved ahead of her own speech, and now yelped in pain, “Ah! You bastard!” Anne blinked at the sight of two masculine arms wrapped around her twin’s chest in a crushing embrace.

“Alle?” Anne cried in sudden distress, forgetting the interrupted argument as she struggled to sort out what was happening. A stranger had come around the corner behind them, and made a grab for Anne. Alle had noticed and moved instinctively to protect her. As a result, the youth who had been about to molest Anne put his mitts all over Alle. Alle gulped, struggling with her arms pinned to her sides for a moment, and exploded into motion again. As far as fights went, it was short. Alle popped him in the solar plexus with her elbow, twisting her torso to perfect her aim, and wriggled out of his grasp, fuming and offended. Her assailant slumped back, sitting down hard. The boy, he could not have been more than a year older than Anne and Alle, looked up in shock, and stared at them both, hurt.

“I don’t believe this!” Anne declared as she recognized his face.

“Ow!” the boy gasped, trying to regain his breath. His arms were folded against his ribs, trying in vain to assuage the pain of a paralyzed diaphragm. In spite of being able to manage only the shallowest breaths, he spared the wind to utter his surprise, “I didn’t know both of you were enrolled.”

“Do you want to tell me what you think you were doing?” Alle demanded in outrage, ignoring his comment as her own arms tenderly embraced her bruised breasts. She glared down at the boy as he tried desperately to suck in enough air to answer her.

“Welcoming my beloved goddess on her first day of school,” he wheezed as he finally regained his breath. He carefully eased himself back to his feet as Anne caught Alle’s arm to restrain her from further mayhem. Alle glowered, but allowed him to stand. He gave her an accusing look and began, “I don’t think—“

“Obviously not!” Alle cut him down quickly.

“—that was called for,” he finished protesting, while grinning at the insult. In spite of his pain and momentary incapacitation, he had clearly heard Anne address her twin. He looked at Alle entreatingly and declared warmly, “Come on, Alle, you know I love you too!”

“What?” Alle squeaked in surprise.

“I love you both!” he advertised heartily, opening his arms to symbolically embrace the twins. Anne put a hand over her face while Alle stared at him incredulously. Her eyes ran over him in confusion, taking in his tall, well-developed frame, his black hair and piercing green eyes. Anne was already quite familiar with his boyish good looks and charming personality. He was shorter than Alexander by a couple of inches, but still an impressive piece of manhood. Even Alle was disarmed by him. It took her a moment to bring her eyes back up to lock on his face. She blushed as she realized he had studied her as appreciatively.

“I’m sorry, do I know you?” she demanded pointedly.

“Ah!” he slapped a hand over his heart and winced, “You wound me, beloved! It’s me, Keith Tavish,” he asserted his identity familiarly. He gazed intently into her eyes, stating confidently, as if reminding her of a fact he knew she knew well, “You know me! Both of you do!” Anne smiled helplessly. She knew him well enough, but poor Alle was clearly lost.

“Not well enough for you to jump us, you pervert!” Alle snapped. Anne’s smile faded.

“You’re acting like I tried to molest you,” he accused.

“You didn’t?” she retorted hotly. “Listen up, pal,” she growled, “You ever touch me like that again, I won’t just thump you. I’ll break you in half. Touch *her* like that, and I’ll have to get really mean! I’ll break bones you don’t even know you’ve got.” Listening to Keith and Alle exchange words, Anne stared on in growing annoyance. Alle was carrying on like a boy, protecting his girl, retaliating for the assault on his person, and threatening the other guy. Only, she was a girl, and none of it was having the intended effect. Keith was outright charmed by her, and did not take the threats the least bit seriously.

“I was only trying to startle you,” he laughed. He shook his head and regarded her amorously, “Man! If you’re this heated up over it, I must have really scared you. Come on, be honest, you loved it!” he insisted, easing toward her.

Alle backed away, grinning as she affected a passionate tone, “Oh yeah, I love it so much—I’ll break your neck if you try it again!” She was half on guard, simply begging for him to make a move as she mocked him. Keith’s eyes lighted up and he continued to gravitate closer to her. Anne huffed quietly and slipped in between them.

“Um, Keith? Could you excuse us?” she begged pleasantly, grabbing Alle by the hand. Edging her twin back she explained casually, “We’re late for class.”

“Yeah, sure,” he smiled easily, waving them off. As they retreated, he called out to Anne, “Take care of your sister, huh? She’s wound up tighter than a mousetrap.” Both girls’ faces were burning as they walked away from his laughter. Anne spared an angry glance at Alle, but she was too wrapped up in her own anger at Keith to notice.

