Avatars-7

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Anne and Alle lay in the grass looking up at the sky until the tension ebbed out of their systems. Alle had related her troubled night in more detail, and described what had been going through her mind when her father confronted her that morning. It had sunk in that they had survived their first quarrel, and remained friends. If anything, they had grown even closer, as they reflected on the true emotions behind their aroused tempers. Alle was touched by the amount of concern Anne had for Alle. Alle held her friend’s advice, her expressed interest in Alle’s development as a girl, close to her heart, finally adding her father’s approval. It was possible to feel grateful, once she admitted how guilty she had felt. There was no question she felt an obligation to return to being a boy. She took that obligation so seriously, she still had not confronted what she wanted.

It was on her mind, however.

Alle rose easily, at the suggestion that they get something to eat. She nursed her thoughts as she followed Anne to the commissary. In spite of the fact that it was a satellite campus, there was a small restaurant and cafeteria, tucked in with a bookstore and student lounge. Alle let Anne order their food, while she staked out a table and thought about where she was going. It seemed to her that she was headed for a split. She understood that the boy in her was a state of mind. As a person, she was simply Alex, or Alle. As best she understood it, that person was a girl, however naïve and inexperienced. Her history was tripping her up, though. The fact that she was comfortable with being a boy, with the fact that she had been a boy for most of her life, meant only that she could handle the obligations she had as a consequence of having been that boy. Unfortunately, actually being that boy again meant discarding her most recent growth and evolution.

As her father had tried to tell her initially, she could not turn herself back into a boy. The closest she could come was asserting the memory and the form. Switching back into that mindset, she had lost her grasp on everything she had learned over the past nine days. It was hard to wrap her mind around it, but she would never be Alexander again. He could be Alexander, and he would even remember being her, but he wiped her out as soon as he came forward. She was still the same person, the same mind, the same soul, but the perspective shift that came with her transformation had altered her identity. It had changed her understanding of who she was. The only way she could be Alexander, and still remain herself, was if she let Alexander out on his own.

She never wanted to be suppressed, the way she had been that morning, again. To be fully conscious and yet totally oblivious was too unsettling to bear. Alle clutched her fist, painfully conscious that Alexander was bearing it even as she reflected on it. Either Alexander would choose to be a girl, forsaking all other obligations, or he had to get out of her. Alle was not going to sacrifice herself to him.

Anne arrived with the food, and Alle put on a pleasant face. She coaxed her friend into conversation, returning to her questions about being split in an effort to introduce her new resolution. Before she could, a presence at her elbow distracted her. Before she could turn and see who had walked up behind her, he spoke.

“May I join you two?” Keith asked pleasantly.

“Oh, no,” Alle moaned softly and put her face in her hands.

Anne glanced at her, amused and mildly annoyed at her friend’s reaction. She looked up quickly at Keith and greeted him, waving for him to sit down. “Hello, Keith. What’s on your mind?” she asked sweetly.

“Well,” he began as he sat down at the head of the table between Anne and Alle. “I’ve been thinking about that scene this morning,” he announced contritely. He shuffled objects from his tray to the table and then discarded the tray. His face was grim as he added, “I’ve heard about girls getting raped on campus. It was really stupid of me to jump out at you guys like that,” he apologized, looking very serious.

“I forgive you,” Anne smiled, patting his hand.

“Well, actually,” he turned to look at Alle. “I came to apologize to Alle.” Alle sat up and looked at him in surprise. He looked so sincere, it was the kind of look that spoke of honor among men, and it touched her disarmingly. “Will you let me take you out on a date, sort of to make up for being such a jerk this morning?” he asked anxiously.

Alle was taken aback. She squirmed, instinctively trying to refuse, “I don’t know—“ Anne stepped on her foot under the table, cutting off her rejection. Alle winced and stared at her. Anne met her eyes intently and pierced her skull with a tightly directed thought.

*«Alle, if you want me to accept your apology, you had better accept his,»* Anne insisted, reminding the other girl that she was still on parole. Alle’s eyes widened, as she learned her penance. She glanced at Keith and felt sweat bead on her forehead. He was looking at her hopefully, silently urging her to accept. She looked back at Anne, begging for reprieve. Keith followed her gaze over to Anne, and he saw her silently urge her sister to say yes. He smiled and looked back at Alle before they noticed his interest in their silent exchange.

“Okay,” Alle relented, letting out her breath in sync with him. She chuckled and added self-reproachfully, “I guess I owe you too, for beating up on you.”

“Thank you,” he beamed, taking her hand and squeezing lightly. He let her go and dug heartily into his meal. Alle was less enthusiastic. He stomach knotted up and it became impossible to eat. She picked at her meal quietly as Keith engaged her twin in high school reminiscences. He finished eating quickly and stopped to check his watch. He frowned wryly as he noted that he was out of time. As he hopped up, to rush to his next class, he turned to Alle and returned to the topic she had brooded over so silently through the meal. “I’ll meet you after classes. You already look perfect,” he complimented, setting the time of their date. Alle swallowed, realizing her doom fell so near in the immediate future.

“Uh, actually,” she protested, “we both have gymnastics after class.”

“That’s great,” he smiled enthusiastically, picturing them in leotards. “I’ll come and watch,” he promised. “We can go when you’re done.”

Anne was staring at Alle, foot cocked and aimed at her shin. Alle quickly assented, “Mmm. That’s fine.” Keith grinned and saluted as he bolted for the door.

Anne brought Alle back to Earth, urging her to finish her lunch. They had practice, and she would need the fuel. Her mind could easily maintain her body, but it had a price. Using psi to sustain herself opened her mind, adding distance between mind and body. Her normal regeneration was detaching enough without being provoked into compensating for natural metabolism. Alle forced herself to eat, telling herself that detachment also heightened arousal, and after practice she was going to be alone with a strange boy. Her concerns about what to do regarding Alexander had been jolted entirely out of her mind.

