

Assignment: Futurist (an Institute story)

by Wrestlr

[M/M, MC]

Synopsis: The mind controller has to deal with a trainee on a mission to recruit a precognitive. An Institute story, and sequel to "[Assignment: Tracker](#)."

Disclaimer: The naked hypnotist strides confidently into your room. His lips curl in what might be a smile as he dangles his shiny crystal pendulum before your eyes and announces, "Listen and obey. If you are not of legal age, or if you offended by sexual situations, you will leave this place immediately. From here on, no matter how realistic it may appear, everything will seem like fiction to you, a pleasant dream where scientific possibilities and laws may change according to my suggestion. Now, if you are willing, sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride."

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Author's note: This story is a sequel to "[Assignment: Tracker](#)" and follows the events of "[Change of Plans](#)."

Assignment: Futurist

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1.

Robots. I *hate* fighting robots.

Why does every self-styled evil genius decide his ultimate creation is going to be some army of killer robots? Do they have annual Evil Genius Conventions or something where they compare master plans for world domination that feature killer robots? Why isn't their plan ever to--oh, I don't know-- capture the hottest military man they can find and clone him four thousand times into an obedient

army? I could handle an army of four thousand hot soldiers. As long as the lube supply holds out, at least.

But against robots, my telepathy is useless. I have to deal with rampaging killer robots just the same way a Normal would: by running from them or by shooting them. Repeatedly. Give me a gun--or better yet, a rocket launcher--and I can deal with robots. As long as the ammo supply holds out, at least.

Right then, the three of us were doing a lot of both: running and shooting. That's why I was glad, for once, to have this man beside me. The Colonel is a remarkably efficient killing machine, only of the human variety. I don't know whether he's a Talent like me, or just a well-trained Normal who enjoys shooting things--I mean, really, really enjoys shooting things. And is good at it. The Colonel told me when we were first assigned together that, if he ever so much as suspected I was scanning him with my telepathy, he'd put a bullet through my brain before I could blink. I believed him then, and everything I'd seen him do since has made me glad I did. Which means I never tried to get a definitive answer to the whole *Talent versus Normal* question as far as he was concerned. He was my handler, and he could kill me just as easily as he incapacitated these oncoming robots, and that's all I needed to know. Oh, sure, the higher-ups would probably have complained if he did put a bullet through my brain, and there'd probably be a couple of forms for his paperwork-hating self to fill out, but fat lot of good that would do *me* if I were dead. And generally speaking, I didn't want to be dead. Dead didn't sound like much fun.

Speaking of oncoming hordes of robotic death, we were in the path of one at the time. "Shoot for the neck!" the Colonel shouted to me over the cackling of the evil genius *de jour* blasting from the loudspeakers. Because--yes, of course--the most vulnerable part of these robots *would* happen to be the hardest spot to hit with bullets.

And speaking of cackling evil geniuses, why do they all laugh like that?--It's always some variation of the same laugh. At those annual conventions, do they hold workshops on how to do it? Introduction to Maniacal Guffaws? Advanced Sinister Snickering? And this genius *de jour* was a master of the fine art of cackling. I mean, seriously, who can laugh like that for five minutes straight without taking a breath? Just try it sometime.

"What?" I shouted back at the Colonel over the din. Because obviously his *no telepathy or I'll kill you* rule meant I couldn't just connect us up mind-to-mind for a little genteel conversation in the midst of this melee.

The Colonel was shooting robots in the neck with his usual unerring efficiency and trademark grimness. One robot, one bullet. He's a peerless marksman, whereas I'm more a *spray 'em with bullets and hope to hit something vital* type of shooter. The Colonel flicked one of his guns toward the overhead loudspeaker and--*bang!*--destroyed it with one bullet, same as always, and then there was no more evil laughter deafening me.

"Thank you," I shouted at the Colonel.

Because, really, who wouldn't rather listen to gunfire and the cacophony of an oncoming horde of robotic death?

Me?--I wisecrack under pressure. That's just my way of dealing with stressful situations. And pardon me if I call being chased by a hundred mechanical marvels hell-bent on killing me a stressful situation.

What worked most in our favor was the tight space. The three of us were retreating--a polite way to say running for our lives--down a long hallway, but the relatively confined width meant only three or four robots had a clear line at us at any given time. Shoot them, and then their mechanical siblings had to take a moment to step over the wreckage before they got their shot at us. Their shot at being shot at by us. Heh. Damn--sometimes I crack myself up.