“God! Can you believe that guy?” she demanded as they moved out of earshot of the boy. She was fuming, hands fisting, as she grated, “He’s lucky I *didn’t* break his neck, jumping out like that. Do we really know him?” she demanded, turning finally to look at Anne. Anne glanced at her out of the corner of her eye, wondering if she could speak to the other girl civilly. Alle reflected for a moment on her memories of Anne’s life. Recognition finally dawned on her face, and she answered her own question, “Wait, you did know him, I saw him in your memories. Jeeze, he’s been chasing you, cornering you, and pestering you for years—“

“He happens to be one of my friends, thank you,” Anne interrupted her. Alle stared at her, questioning her assertion. An acquaintance, surely, she admitted, but a friend? It did not seem likely. Anne glared at her doubting look, defending the boy, “It’s not his fault he’s male, or that it makes him act that way. He’s normal.”

“He’s obsessed,” Alle asserted, forming her own opinion.

“It he wasn’t before, he certainly is now,” Anne laughed harshly.

“What’s that supposed to mean,” Alle challenged, sensing a personal rebuke.

“Forget it,” Anne waved it off, trying to get a grip on her temper. She glanced back at Keith, retreating in the distance, “He really is a nice guy. He just happens to have this thing about redheads—and twins. That sort of makes him the president of our fan club. I should have warned you about him,” Anne commented almost apologetically, “but I’m used to thinking of him as my problem. Naomi dumped him on me to shake him off her tail.” She grinned wryly. “He’s been after me all year. I suppose he enrolled in the summer program so he could keep trying to get in my pants,” she mused thoughtfully.

“Don’t worry,” Alle promised, sensing the release of tension, and trying to encourage Anne to relax further. “I won’t let him get to you,” she smiled reassuringly.

Anne stiffened, and the cold bite was back in her voice as she replied sharply, “What makes you think I need you to protect me?” Alle blinked in surprise at the sudden resumption of hostility. She scrambled mentally through the conversation, wondering how she had given offense this time.

“What? Do you want this guy?” she asked cautiously.

“Do you?” Anne snapped fiercely.

“What kind of question is that?” Alle recoiled, uneasy at the very idea.

“Have you forgotten you are a girl?” Anne demanded piercingly. She glared as Alle flinched, waiting for an answer. When Alle remained silent, she pressed on, “Did you just throw everything you said out the window this morning and decide to just fake it?”

“No!” Alle found her voice, almost crying, as the question stabbed to the very heart of what troubled her. Fighting to control the pain, she asserted, “Absolutely not. If anything, I’m more committed than I was before.”

Anne softened a bit at the sound of suffering in Alle’s reply. Her voice was almost normal, as she demanded an explanation, “Then why did you get so defensive at the mere suggestion that being a girl was acceptable? You were so caught up in denying any interest in being female you didn’t even notice they way you cut me down!” a bit of her own pain crept into her voice. Alle met this in desperate silence, unable to explain what she had faced during the night. Anne’s brows furrowed, unhappy with the other girl’s reticence. Anne growled, her temper rising close to the surface again, “Before I can even tell you about it, you’re jumping into a fight like a jealous boyfriend. Acting like a macho jerk the instant a boy shows an interest in me! Is that what you call trying to act like a girl?”

“I’m not trying to act like anything, Anne,” Alle protested, restraining anguish. That cut deep too. “I’m just being myself. You can’t blame me for reacting like a boy. It’s what I know,” she begged the girl for her earlier understanding and compassion. She clasped her arms about herself, struggling to keep herself together as she saw she was not going to get it.

“Whatever,” Anne dismissed turning away. “We don’t have time to talk about this,” she declared as she resumed marching to their first class. Alle stood there in dismay for a moment before trailing in her wake. She wrapped her pain and confusion in a blanket of astonished anger. She reflected that this was the down side of female emotion. She had no idea what had caused it, but they were tearing each other apart. Alle could not handle it. It was bad enough to know she had really hurt her friend, but they way Anne was lashing back at her was brutal. Attacking Alle for acting like a boy was completely irrational. She felt that Anne was revoking her assertion that she accepted Alle for who she was—or, like a girl, changing the rules to suit her whims.