As they headed for their first afternoon class, she appealed to her lover, “Anne, what did you get me into?”

“Sorry, Alle. You got yourself into that one,” Anne laughed.

“How so?”

“That lesson I told you about, this is it.”

“What do you mean?” Alle looked at her sharply.

Anne thought about the scene that morning with Keith and tried to explain, “There are times when boys and girls act exactly the same way. But trust me, their actions don’t mean the same thing. If you don’t start to understand that, your male social reflexes are going to get you into a lot of trouble.”

“What do you mean?” Alle repeated, alarmed.

“Do you remember the way you were acting this morning?”

“Anne, I was just trying to protect you,” Alle protested, remembering how Anne had objected. That still bothered her. She admitted that she had been thinking like a boy, but she had thought even a girl would have asserted herself in that situation. “Remember what you told me, girls look out for each other, especially sisters,” she argued.

“That’s true,” Anne allowed. “But we also compete with one another. The way you were acting in front of Keith can only be considered protective if you happened to be a boy. Unfortunately, Keith doesn’t know you’re a boy. What he saw was one girl aggressively asserting herself to distract him from another girl.”

“No way!” Alle objected, while at the same time remembering what often happened when Alexander had been presented to more than one girl at a time.

“It’s true,” Anne maintained, grinning sympathetically. “By your actions, you were declaring that he was paying attention to the wrong girl. He wants us both, but you made him well aware that he has to approach you first.” Anne giggled at the look on Alle’s face. She sighed; she had no illusions about Keith’s intentions. “To win us, he has to first win you. After seeing you in action, he’s almost certain of your interest in him,” she explained, outlining the consequences to her friend, and smiling apologetically. “After I made you accept his proposal, he’s fairly certain of me now too,” she added, revealing how the consequences had expanded and engulfed her as well.

Alle paused, thinking furiously. “You knew he was going to ask me out.”

“Yes,” Anne accepted her accusation calmly.

“Why do you want me to go along with it, if you’re so sure we’ve given him that much encouragement?” Alle demanded.

“Alle, don’t hit me for this,” Anne begged, wincing. “I did it for you.”

“What?” Alle stopped to stare at her. Her mind flipped one more time through their argument about Keith in apprehension. “Did I give off some strange signal to *you* saying I wanted him?” she asked in dismay.

“Maybe you do, maybe you don’t. That’s not my point. My point is, you need this.”

Alle stood silent for a moment. Slowly, carefully she inquired, “Do you remember what happens when we say that?” Each step in her sexual evolution had been foreshadowed by those words. Under the present circumstances, she was not at all comfortable with the assertion. Just the same, she trusted her friend’s judgment, and asked herself if she honestly objected. She had certainly responded physically. Her fury at Keith had been in part arousal.

“Alle,” Anne answered carefully, “I’m not telling you to go get laid. I’m only sending you on a date.” Anne watched to see if Alle understood what she had meant. There was one part of being a girl Anne simply could not provide herself. Keith, and his undying affection, offered Alle the chance to experience the attention of a boy. The way she reacted to people’s stares had made it clear to Anne that Alle needed to confront it, and learn to cope with it. She had initially suspected that Keith’s first impression would lend her friend some restraint in dealing with him. Unfortunately, she was a sensual girl. She had no fear of sex. It would be a mistake to deny that. “If you think it needs to go further than that,” Anne addressed it, “just remember I’m on your side. I’ll back you up, and I won’t make you face it on your own.”

“You’re going to give this guy what he wants for *me*?” Alle did not know how to take it. It was clear that Anne had never had any intention of sleeping with Keith. She liked him, he was an interesting person, and he kept her life at school from becoming boring. The idea that she would sleep with him, just to support Alle—in the event that she succumbed to his affections—was touching, and alarming. Friends who would pull a person out of a fire were worth their weight in gold. A friend who would jump in the fire and burn with her was priceless.

“Well, I’m not in love with him, am I?” Anne challenged.

It was the first time one of them had come close to saying it. Anne’s words rang in Alle’s ears through the length of class. She kept returning to it as she retreated from her apprehension. For the rest of the day, Alle was in dread of the date she had been forced to accept. Anne had a ruthless streak, and Alle was beginning to respect that, and the logic she used to support it. To consider, on top of that, that Anne had implied so strongly that she was in love with Alle simply blew her mind. In the time they had spent together, the greater part had been spent in passionate embraces. Only once had they been in a quarrel, and it had been founded on Anne’s fear and concern for her, Alle, the girl who had to wonder if she was even real.

Alle stared at her twin through class, and realized that her wondering was over. If she was not real, she could not love Anne so hopelessly, so fearfully, that she had considered giving up herself to give Anne Alexander. She had confronted that during their fight. It scared her now, because she sensed she might have given up Alexander to give Anne herself. The only hope he had was the fact that he was the better part of her, and so much of what her lover loved in her. Looking inside herself, she sensed what the boy in her was investing in her. Before, she had talked about consuming Alexander. He was the seed from which she was growing. Dissolving into her, he was eagerly giving himself up to become her. It might already be too late to take her father’s advice.

Anne noticed her haunted look, and hugged her tightly. “Oh, cheer up! It’s not the end of the world. It’s just a date. You’ll have fun,” she promised.

Alle was relieved to be distracted. Worrying about Keith suddenly felt safer than musing on what was happening within her. Her mind easily returned to the apprehension she had been nursing between bouts of lovesick musing. It was a real concern, one she could confide in her friend, and which she could answer. “I’ll be alone with him,” she framed her concern. “The only man I’ve ever been alone with is my father. This is not the same.”