Still, it was just a matter of time until a robot got lucky, or we ran out of ammo, or more robots appeared at the opposite end of the hall and cut off our fall-back route. Hey, in real life, stuff like that happens.

"How're you coming, Junior?" I yelled over my shoulder at the new kid as I popped out an empty clip and jammed in a fresh one. Hey, this ain't the movies--in real life, guns need to be reloaded.

"Junior's" name was Jase, but I couldn't be bothered with details like that at the moment. He had a firearm but, since the Colonel and I were mostly between him and the oncoming robots, he couldn't do much with it--not without likely shooting one of us in the back, that is. I hoped he handled pressure well enough to realize that would be a ... What do they call it? Right: A Very Bad Idea. Body armor or no, the Colonel does *not* like getting accidentally shot by one of his own team. Trust me on that.

No, Junior had another role in this particular situation, and he knew it. This time, his main weapon was his Talent, and his job was to find us a way out of that situation before the inevitable reinforcement robots put in their appearance at the other end of the hall and caught us in the crossfire. If that happened, we were well and truly fucked. Unlike robots, real life doesn't come with a reset button.

"Come on, Junior! Time's a-wasting here!" Dammit, if he didn't hurry up, I'd shoot him myself and save the robots the trouble.

Oncoming robotic death situations tend to make me impatient. Sue me.

Junior--Jase--looked around, then up. There wasn't much to see in this hallway, but he wasn't looking with his eyes. He was a Talent, a telepath like me. And he'd just found what he was searching for, then checked it against the building schematics we'd memorized. Good boy. "There!" he shouted and pointed at a door. "That way!"

Rule number one: When you're in a fight with the odds stacked against you, change the game. Well, maybe it's not rule number one, but it's got to be in the top ten.

We were on a mission, and the best way to get out of this situation and complete the mission was to take the fight to the evil genius *de jour*. Looked to me like Junior had successfully cut through the noise of the hostages' minds--terrified people's thoughts are *loud*--and found our evil genius. Either that, or Junior just guessed right.

We'd debrief on that later. Right then, Junior and I were too busy busting through the door while the Colonel kept whittling away at the oncoming robot ranks.

2.

The Institute wanted more field teams. The higher-ups hauled the Colonel and me, one of the best teams, back to review a trio of candidates. We were to evaluate them, select one, then haul him around with us in the field to show him the ropes. Eventually, once the higher-ups thought he was ready and were confident he'd be a good little soldier, he'd be paired with a handler-partner of his own and they'd be sent out into the world. Standard familiarization procedure.

The Colonel and I agreed one candidate, a telekinetic, wasn't ready. When we hauled him through the "killer robot" training scenario, he froze, multiple times. One time we could understand--lots of people freeze during an early mission before they learn to handle the stress, and they still go on to successful field careers. That's the purpose of training missions, and that's why we work in teams. But people who freeze more than once usually go into a body bag.

The Colonel was pushing for candidate number two, a pyrokinetic. The extra firepower, he argued--in this case, the power to start fires with just a thought--would come in handy in the field. I wasn't so sure, and I pointed out that what we did often required a more ... surgical touch than just *burn the whole place down*. Flamethrowers are great weapons, but for only for specialized purposes.

That left candidate number three—Junior, Jase, whatever--the telepath. Of course, I called all the candidates *Junior*, since I wasn't about to clutter up a brain cell remembering the names of people I might never see again. They'd have to earn some respect before I'd bother.

Junior the telepath had good scores and he did well on the first test against the simulated evil genius and his army of robots. Came pretty close to record time, actually--and I should know because I was the one who set that record. Of course, Junior didn't know it was "simulation" until after it was over. What would be the point of telling him in advance? We told him he was accompanying us on a mission, something milquetoast, and we hauled him a couple of hours into the middle of fucking nowhere. The plan was, once we got underway, everything about the mission would suddenly seem to go tits-up--which happens more often in real life than one might expect. Our bullets were real. The robots were real. The "hostages," thanks to a little telepathic illusion in advance, were convinced they were in immediate mortal danger. The "evil genius *de jour's*" mind was partially shielded to keep Junior from reading anything but the surface thoughts that had been planted there. For us to learn how he operated under life-or-death pressure, Junior had to believe he was in a life-or-death situation.