The two of them had elected to enroll in the same classes, for mutual support. Now that they were angry at each other, they almost regretted it. They entered the class together, attempting to sit as far away from each other as possible, and were forced to sit side by side as the teacher came in and instructed everyone to sit down in the order of roll call. It did not matter to the two girls that it was a temporary measure to help the teacher learn their names and faces. The freedom to sit wherever they chose, in a week, did not help with their present turmoil. Given time and space, they might have calmed down, but the close proximity worked in anger the same as it did in arousal. They fueled each other’s temper simply sitting side by side.

They argued under their breath through the next few classes.

It started with Alle trying to be reasonable. She had been distracted by the memory of their morning’s confrontations, giving little attention to the orientation and opening lecture. Anne was so irate; Alle’s skin actually itched if she moved to close to her twin, as if she was broadcasting an intense static charge. She tried to throttle her own anger and stop feeding Anne’s. While the instructor’s back was turned, she leaned into that cloud of anger and entreated softly, as reasonable as she could, “Anne, what’s gotten into you?”

“Shush,” Anne didn’t even glance at her, commanding, “pay attention.”

For the rest of that class, Alle tried to take notes and focus on learning, but Anne nipped at her if she even dared to address her about classroom material. The next class, they managed to avoid each other, and nursed their tempers alone. On their way in for their last morning class, Alle approached Anne and caught her before she could walk away. Anne met her with a glare, highly conscious of the people milling in around them. Alle, who had felt she had calmed down enough to talk, felt a new spike of anger. Her resentment of watching eyes, which normally restrained her from expressing her affection, had redoubled as school, teachers and other students interfered in her efforts to resolve her quarrel with Anne. She was reminded of her initial reaction to the idea of going to school.

“You know,” Alle began, once she saw that Anne was not going to be able to ditch her, “I really don’t want to be here.” It was an expression of her general discomfort, and a response to Anne putting her off to focus on their classes. She was trying to express her opinion that school did not outweigh their friendship, but it did not quite come out that way, as her question turned accusing, “Do you have to make this even more difficult?”

“Hey, I’m not making you stay,” Anne replied with false compassion. She swept her hand out and indicated the door. “Go ahead,” she insisted, “leave.”

The teacher walked in at that point, and Alle pulled Anne down into a neighboring seat as she sat down. While everyone else took their seats and quieted down, Alle growled under her breath, “I’m not going anywhere without you.” No matter how angry she was, Alle could not walk away from her friend. Even if she wanted to, she was too dependent on her twin’s counsel and guidance.

“Then sit still,” Anne demanded, resolving herself to tolerate her lover’s presence. If the girl could just focus on the class, and stop annoying her further, she could keep her temper under control. She did not want to be angry with Alle. She understood now that Alle was not conscious of how her behavior had changed, or how it alarmed Anne. Anne was still angry, but for the most part she was angry at herself for her quick temper. If they could make it through this class, they would have a break in which to talk. In spite of that resolution, her reply concluded with a bit too much snap, “I do have a reason to be here, and you’re distracting me.” Alle’s face went hard, but she kept her mouth shut and turned to listen to the teacher.

She kept her silence until the end of class, when she stood up and demanded, under her breath, “Are you going to be angry with me all day?” Anger still simmered in her voice and body, but it was underscored with emotional fatigue.

“Are you going to keep playing stupid?” Anne demanded, studying her hard.

“That’s not fair,” Alle grimaced.” You know I’m out of my depth here.”

“Yes, you certainly are,” Anne declared. Her voice was still firm and sharp, but it was not exuding anger so much as strained patience.

“I’m counting on you to help me through this,” Alle pressed on, catching the subtleties of Anne’s tone. It occurred to her that Anne might have been speaking so abruptly all morning to avoid expressing what she really thought. What she was really angry over. The last of her resonant anger finally eased out of her voice. All that left her with was her hurt and confusion, as she reminded her friend, and confessed, “You promised you would help me. I’m way out on a limb here, and I’m starting to get scared.”

“Scared?” Anne laughed, disbelieving.

“Anne,” Alle said softly, a more frightened and vulnerable look emerging from behind the mask of anger she had set aside. “I’m serious. I don’t understand anything that’s happened today since you got mad. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to act. All I’ve done until now is follow your lead, but I can’t just get mad at you.”

“I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at the way you’ve been acting,” Anne rephrased her original assertion. She shook her head and urged her friend to follow her out of the classroom. Alle picked up their books and followed Anne out the door.

“Then why didn’t you say something?” Alle begged, handing the other girl’s books to her. “All this is doing is making me mad at you.”

“What have you got to be mad at me for?” Anne challenged.