“He’s not going to rape you,” Anne assured her gently.

“It’s not him I’m worried about,” Alle protested, blushing.

Anne was certainly familiar with Alle’s hypersexuality. Unfortunately, it did not sit well with the concern she was expressing. Anne knew Alle had no fear of sex. Anne also felt that the girl could handle a boy a great deal better than she imagined. She understood them so well. Anne probed a bit deeper testing for what really had the girl so on edge. “You’re not worried about me, are you?” she asked intuitively. Alle’s eyes widened. Until Anne asked, she had not realized that she was. She looked down, and Anne sighed. “Look, you’ve never been with a guy, but you’re enough of a girl to admit that you might return his interest. Don’t confuse the matter by worrying what I’m going to think,” she advised firmly. “I don’t own you, Alle. If you want to sleep with him, even if it’s just out of curiosity,” Anne smiled, and shrugged, giving her blessings freely, “it’s entirely your decision.”

Alle nearly stopped breathing. Anne was giving her permission to sleep with Keith—if she felt she needed to. “I thought you said you weren’t telling me to get laid?” she asked softly, probing the boundaries of her friend’s mind. Anne let her taste her sincerity, but shut her out of her thoughts.

“Alle, let’s not get into a big discussion here,” she begged. Alle pulled her feelers back and looked into her friend’s face. Anne smiled reassuringly, “All I’m saying is that it’s your body. If you decide to share it, I’m not going to be hurt or offended. I’m not the jealous type. You’re the one who is exploring being a girl, and well, a girl needs her freedom.”

As Alle stripped and donned her borrowed leotard, she was grateful that Anne had forced her to eat. She had rushed out on breakfast, and she had been wired up all day. After Anne had quelled her fears, her energy level had gradually risen. She was feeling perky and excited about getting out on the mat and working her body, learning new skills and improving old ones. She could have put it all out of her mind entirely if she had not run into Keith on her way into the gymnasium. He had come to watch them at gymnastics, as he had promised. Alle was aware of him from the moment she began stretching on the mat, and through every flowing move that followed. She could feel him standing in the bleachers, openly admiring her. He was equally appreciative of Anne, but he focused most audibly on Alle, buttering her up for their date.

It made Alle’s head churn, because part of her was suspicious of and uncomfortable with the scrutiny, and yet there was something extremely flattering about the way he was so enamored of them. She found herself actually performing for his benefit, and enjoying his applause. She hardly wanted to jump in the sack with him, at least so she told herself, but he really had a way of making her feel very good about herself.

Jack noticed him as well. He commented on it as he worked with her on her high beam routines. “It looks like you have a rooting section, Alle.”

“Um, yeah,” she grinned. “That’s the president of our fan club.”

Jack chuckled, and urged her to focus her attention on what she was doing. She was grateful for his suggestion, but the fact was, Jack too was a man, and he had his hands all over her body coaching her through the dangerous maneuvers she was learning. Caught in the vice of that much masculine attention she could hardly concentrate. Jack continued to work with her, but he was conscious of her distraction. As the class dismissed, he sent her to the showers. He told her frankly that she was in entirely the wrong mood for studying martial arts. At the same time, he smiled encouragingly. A man who devoted his life to working with girls had an uncanny sense of what made them tick.

In the showers, Alle sidled up close to Anne and begged, “Anne, please, you’ve got to help me.” Anne took in her little girl look and tilted her head.

“Are you trying to wiggle out of the date?” she asked suspiciously.

“No,” Alle bit her lip and glanced around her at the other gymnasts. Tucking her body close to Anne’s rubbing sensuously, if surreptitiously against it, she pressed her cheek to Anne’s and entreated softly, “Anne, I need to work off some serious tension before I even go near him.” Another girl looked over, seeing only a girl whispering into her twin’s ear.

“You mean, you think you really want him.” Anne tested carefully.

“It’s the way he looks at me,” Alle confided, grateful that Anne had not spoken in a challenging voice. Assured of genuine support, she added, “I’m afraid I won’t be able to say no, or stop him if he starts touching me, if I go out with him already feeling like this.”

“You’re serious,” Anne noted cautiously.

“I lose my judgment once I start feeling this way. Not if it’s just sex. It’s too safe, too easy to just go for it. I can’t get pregnant, and I won’t get any diseases. What do I have to be afraid of?” Alle demanded, confirming Anne’s assumptions about her. Anne nodded to herself. In a psionic, the concern Alle was expressing was entirely normal. Alle was concerned about her judgment, not so much about the possibility of having sex.

Anne saw nothing objectionable in Alle’s assertion. It was a rhetorical question, as far as they were concerned, but there was one thing she had not mentioned as a consequence of having sex, and she addressed it. “Besides letting yourself get entangled in a relationship?” Anne posed. It was a fear Alle needed to address, if she was concerned about the quality of her judgment.

Alle shrugged. “I like being liked. I like having sex. I told you I was turning into a nymphomaniac!” she laughed. Alle leaned into her twin, moving almost imperceptibly, but achieving a long, slow caress for both of them. Anne kept her eyes open, watching to see if the other girls noticed. It would hardly be the first time two girls were caught having sex in a public shower, but Alle needed more than a girl’s touch. Anne considered the matter before deciding, but concluded that it would be best to help Alle keep her judgment.

“All right, let’s get this out of your system. I don’t want you losing your head,” she agreed. Alle was already in shameless mode. Keith really had aroused her with his worshipful attention. Anne led her out of the shower. She spotted a locked storeroom, and led her twin over to it. Alle stood watch, while Anne studied the door.