The whole purpose of the simulation process was to take the candidates out of their comfort zones in several different ways. People with Talents tend to rely on their Talents. That's understandable--that's what the Institute trains them to do. The question was whether they could cope with situations where their Talents were not applicable or outright useless. Robots are great for that--since they don't have minds, telepathy doesn't work on them; they can be made fireproof enough to resist pyrokinesis; and they can be counterweighted against telekinesis or made just too damned heavy. Oh, and guns don't scare them, either.

Back at the Institute, for the remainder of his assessment period, Junior got uprooted from his normal dorm room and assigned to bunk with me in the "guest quarters" used by field teams on the rare occasions when they had to be at the Institute. The accommodations weren't fancy--even cheap hotels were nicer--but this was part of his evaluation. During his assessment, he would be treated as if he were a field agent. Everything that happened over the next few days would be an evaluation. This particular stage would determine whether he could stand to be in confined quarters for extended

periods with nothing to do, the sort of thing that happened on the road when a team was sequestered in some fleabag hotel room, or got captured by one of those evil genius types. I was always amazed at the number of candidates who got cabin fever and flaked out.

Plus, sometimes two telepaths in a room was a recipe for trouble. No physical or mental privacy? Some people couldn't handle it. Field agents needed to be versatile enough to handle just about anything.

I'd been back to the Institute only a handful of times in the last couple of years. The Colonel and I had been back once shortly after that time with Cowboy—Billy, whatever—and again shortly after Dion's half-brother had been captured thanks to us. Cowboy. Dion. I still thought about them a lot, and sometimes I wondered what had ever happened to them, where they were now. And not just because they were each great sex. I'd sensed a connection to them, like maybe under different circumstances we could have been friends, or more. Assuming they didn't want to kill me, that is.

Better push those thoughts away, I decided. Sometimes telepaths can pick up on impressions from each other without trying, and I didn't want Junior picking up on my little erotic fantasy starring Cowboy and Dion right then.

I strolled out of the shower--if I could call that glorified cubbyhole with running water a "shower"--wearing nothing but a towel around my waist and another that I used to dry my hair. At least the hot water was plentiful. "Man, there's nothing like a good hot shower at the end of a long day, is there?" I said, pretending casual conversation to put Junior at ease.

He was sprawled on his stomach, propped up on his elbows, on the opposite bed--if the narrow little mattress could be called a "bed." Even though Junior pretended to be paging nonchalantly through some briefing materials on his tablet computer, he couldn't hide his nervousness. The more he tried to act unconcerned, the more he looked tighter than a coiled spring. I didn't need my telepathy; I could see it in the corners of his eyes, his fidgety hands. Junior was probably about twenty-one, maybe twenty-two. His years of training were nearly over, and the next few days would determine a lot about his future with the Institute and the types of assignments he would be given. He had no way of knowing what was a test, or when. All Junior knew was that he was bunking in a room with one of the top field agents--that would be me, since the Colonel made sure he never shared a room with a Talent if he could help it--and that field agent held his future in the palm of his hand. One slip-up and ...

Well, Junior knew what failure could mean. Not all of these tests were non-lethal.

I sat on the edge of my bed, against the opposite wall from his, though the cramped quarters didn't keep us that far apart. I spread my knees a little as I worked the other towel down my neck and--

Did Junior just try to sneak a glimpse under my towel? Well, well. Junior and I might have more in common than I originally thought.

I decided to tease him a little--a different kind of test. I spread my knees just a bit wider, as if unintentionally, to see what he would do. He pretended to read the screen, but his head bobbed down a little, and his eyes flicked at my knees. Yep, definitely trying to steal a glimpse of my equipment.

I'm a good-looking man. I could understand why he'd want a peek.

I stood up and turned my back to him. I rummaged in my bag for fresh underwear. My plan was to drop my towel, give Junior a quick look at my ass as I pulled on my underwear, and then flop out on the bed to resume teasing him some more.

Junior shifted until he was sitting on the edge of his bed. He asked me some inane question about what to expect at the briefing tomorrow, which he knew I wouldn't answer, an obvious distraction ploy.

I felt Junior's telepathy reach out, jus a tendril, and probe ever so faintly against my mental defenses. Until now, he'd minded the *no telepathy on the agents* rule and hadn't tried to push the boundaries. I was flattered he found me tempting enough to risk it.

Now, for most telepaths, there are things they learn on their own when they first manifest their Talents. Then, there's more stuff they learn at the Institute, which makes them stronger and more finessed. But, then there's stuff we field agents learn when we're out in the world fighting for our lives day in and day out, and that makes our Talents hardcore. Most people who only had Institute training probably wouldn't have even been aware of Junior's probe. It slid over the back of my mind, looking for a weak point in my defenses where it could push inside undetected. He probably planned to influence me to drop my towel and turn around so he could get a good full-frontal look.