“Anne, I depend on you, and you’re freezing me out just when I really need you,” Alle complained. It was all her anger had compelled her to say, but she could not have said it while she was still angry. Anne stared at her as they walked down the hall. Thoughts roiled under the surface, and Alle simply followed her out to the quad, letting the other girl think. It was a legitimate complaint, and Anne could not argue with it. Alle found a spot in the grass, a gentle hill bordering the small quadrangle at the center of the campus, and sat down. Anne joined her, debating silently with herself for a moment more.

Anne finally turned to her friend and asked, sternly, “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything,” Alle offered, laying back and covering her face with her arm.

Anne shifted and looked down at her. Her question was preceded by a list of assertions Alle had made. “You said you were comfortable. You said you weren’t afraid of losing your manhood and that you were committed to being a girl. I believed you, and that’s why I made the promises I did. You were doing so well even your father is coming around. What was so horrible about the compliment he paid you? What’s got the boy in you so worked up?” she finally asked, repeating her earlier question more civilly.

“I thought you liked the boy in me,” Alle moved her arm to look up into Anne’s face.

“I do. I just—“ Anne caught herself, and rephrased her reply, “I need to know what’s happening to the girl in you.” Anne studied her friend intently, clearly uncertain. There was clear concern in her face, perhaps even a touch of fear, as she asked, “Are you giving up?”

“No,” Alle said simply. It would have been easier to stick a knife in herself.

“You avoided the question, though,” Anne pointed out, looking away for a moment. She studied the clouds for a moment before turning back. She looked deep into her friend’s eyes and finally named what she had seen there all morning, speaking directly to her concern, “Alexander, you haven’t been a girl all day. Alle follows her instincts and doesn’t screw up, but you, boy, you’re screwing up by the numbers.” Alle blinked, her face frozen, as what Anne said, and in particular how she had addressed it, penetrated. She sat bolt upright, gasping.

“No,” she said in a small voice, looking at nothing. “It’s not possible.”

“Alex?” Anne begged, fearing she had confronted Alle too bluntly.

“I—I,” her mouth worked, and suddenly she turned to face Anne. She shock had abruptly given way to fear and loss. The boy in her had recoiled from Anne’s pointed assertion. He had been convinced that being a girl did not threaten his identity, but his father had shaken that assumption, rousing him in such apprehension that he had stomped over the fragile girl he was becoming to assert himself. He had not even realized he had done it. Now he feared, as she feared, that irreparable damage had been done. Alle trembled on the edge of the abyss, desperate for confirmation that she still existed. Terrified that she had thrown herself out the window and merely pretended to hold on to the new perspective she had been evolving into. She grabbed Anne’s hands, squeezing them fiercely as she begged, desperately, “Anne! Please, tell me I’m not gone!”

“That’s the girl I know,” Anne murmured as tears suddenly spilled onto Alle’s cheeks. “Hey,” she took the other girl gently into her arms, speaking softly into her ear. “It’s okay. Can you tell me what happened?” she prodded, desperate to find out what had shaken the girl out of focus. What had provoked Alexander to assert himself so defiantly?

“Oh, Anne,” Alle cried. “I don’t know what to do. I’m cured,” she sobbed, finally confessing what she had been afraid to mention. She felt she had been caught at the last moment, her feet still swaying in the open mouth of oblivion. Her tears, more than anything, convinced her that she was still real, a living, evolving person and not just an act, a creation of self-deception. She was still terrified, though. From the abyss, she returned to the decision she had avoided making. Who would yet fall in that fathomless maw, herself or Alexander? She gritted her teeth and forced herself to admit, “I discovered last night that I could go back to being a boy.” Her entire body shivered as she said it.

“What?” Anne gasped, startled at Alle’s simple explanation.

“There’s no more headache,” Alle elaborated. “There’s no resistance when I translate. It’s like flipping a switch.” She clung even tighter, afraid to look up and see Anne’s reaction to the news. Both sides of her were afraid to see a betraying expression, some faint hint of which side of her Anne really wanted.

“But that’s good,” Anne breathed, in wonder. Alle cringed, fearing that Anne’s reply favored her boy side. Alexander studied her from within, himself an idea he had held regarding who he was, and the thought of effectively killing the girl who had evolved from him, his own Athena, tortured him. He could not rejoice at the thought that Anne was pleased that he could now emerge from Alle’s shadow. And yet, Anne did not sense the cause of her turmoil, only the fact of its presence. “What are you so upset about?” she pleaded.