She ran her fingers lightly over the doorknob and closed her eyes. She was suddenly conscious of what she was doing. According to the rules she lived by, she allowed the vast majority of her mind’s potential to lie dormant most of the time. Unlike most of the people around her, she had a choice. It was the first time she had ever refused to accept a locked door for a locked door. What she was about to do was more risky than having sex in public. She could only justify it to her parents as a necessity for hiding the use of her power while having sex. She quickly calmed and cleared her mind.

She opened her eyes and looked at the world. It was a strange and unfamiliar place. Her eyes darted around, striving to nail everything down and put it into perspective. This was the difficult part; she forced herself to stop looking at the environment around her and willed herself to actually see it. Her gaze became unfocused and the realization finally came. She was dreaming. So, she opened her eyes. Nothing had changed. She looked at the world the same way. The only difference was now she was *aware* of it. Instead of being an isolated body within the world, she had opened her mind and let the world into herself. She glanced down at the door and her eyes saw the light reflecting off its surface. Directed by her sight, her vision unfolded, penetrating the wall, and inset door. The structure of the sealed enclosure revealed itself to her with a sense that was entirely graphic but as deep and intimate as touch.

As she began to feel the contents of the room beyond—kinesthetically, the way she normally felt her body—she became aware of the forces that acted on them and through them. A tremendous rushing force, an eternal waterfall, raced down from the infinite heavens, trying to carry her and everything around her along in the tide, but a powerful current surged up at the same time to meet it, a sea of rough and glittering particles buoyed up on each other in furious agitation. This storm of invisible forces collided in a tremendous standing wave and the world she was looking at danced in its grip.

Everything was in motion, but the net effect of that motion was the stillness of the world. That world was an illusion, a product of an interface between space and time. It was an image resolving and solidifying in a conjunction of force and form. It could all be quite intimidating, but—abstract or manifest—an expression, no matter how complex, inevitably boiled down to one thing. Information. Hence, matter and energy, the expression of structure in space and time, ultimately translated into thought. In what other media could information find its simplest expression—or its native home?

Science may not have reached the point where theories about the nature of the mind could be tested and applied, but nature did not wait for science. The holy grail of physics, a unified field theory, had been phrased, tested and applied—written in the complex manuscript of genetic code. An instinct, which circumstances had stimulated, that she had seized and carefully cultivated into something more sophisticated. Her mind embraced the information that defined the composition, state, and disposition of the door lock. The information was both complex and simple. Her objective was elementary, so she ignored the high-resolution details and focused on bluntest aspect of its design.

The core of the lock was a simple array of pins barring the rotation of a two-position switch. In the normal course of events, a key turning in the lock, action would change the information at the heart of the expression. In this instance, a change in the information would produce an action. She thought it, and the pins aligned allowing the cylinder to rotate smoothly and silently. She opened the door, and ushered Alle inside.

The lock was ice cold when she placed her hand on the knob to lock the door again. “Oops,” she smiled softly. By changing the information that defined the state of the mechanism, she had provoked a spontaneous action. In the absence of more specific direction, the energy to fulfill the imperative—to correct the expression of the lock to match its altered definition—had come from the object’s internal store of kinetic energy. Such pronounced side effects happened when the scope of a translation was too narrowly focused. If a broader focus was used, the mind tended to minimize the impact of a translation by dispersing the reflex—the world’s reaction to the use of psionics—across a larger domain.

For Anne, the whole procedure had involved little time or reflection. All she was concerned about was getting in the storeroom and help Alle work her arousal out of her system so she would not end up in bed with Keith in spite of herself. In the process, her mind slipped back into quiescence. She placed her lover on a bed of towels, and focused all of her attention on fucking her. Under the circumstances, she could not call it making love. Alle was ready, as demanding as a cat in heat, and in a male body that was arousing enough for Anne to get in the groove. Both of them cut loose in a way they never had before. It was sheer animal intensity, and they parted in exhaustion agreeing wholeheartedly that fucking could be more fun than making love.

Once Alle assured Anne that she felt able to keep her head, she opened the door again and led her lover back to the showers. They scrubbed each other down, swiftly and efficiently, taking care to come out entirely fresh and clean. They dressed quickly, and Anne grabbed her brush and make-up to restore Alle’s appearance to the morning’s glorious standard. Once she passed Anne’s inspection, they went out to meet Keith.

Keith showed no annoyance at the delay. He greeted their arrival outside enthusiastically, jumping up to meet them at the door. As he held it for them, he declared his admiration for their skill in gymnastics. “You were amazing! Both of you, I’m really impressed,” he said.

“Thanks, Keith,” Alle smiled in appreciation.

“Are you ready to go?” he looked down at her expectantly.

“All set. I’ll see you later, Anne,” she clasped hands with her twin.

“Okay, have fun, alright?” Anne urged, squeezing back, silently wishing her luck. She turned her eyes to Keith and admonished, “Keith, be good to her, this is her first date, you know.” He nodded, and Anne picked up her and her twin’s books. With a parting smile, she turned and started off for home alone. Alle watched her, feeling the presence of the young man beside her, and swallowing nervously.

“Is that true?” he asked her, when she finally turned back to face him.

There was something gentle in his expression. Alle smiled and answered, “Actually, it is.“ As a boy, Alexander had met many girls, but he had never actually been on a date. He would be a guest for a few days, compelled to spend time getting acquainted, but he had been restrained, resenting the shut-eye chaperonage he had always been offered. He could have slept with any of them, all of them, and been no more obliged to stay and face the consequences. Instead, he had withdrawn. He had not been rude, not quite, but he had silently refused to get acquainted. He had simply tolerated the girl’s presence until it was over.

“Hmmm,” Keith had been absorbed in his own thoughts while she reflected on her uncomfortable past. She met his eyes, as she looked up inquisitively at the sound. “Are you terribly hungry?” he asked.

“I can wait,” she assured him, “what did you have in mind.”