But where most Talents' psi-defenses are a wall that's thinner toward the "back" of their minds because all their cognitive workings are "up front," Junior learned my defenses were a serious barrier. Three hundred and sixty degrees in three dimensions of battle-hardened psi-force. First, he seemed curious, then impressed, and then a little nervous because he was discovering I was in a whole different league from him, his instructors, and probably every other telepath he'd ever encountered before.

As I turned around, Junior discovered something else about my telepathy. While his was subtle, mine was a whole different league of covert. Before he realized what was happening, my telepathy ran back along his tendril, sneaking past *his* defenses and into his mind. My thoughts grabbed hold of that tendril, solidified it like a rope leashing his mind, and yanked.

Junior gasped, wide-eyed, as he suddenly found himself compelled forward off the mattress and onto his knees on the floor before me.

"Naughty boy. Not as sneaky as you thought you were, huh," I scolded.

"How--?" he gasped. The expression on his face and the thoughts running through his head could be summarized as: *Uh-oh!* His mind was flailing but he couldn't find anything inside his head that was me--anything that wasn't him. In other words, he couldn't find the source of my incursion or how I was doing this, which meant he had no idea how to fight it.

"Telepathic subversion," I told him. "I corrupted your little probe, and now I'm using your own telepathy against you." Which was accurate, but not informative enough to give him much to work with.

Then, thank heavens, he tried something else. I'd have been pissed if he'd just knelt there and accepted it. I was looking for fighters; I was looking for spirit.

He slammed the full force of his telepathy against me, aiming for one of the traditional weak points in mental defenses. It was a damned good strike too--sharp and fast as a scorpion's strike. Unfortunately for him, it was as effective against my defenses as a child's squirt gun against a battleship.

His expression and thoughts turned to: *Oh, fuck!*

"Nice try," I said, trying not to sound too condescending because it really *was* a good try. "Don't forget: No matter how strong you are, there's always someone stronger."

"Yes, sir," he gasped, still struggling to find how I'd done this. Yeah, Junior had plenty of spirit. He was especially confused because his thoughts seemed unaffected; he was completely aware of what was going on and how much he wanted to break free. Junior had probably played lots of telepathic domination and submission games with his fellow trainees--the Institute likes to pretend nothing of the sort goes on, but what else would they expect when they pack a bunch of kids with mental Talents together in what's basically a glorified boarding school? Junior, though, had never played a game where he didn't know the rules. He was probably used to being the winner, or at least having a level playing field. He didn't much like being checkmated after his first move, but at the same time he respected my skill. He looked up at me with eyes wide with surprise, aggression, and something very much like arousal.

Well, well. Apparently Junior and I really did have that something in common after all. Something very important.

His telepathy squiggled and squirmed, but I held his mind tightly leashed. "Stop that," I scolded him. Time to use the leash to guide his thoughts, just like walking a dog. Time to see if I was right about that something we had in common. "Be a good boy and you might just get what you want after all. Understand?"

He didn't--I could feel his confusion--but he did the right thing and agreed: "Yes, sir."

"You started this little party. Now, you're going to finish it."

He blinked and gulped at the same time. "Ah ... Huh?" He looked at my crotch and the appendage rising underneath the towel, then back up at my eyes, trying desperately to read my thoughts, my expression, my tone of voice—anything to help him figure out what was going to happen next.

I decided to throw him a bone, and I allowed an impression to slip past my defenses so that Junior could pick up on it: *Teasing* rather than *threatening*.

I gave the mental leash a little tug to nudge him along. His thoughts were blazing with arousal. The boy was well-versed in games of telepathic submission, and he seemed to like it. Yeah, he was definitely willing, and definitely wanted this. He was so turned on he was about to cum right where he knelt, without even touching himself or me.

Then he reached for my towel, and the party was underway.

Were I prone to introspection, I might have said I was looking for that brief moment of dissolution during orgasm when things left undone, unsaid, and everything else disappeared and the world was nothing more than a bright splash of pleasure. Fortunately, I wasn't the introspective type. I just liked to cum.

I won't go into the mechanics. I'll just say that Junior had a willing ass, a nice-sized dick, an effective repertoire of things to do with both, and a lot of enthusiasm for the doing thereof. Yeah, definitely a lot of enthusiasm. Stamina, too. That part of the game he played very well. So well, in fact, that we only got a couple of hours sleep that night.