“Anne, I still don’t know anything about being a girl. All I’ve done is have sex. How can I decide who I am based on that?” Alle finally pulled away to meet her friend’s gaze, wiping her eyes, and looking at the other girl in appeal. Anne studied her, and suddenly realized what the real conflict in her soul was.

“Oh, Alle!” Anne laughed, relieving tension and warming with sudden empathy. She shook her head, and took her friend’s face in her hands. “That’s not what it means!” she declared, refuting the entire notion that Alle had reached a cusp of decision so abruptly.

“Huh?” Alle blurted, suddenly twice as confused.

“The translation of the sexes starts as an instinctive ability,” Anne reminded her, vying for an angle to explain herself from. “All the headache you suffered is caused by the effort to gain control of that instinct. In your case, you spent your life fighting the instinct and then lost. You programmed yourself to fight for being male,” she informed her friend. Alle’s confusion began to ebb as she considered what she was hearing. Anne continued, “The instinct is just an imperative to change and the understanding of how to accomplish the translation. It takes a while for people to learn not to fight the imperative and take control of the translation matrix.” Anne paused, evaluating the other girl’s response to her assessment. She waited until Alle caught up to what she was saying and looked to Anne to finish her thought. Anne smiled, “Since it’s not a learned ability, you had to wrestle with it, like everyone else, to make it a part of you.”

Alle considered that, but could not quite draw a conclusion. “So, what does that mean?” she asked, looking for something more to go on.

“It means you have two body states mapped out in your matrix,” Anne stated.

“Does it mean I should go back to being a boy?” Alle pressed, painfully.

Anne sighed. She thought carefully, getting a strong sense of what was really going on in her friend. Her mind was already made up, but she was too much like Anne, pushing herself to find the ‘right’ answer and obey it, regardless of the cost. Afraid that the right answer was the most painful one. Afraid because it pitted her against what she saw as the better half of herself. Unfortunately, Anne did not dare confront her with that. She had to figure it out on her own. The only way the girl could make the right decision was if she gave herself enough time to come into the understanding of it. Fortunately, that was something she could say. “Things don’t tell you who you are, Alle. You already know, you just haven’t figured out how to tell yourself yet,” Anne told her.

Alle scowled. “How can I know and yet not know how to tell myself?” she demanded.

“Oh, come on, Alle,’ Anne laughed. “Everyone has that problem. Look around you. All these people have been trying to tell themselves they have psi potential all their lives,” she reminded her friend, “but they have been trained to think in a language that defines psi, even the mind, as something that can’t even be proven to exist.” It was a strange thing to be able to listen to people’s thoughts, hear them giving themselves the right answer, pointing out the truth again and again, and see people back away from it in consternation. “It’s a paradox. People understand things they can’t express, and can’t tell themselves anything they don’t already know,” Anne complained.

“God, this must be what my friends are going through!” Alle mused, as it penetrated.

“Well, at least they can find a guide to interpret to them,” Anne sighed. She looked at her friend thoughtfully, and confessed, “I wish I could tell you what you needed. I’d be happy to point the way. For now, all I can suggest is that you follow your instincts. The best advice, you already know; to thine own self be true. You already know the answer; you just need to find the pieces that enable you to spell it out.” Alle met her gaze, wondering. Anne broke contact and turned her attention to the people milling about the big courtyard. A few concerned faced had been fixed on them, wondering what had happened to cause one of them to break down like that. They turned back to their own business as Anne returned their gazed calmly. Alle stared off into the middle distance for a while, before speaking again.

“Hey, Anne,” she called her friend’s attention softly.

“Yes?” Anne turned, presenting a smile.

“I apologize,” Alle said simply, blushing slightly. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Anne retorted with a bit of her former bite.

Alle half flinched, “Why?”

Anne sighed, and lay back while declaring, “I’m only accepting your apology conditionally.” It was nice to have rooted out the real problem and set things straight, but their quarrel had provoked other consequences, and those had not yet been addressed.

“Conditionally?” Alle repeated uneasily.

“I’m not letting you off the hook until you learn something,” Anne said.

“What?” Alle demanded, at once all ears.

“Only what I promised,” Anne returned. She closed her eyes and meditated for a while, but when she opened them, Alle was still looking at her with the same expression, waiting for an explanation. Anne smiled as she noted that there was some tension in the girl, but from apprehension, rather than annoyance. She would wait until Anne spelled it out. Anne laughed silently and relented just a bit, saying, “You have a lot to learn about being a girl. One of those lessons is about to confront you.”

“Anne!” the girl fell back in exasperation.