“I thought you might be more comfortable with me if we took some time to talk, get to know each other. I mean, talk for real. I’ve been waiting a long time to get to know you,” he explained sincerely. He had dispensed with his roguish airs, and ebullient posturing. He was really taking her seriously. This direct, open exchange was having far more impact on her than his boisterous enthusiasm. He was showing himself, not his persona, and it would have urged her to befriend him when she was a boy. As a girl, she found it disarming. Going along, while he put his arm around her and took her to his car, was the hardest thing she had ever done.

To her surprise, he was really nice. He took her to a park, where they took a long walk and talked. He asked her genuine questions about her life. It was frustrating to only have her devotion to martial arts to talk about. She could have talked about her travels, but of course, she knew from Anne’s memories that such experiences would be out of character for her. Picking through her life, searching for something to share, she was amazed to note how lonely she had always been. Even so, he found enough in her exposition to take interest in and comment on. Explaining how she had gotten into gymnastics, in answer to his question, she was able to tell one funny story, her first encounter with Jack Hunter. To explain her devotion to martial arts, she referred to her cover story, her abduction at birth. Such an experience really justified so intense an interest in protecting herself.

She pressed him for his story too, amazed that he had simply listened to her going on about the little she could talk about. He confessed that he had little to confide himself. He was an only child, and he had been abducted at a young age himself. He did not want to talk about that. Alle was grateful, since she would have hated to make up a story to compare to his. He had always been athletic, and had spent a great deal of his life pursuing one sport or another. It made his family proud, and earned him some renown at school. He was also into drama, hence his effusive character. He even confessed to his great obsession with girls. He was so passionate about them he tended to scare them away from him. If there was anything he felt particularly gifted at, it was making love. Alle stared at this bold assertion. He shrugged his shoulders. Sex, as far as he was concerned, was a necessity. If one opened his eyes and just looked around, he would see that sex touched everything. It was what really motivated people. What they really wanted. He did not see any reason to be ashamed of it. He saw every reason to be good at it. He simply lacked the one advantage of a female. Girls decided. Girls provided. A boy simply had to win their favor.

Alle confronted him about the way he had pursued Anne and Alle so relentlessly, without betraying the fact that only recently did that include her. “I want you,” he confessed frankly. “I want you so bad I can taste you. Sometimes it’s all I can think about. The only thing that keeps me from raping you is the fact that I love you.”

“Keith!” she looked scared, and fought it down. Asserting calm, she demanded, “How can you love me? You don’t even know me.”

He paused. She waited as he studied her. “I can’t explain it. I’d have to have the right to touch you, to convince you if I did explain it.”

“If you really meant what you said,” she pursued the matter, “about how your love is the only thing keeping you from raping me, you had better explain it.”

“Fine, I’ll try to explain. The proof of my love is not anything I can do. It is refraining from doing something I can do. I said rape, because that’s what it is when you refuse to take no for an answer. If you don’t even allow a girl to say no, it’s the same thing in my book.” Keith sighed, “I can’t show you what I can do unless you ask for it.”

“I’m not going to have sex with you Keith, if that’s what you’re getting at,” she warned. “I appreciate that you’ve been so frank, but this conversation has already crossed the line. I hope you have a better way to convince me I can trust you.”

“I know. I am not asking you for that. You asked me to prove my love. After what I said, you’re justified. Rape is not a subtle topic, I’m surprise you didn’t take off running the minute I said it. Thanks to my big mouth, I have to prove two assertions, and both of them are touchy. Both of them can be proven simply if you let me touch you,” he explained, holding up a hand as she opened mouth to cut that idea down. “Get this straight. I am not asking at this time to have sex with you. Furthermore, before I will prove what I am talking about I must assert that I will not have sex with you. Not even if you demand it.”

“What?” she stared at him uncertainly.

“I can only explain if you let me touch you. I promise it won’t be invasive, but it will have a tremendous impact on you. I know that, that’s why I said I won’t have sex with you after I do it. It would be taking advantage of you.”

She considered that. “You’re serious, aren’t you?” He nodded. She paced for a moment, trying to decide if she was in over her head. The suggestion that he could make her beg for sex simply by touching her, touching her in a special way that was otherwise innocent, was unbelievable. So was the notion that the mind could move mountains. She regarded him watching her patiently, and considered what she knew about him. He did, truly want her. In order for that to be a possibility, she had to trust him at least. She wondered if his slip was a slip, after all. It seemed to her a calculated risk. She was not above taking a risk herself. If worse came to worse, Anne knew she was with him. If he so much as pulled her hair too hard, Anne would come down on him like the wrath of God. She nodded her head and approached him. “I accept your terms. You can touch me, just to prove this. What happens next, where we go from there, all depends on you.”

He looked surprised. He had expected her to say no. He massaged his hands and looked in her eyes. She met his gaze, curious, but calm. He nodded, and placed his hands on her bare forearms. He slid his hands down the outside, and them rubbed back up, curling his thumb around to caress the soft skin underneath, probing expertly from her wrist to the inside of her elbows. His hands continued up the outside of her arms, the thumb retreated across her bicep and his other fingers curled around to the inside of her upper arms. Alle stood there, feeling nothing particularly erotic. His touch was somewhere between tickling and teasing. Pleasant, but not gripping. As his fingers completed their upward movement, they pressed tightly into the muscle, and hit a nerve.

She stiffened as a jolt passed down to her fingertips, then a strange, hot, tingling sensation crawled up her arms, following the movement of his fingers, repeating each subtle caress. It felt like a hundred warm, wet tongues licking along her arm, exuding an electric current, and it continued undiminished, reverberating to her own pulse, until he released the pressure he had applied. She gaped down at her arms, The tingling suddenly intensified as the circulation was restored, amplifying the pleasure of the electric caress, piercing her brain with an orgasmic level of sensation confined to her arms and hands. It took a minute for the sensation to evaporate.