The next morning, when we met the Colonel at God-awful o'clock for breakfast, he knew what my expression--equal parts bleary, smug, and satisfied--meant. And I don't think he liked the way those expressions Junior was giving me had turned from *respectful* to full-on *puppy crush*. "Dammit," the Colonel grumbled at me under his breath, "please tell me you do not plan on fucking each and every damned one of them?"

I checked to make sure Junior wasn't eavesdropping. The Colonel and I, we'd had this conversation before, many times. I shrugged and grinned, like always. "Only the ones I like," I said.

3.

"The assignment is routine," the Colonel said as he gave us the updated dossier on our next target. "We are to secure the target and bring him back here to the Institute. He is a twelve-year-old boy."

The Colonel gave me a smirk that said: *Finally, here's one you won't try to fuck.*

I fired back a smirk of my own that said: *Finally, here's one you won't try to shoot.*

Because really, what grown man needs a firearm to handle a twelve-year-old boy? Just knock the phone out of the kid's hand and he's reduced to a helpless emotional wreck. The same thing applies to a lot of grown men too.

"So why us?" I asked. "This sounds like standard recruitment stuff. Why send an operations team instead of a recruiter?" Junior would be tagging along. He'd passed all of the previous evaluations, and this would be a sort of final exam, to see how he handled himself on an actual field job. The brass handing us a softball assignment for his trial run made sense, but something sounded too easy. This just didn't seem worth our involvement when the Institute had a whole corps of recruiters whose job was to spot, tag, and bag budding young Talents for "recruitment" and send them back to the Institute for evaluation and training.

"The boy is precognitive. He can foresee the future. Exceptionally accurate, but short-term--so far, reports indicate he can foresee up to about twenty-four hours in advance."

I nodded. Okay, so I should have read the preliminary dossier last night instead of fucking around with Junior. But I could wing this. "So he'll know we're coming," I mused. Precogs are rare, the rarest kind of Talent--incredibly valuable, and often the least reliable. The future isn't always a set path--precognition often involves foreseeing multiple possible outcomes. Glimpses of the future don't always tell which possible outcome is most likely, how to get there, what really happens, or what the long-term consequences will be. Too many variables. But there had to be more to warrant our involvement. "So ... the brass doesn't want a recruiter fucking this up. Still ..."

I noticed the detail just as Junior enthused, "But we're going to Darven! I think that's so cool!"

The Institute had no charter to operate in clan counties. A functional precog was important enough that the Institute was willing to risk an international incident in order to get him.

Okay. Maybe this wasn't such a softball assignment after all.

Junior hadn't been out of the country before. I had, often, plus I'd been to Darven before. It's a culling country. If we got in and out without running afoul of the local authorities, fine. But if not, the Institute probably wouldn't get its precog and might have an international incident on its hands, which wouldn't reflect well on any of our performance evaluations--assuming we lived through the experience. Dead people don't need performance evaluations.

The Colonel said, "We have reason to believe the local government may have learned of him, so we'll have to move quickly to find him and retrieve him. We've got a ticking clock on this one."

And there it was, the stinking turd that justified bringing us into the picture. Government interest virtually guaranteed a clash with the local military, which virtually guaranteed a shoot-out. The Colonel must have practically creaming his pants with anticipation. Eww.

By early afternoon that day, after a high-speed flight to a friendly neighboring nation and then a commuter flight under aliases into Darven itself, we were in a rental car in Javennek, a mid-sized coastal resort town some distance north of the capital city of Darvenek. I'd been to Darven before, but not to Javennek. The last time I was in Darven was six months before, when I encountered Dion and used him to get information that led to his half-brother being apprehended. This time, I spent the trip trying hard not to think about Dion. Junior spent the whole trip practically vibrating with excitement--which, as a telepath, was exhausting for me to be near. The boy seriously needed to work on *not* broadcasting his enthusiasm sometimes.

Darven is a clan nation. They breed selectively for genetic consistency, and the Darven-clan standard stresses curly blond hair within a certain color range, two allowed facial types, five body types. "Full-clan" standard Darvens are easy to identify, but individuals are hard to recognize; since they all look nearly identical, they're difficult for outsiders like me to tell apart, at least not without checking their thought patterns for confirmation.

Darven-clan people don't like out-clans. And they really don't like Talents. The whole purpose of their eugenics program originally was to breed out the Talent gene. The few "throwbacks" that manifest they handle by culling, a government-sanctioned program that's a fancy way of saying they killed Talents there, on sight. If the government got its hands on our little precog, chances are he'd be foreseeing a very short future for himself.