“The arms are not very sensitive,” Keith commented absently. “But, they are very important. The density of tactile nerve endings in the hands is matched only in the genitals, and all those nerves are fed through branches in the arms. Any nerve capable of intense pain is also capable of intense pleasure.” Keith gazed steadily back at her when she looked up at him. “I didn’t want to over do it,” he explained, with a strange apologetic tone. “If I wanted to sleep with you, I’d get to know you well enough to offer a massage. With control of your back and neck,” he shrugged. “I think you get the idea. That’s what I can do to anyone. This,” he suddenly reached out, placing his hands on her hips, “is what I can do to you.” His hands rested firmly on her hips, and his thumbs turned up, sliding up her waist, then turned and drove in over the curves of her hip bones. When they rested in the hollows where her abdomen tucked into open splay of her pelvis, she felt a subtler jolt.

Alle tried not to moan as she flushed with warmth and became instantly wet. Applying nothing more than gentle pressure, he evoked the gripping, aching, gut twisting surge of arousal. Her hunger simply mounted, until she could not bear it. “Please,” she gasped. “Stop.”

Keith let her go and stepped back.

She folded to the ground and held herself for several long moments. As she suffered the ache in silence, she berated herself. She knew about neural feedback and pressure points, and had enough experience now with sex to know that simple digital stimulation was all one needed to kick off the big O. A man who combined the two was a girl’s worst nightmare, or her fondest wet dream. Keith had not been bullshitting her. She was convinced. She remained sprawled on the ground, chasing mantras through her head to regain her cool. Once she felt able to stand, she asked if they could go back to the car. She suggested it was about time for dinner. From there, they picked out a restaurant and ate. Neither of them mentioned his demonstration. Neither of them forgot it though. She had no idea whether or not he had proved his love. He had proved his integrity, however. A man who could simply take a woman, who bothered to actually court her, was worthy of respect. He suggested a movie, and that really was a treat for her. She was always missing the chance to go to movies, on account of training or traveling.

It was dark, when Keith finally drove her home. Aside from demonstrating his unique gift, he had been a perfect gentleman the entire night. That one exception had gone over the top. He had been forthcoming and honest about the fact that he desired sex, and could compel her to indulge him, exercising admirable restraint and no hypocrisy. He clearly wanted more than physical intimacy, he wanted her trust. He wanted to win her, not steal her. He was certainly off to a good start. This was not, she told herself firmly, what Anne had in mind when she turned her twin over to him. He was not safe to toy with. She would warn Anne to take him seriously, because he certainly took his interest in them quite seriously. He wanted their sweet, succulent bodies, but he was after their hearts.

It was a shame he was not a member of the Families.

Alle pulled herself up short, reminding herself that he did not have to be. Alle was becoming confident that her life would be lived as a girl, a woman. She did not expect Anne to give up being a girl for her. As long as they were willing to father each other’s children, they could remain as twins, and someone like Keith could be the man in their lives. It startled her to think of it, but now that she had, she undoubtedly would. It bore a great deal of thought.

Life was, after all, unpredictable.

As Keith came around the car to let her out, she looked up at him and smiled, “Hey,” she called for his attention. He gave her a hand out and looked at her intently. “I had a lot of fun,” she declared, smiling. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you decided to risk it.”

“Anne’s right, you are a nice guy,” she mused aloud. Too bad she had no idea how much of a risk she had been taking when she went of alone with him. All the same, it had come out well. It certainly did alter her perspective to confront a man entirely as a girl and know how much he wanted her, how far he would go to seduce her. He had accomplished quite a lot by resolving not to seduce her. He had made a strong, favorable impression. ”It’s nice to be reminded that there are people like you,” she added thoughtfully.

“Shall I walk you to the door?” he offered.

“Please,” she accepted graciously.

“Alle?” he breathed her name quizzically, pausing.

“Hmmm?” she looked up. He gazed down at her intently, almost passionately. “Oh,” she breathed, sensing that he could not, after all be a perfect gentleman. He wanted at least one intimacy from her. He had promised not to touch her, but he was aching to offer her a kiss. She smiled, considering it. Everything had gone very well, up to that point. There he was dropping her off safely at home, and a kiss did not seem unwarranted. She turned her face up to meet his, and he pulled her into his arms. She was closing her eyes, waiting, when the morning’s scene suddenly repeated itself.

In the dark, they had not noticed the car parked across the street. Alle would have recognized it if she had. Neither had they seen the young man who sat on the curb under the tree beside it. He had jumped up when Alle stepped out of the car, and begun to approach silently. Chris had come right up behind them undetected, and when Keith finally got up the nerve to put a move on her, Chris jumped in to defend her. He snaked his arms under Keith’s, then up to clasp his hands together behind Keith’s neck. Applying pressure, he broke the boy out of his embrace with Alle and hauled her back away from her.

“Hey!” Keith protested in surprise.

Chris whipped Keith around and threw him to the ground, giving Alle her first glimpse of their attacker. “Chris?” she voiced her surprise. The boy did not look at her, though. He was stalking Keith as the other boy rolled to his feet. Chris put up his guard and faced her date silently. “Chris! No!” Alle shouted.

Chris was almost as good a martial artist as his friend Jean, and Jean could give Alle a run for her money when she was still a boy. Keith really did not stand a chance, and Alle had to come to his rescue. On Keith’s behalf, he had cunning instincts and great reflexes, and some training. After being jumped once that day, he was a little more alert, and that kept him from getting hurt too bad. Alle cut in before that changed, counterattacking aggressively. Chris was on the defensive the moment he realized who had stepped into the fight.

“Alex?” he pleaded, stumbling back, trying to disengage. “What are you—?“

Keith took advantage of her “distraction” to put Chris down and sit on him. “I’ve got him,” he announced, signaling Alle to call for help. “Fancy moves there. Too bad you picked the wrong couple to jump!” Since neither of them had really spoken, Keith was as certain it was his duty to protect her from Chris as Chris had felt compelled to intercede for little innocent her, naïve to the ways of men simply on account of having become a girl.

“What?” Chris glared up at him. “You think—I was trying to protect her from you!”

“Who the hell are you to interfere?” Keith demanded.

“I’m her friend. Alex, who is this guy?” Chris turned his head, appealing to her. Alle was caught somewhere between wanting to laugh and wanting to scream. She suddenly had some sympathy for Anne’s frustration with her that morning. Alle had to put her foot down to keep the two from engaging each other again. Their mouths were opening to trade insults when she spoke.

“Keith, would you please let him up?” she asked calmly. He looked at her for a moment, realizing she was serious, and then cautiously stood up and stepped away from Chris. As Chris scrambled to his feet, Alle positioned herself between them. Putting her hand on Chris’s shoulder, she turned to Keith and announced, “Keith, this is Chris, my friend from up north.” Turning to Chris, she finished the introduction, “Chris, this is Keith, my date.”

“Friend? Don’t you mean, ex?” Keith muttered suspiciously.

“Date? You do move fast.” Chris accused, at the same time.

“Whoa. Both of you slow down,” Alle commanded, glaring at both of them. It was going to take a bit, following introductions all around, to get them thinking. Turning to Keith, she asserted firmly, “Chris is not that kind of friend, Keith. He just overreacted, he’s been a bit protective since my accident.” Without bothering to explain her accident, she turned to Chris. “Keith here is just bringing me home from a date. I went out with him to make up for getting into a fight with him this morning,” she explained. “But there’s nothing going on between us, you understand me, Chris?” she drove it home. “Neither one of you is my ‘boyfriend’ so you have nothing to fight over. Got it?” she asked them insistently.

Once that was clear, and they apologized for jumping to those conclusions, she got them to shake hands and stop bristling at each other.

“Alright. I hope I didn’t hurt you, Keith. I was just looking out for Alex,” Chris said.

“It’s alright. I understand,” the other boy assured him. Keith still bristled after Alle’s assertion that there was nothing between him and her. He kept it off his face, however. He had accomplished too much tonight to throw it away. Technically, Alle was right. There was nothing between them. Yet.

Alle turned to her friend. “Chris, what are you doing here?” she finally asked.

“I need to talk to you,” he replied simply. “It’s urgent.”

Urgent, maybe, but obviously important enough to make him drive eight hours to speak to her about it, she granted. She considered the situation and decided he could wait a few minutes more. “Fine,” she nodded, pointing across the street. “Go wait in your car, I’ll be done in a minute.” Chris absorbed that and accepted it silently. Alle and her date watched him march across the street, and vanish into the shadow of the tree. Alle sighed and looked up at the boy beside her. “I’m sorry, Keith. That’s twice in one day. Now I owe you again.”

Alle held Chris off long enough to give Keith a proper kiss good night. She had already offered it to him, after the trouble she resolved to really make it worth it. It occurred to her deep down, as she gave him her mouth, that the next time he would be twice as macho and three times as eager to get her in bed.

“Mmm. I accept your apology,” he murmured, holding her in his arms a moment longer. He sighed, finally and let her go. “I guess I don’t need to see you to the door. I’ll see you at school tomorrow,” he promised.

“Wednesday,” she quickly corrected. “We only have classes three days a week.”

He smiled at her, “Alright then. Wednesday it is.” He walked around to his door and climbed into his car. Once he drove off, she turned and crossed the street.

“Alright, Chris. What’s wrong?” she asked, stepping into the shadows and giving him her full attention. He studied her silently, for a moment, and then looked up at the house. She noticed that he was all wound up, and sensed it had nothing to do with the little tussle he had just been in. Chris edged toward his car, and silently urged her inside. She looked back at the house and saw a figure in the window looking out at her. She gave an all-clear signal and the figure moved away. Chris was sitting in the car, so she shrugged her shoulders and joined him. There was clearly a lot on his mind. He seemed to be struggling with himself over how to start. When she prodded him again, he turned and gave her a pleading look.

“Can we go somewhere private?”

“Sure.”

Alle took a quick ride with Chris. Since he insisted on going somewhere private, she gave him directions to the new house. They drove in silence. In a few minutes, they had left the center of town and the lighted streets behind. Rising out of the little valley where Anne and her family lived, they turned onto a canyon road and cut up into the hills. As they pulled up into the drive, Alle jumped out and opened the gate for Chris, then she climbed back in the car after he drove through. The long drive ended in a round about with room for many cars to park in front of the palatial house. As Chris killed the motor, Alle turned to him.

“This is my fiancée’s new house,” she announced. “It’s empty now, we won’t be interrupted.” Chris accepted that assurance with a nod and climbed out of the car in unison with Alle. She led him to a side gate, rather than the front door. He followed her into the landscaped haven, looking about in approval. The fiancée situation still needed some explanation, but clearly, Alex was marrying into a clan with money. They found a bench in the atrium where they could sit down and talk. “Here’s a comfortable spot,” Alle indicated, taking a seat. Chris joined her, supporting his back against one of the flanking columns. “Now, what’s so important you had to come all the way down her to see me?” she resumed asking.

“This is difficult for me to explain,” he began.

“Take your time,” she urged patiently.

He told her he had not been able to keep his mind off of what had happened to her. She thought her father had explained the whole thing, but he shook his head. He did not have a problem with psionics, he stated, the concept had been around for a long time, and he had already believed in it anyway. For that matter, he had spent a good part of his life trying to figure out how to tap into it.

“It’s you,” he emphasized, “that I’ve spent so much time thinking about.”

At first, she did not understand. He asked her a lot of questions about her change. How she felt about it, how she felt about herself before and after it happened, and about the potential of human minds to become either male or female, why a more evolved person would be compelled to develop as both male and female, and how a person knew which he-she really was. She had asked herself a lot of those questions, but as he asked them, she got the idea that he was trying to approach a more personal level of understanding. Her father’s initial explanation had covered most of what she could say about the effect of sex and gender on the mind’s potential. The rest she could answer somewhat from her experience.

“I am still coming to terms with being a girl. I have to admit, it never crossed my mind before it happened, to think about how I felt about being a boy. I was a boy,” she stated. “It didn’t seem to demand a lot of contemplation. I suppose I took my sex for granted. I never considered I might have a choice in the matter. Now I think about it a lot. I have to.” She played with her skirt, thinking of what she had put herself through that day. “I would not be who I am now, if I hadn’t been a boy—nor if I had not been a girl. It’s like I didn’t fully exist until this happened. Technically, I can be either, or both.”

“It doesn’t sound like you’re very happy with that,” Chris observed.

“It does,” she admitted. “Remember what I said about psi being a burden? This is what I meant. Psi makes it possible for a person to be true, in the sense that a truth is ultimately self-defining. At the same time, it confronts you with all these possibilities you might otherwise take for granted, and tells you that you have to choose. It forces you to confront the fact that you are responsible for what you are, even if you neglect that responsibility. Especially, if you neglect that responsibility. Submitting to someone else’s idea of things is still a choice, and once you define yourself that way, you are that way. You have to change yourself to change that. It’s hard to change yourself, Chris,” she looked at him meaningfully.

“Believe me,” he murmured, “that is one thing I am very familiar with.” He studied her carefully, and ventured cautiously, “But you have changed. I am stunned at how much you have changed. You’re a very beautiful girl, Alex. You’ve always been an amazing person, but this new you, I can’t get over it.” He pulled out the envelope he still had in his pocket and handed it to her. She took it carefully as he explained to her the other message her letter had contained. She sniffed it carefully as he said, “I was not sure at first what it meant. I knew you could become a boy, and you made it clear that your fiancée is a girl. Just the same, my instincts tell me you have totally embraced being a girl.”

“What is it you’re really asking of me?” she pressed, after looking at him for a long moment. “I mean, I can see it in your eyes. There’s been this hunger there ever since I changed. You’ve restrained yourself,” she noted admiringly, “but it’s costing you a lot. I can tell.” Chris and Jean had been her friends for a long time. They all met when they were kids, and they had made the effort to maintain their friendship through long absences. In all that time, Chris had been the one Alexander had felt the most affection for, and Alexander the one Chris had confided in most. On account of his secrets, Alexander had not been as open, but what Jean had often refused to be sucked into talking about, Chris had been eager to debate. Chris had despaired of miracles, though. He had looked too hard and found nothing, and his frustration had led Alexander to conclude that he would not cope well with the truth. Chris was too conscious of the consequences of things. The burden of psi would have been unbearable.

If that was not in fact what had driven him to seek Alle out now, then it had to be the way his affection for his friend had changed when she did. Chris was thinking about her question, her following assertions. He seemed to be struggling with himself. Dredging his mind for a way to say what he really wanted. Alle had the strange sensation that he wanted to ask her to have sex with him, and could not bring himself to ask outright. Instead, he was going to the trouble to find out if she considered herself a real girl, with a girl’s desires, and to assure her that he accepted her as such. He admired her deeply for it, in fact.

“I really am a girl,” she asserted. She decided to make it easy for him, and spelled it out. “I can understand how that might change the way you feel about me. I can understand how difficult it must be for you, trying to get past who I was to approach me for who I am now. Even Jean, who’s so careful to treat me just the same, molests me with his eyes. I am not offended, Chris. The two of you are my closest friends. I would not despise you for asking more of me now. I have always liked you,” she assured him compassionately. “I would be honored to have sex with you. It would make me very happy to be that much closer to you.”

Instead of reassuring him, that seemed to make him more upset. He asked her more questions. “How would you feel if I had been the one who had changed? If you were still a guy and I miraculously turned into a girl,” he sketched it out, stressing, “and I proposed the same thing?” Her experience with Anne came to her aid. She asserted that it depended solely on who he was, not what he happened to be. If she liked Chris the person, she would be happy to embrace Chris the girl.

In a spurt of abject honesty, she confessed, “If I really liked a person, I would change my sex just so I could embrace that person.” Then she asked him,” Are you turning me down?”

He doubled back quickly asserting fiercely, “I do want you. That’s the problem.” She raised her eyebrows at that. How could that be the problem? He took a deep breath and tried to explain. “When I saw you become a girl, I had an epiphany. It was a genuine miracle, and the doors of possibility were blown wide open,” he declared, a touch of his initial awe returning. Then his face fell. “When I realized that I was still overwhelmingly attracted to you, I felt crushed. I’ve been consumed by doubts ever since.”

Alle held her breath, asking herself if she had heard him right. She faced him squarely and asked him to confirm her interpretation, “Are you trying to tell me you’re gay?” He gave her a shocked look, then burst out laughing—so hard he started crying. She became alarmed at the sound of pain in that awful outburst. He tried several times to speak, but he would just double over and start roaring again. She had to grab him and shake him to make it stop. After he calmed down, he sighed deeply and wiped his eyes.

Once he could focus his eyes on her again, he laughed once softly and came right out with it. “I’m not gay,” he asserted firmly, pausing oddly in consideration and adding, “or maybe I am, all things considered, but that’s not my problem. My problem,” he spelled it out carefully, “is that I am a girl.”