Javennek was a dichotomy: a former center of commerce fallen on hard times, except for the parts that catered to the tourist trade, and the beaches meant it still had a thriving business as a trendy resort town. Lots of beachfront hotels and tropical lushness for the tourists on the ocean side of the city, and lots of disintegrating factories, warehouses, and urban blight on the inland side, left over from the economic collapse that left most of the locals dependent on either the tourist trade for a living or organized crime. Corruption was a way of life here.

Fortunately for us, even the cheap hotels were in the touristy side of the city. Just in case we needed the cover or had to stay the night, the Colonel booked us into two rooms: one for himself, the other for Junior and me. That was fine by me. The Colonel probably thought putting Junior and me in a room together was a way of telegraphing that he viewed me as little better than a glorified babysitter. Me, I viewed it as a brief respite from a man who slept in a bulletproof vest and teddy bear boxer shorts, with more firepower stashed under his pillow for ready access than most police stations. Certainly

Junior was better scenery. Maybe I could take advantage of his crush for another all-night tour of his tonsils and ass.

We stashed our minimal bags--this was no vacation--and met back in the lobby twenty minutes later.

The dossier had been light on a few facts, like exactly where this boy lived. Finding him wasn't going to be as simple as driving our overpriced rental car right to his door. Still, compared to our usual assignments, this one was a walk on the beach--maybe literally.

"Well?" the Colonel scowled at me over his trademark sunglasses.

Shit flows downhill, as saying goes--although in my experience, its mode of transit has always been more projectile--so I turned to Junior and said, "Well?"

He blinked behind his own brand-new sunglasses, which I suspected had been purchased from the hotel's convenient gift shop minutes before our lobby rendezvous. "Uh ... The dossier said he makes cash doing 'fortune telling' for tourists on the beaches near the trendier hotels. We should start there. Scan the crowd. Look for a booth or see if anyone has seen a sign advertising psychic readings, or if someone is thinking about this amazing fortune teller. That might point us in the right direction."

Well, give Junior a cookie. That was exactly the plan I would have come up with. Really--I would've.

The Colonel looked at me smugly. "Maybe I should give him your job. Thirty seconds, and we already have a plan that doesn't involve you fucking all the bellhops."

Grr. I volleyed back with, "Or you threatening the concierge at gunpoint."

Casual clothes. For the Colonel, it meant no bulletproof vest, at least not on the outside of his clothes where people could see it. For Junior and me, that meant no Institute *i* logo on our clothes to warn the Normals. Junior was nervous about that at first, because the need to be marked at all times was instilled in Institute recruits from day one, but I reminded him that our laws didn't apply here in Darven. Too, we were there incognito. Tee-shirts, shorts, sandals. The ear bud and hidden microphone I used to stay in touch with the Colonel were nearly invisible. Junior and I were just two tourists out for a stroll along the beach, while the Colonel stayed hidden and did ... uhm, whatever he did as our backup. Tee-shirts and shorts don't provide much cover for his concealed weapons. Close proximity to salt air and beach sand probably wasn't good for his favorite firearms anyway.

The day was beautiful. The sand and sea, beautiful. The crowd of tourists?--A nearly deafening mental cacophony as we fished through the tide of thoughts roaring around us. Imagine trying to listen for the sound of a mouse coughing under the symphony hall stage while the orchestra blasts through the more strident passages by Wagner.

Listening in on the innermost thoughts of one's fellow humanity ranges from the completely inane to downright scary. One minute I was sifting through stultifying crap like that guy over there--*How do I tell her I'll need a second job to pay for this*--or that woman over there--*Did I remember to turn off the stove*--and the next I'm wading through the sick filth of the overweight man over there who was thinking about the time he raped a barely pubescent girl and without a hint of remorse--*Yeah, she was begging for it, I bet that one there would beg for it too, pink bikini, she's just asking for it, or maybe that one ...* Ugh. I didn't have time to plant a compulsion for him to turn himself in to the authorities when he got back home, but I memorized his name and address. After this mission was over, I'd pass the information to the police. Fortunately, as an Institute-certified telepath, my testimony would be

admissible in court and the authorities could follow up on it by bringing this asshole in for questioning. He'd probably crack within minutes.

Focus on the mission, I told myself. That guy's just a distraction.

At some point, Junior peeled off his tee-shirt, whether because of the heat or just to catch some rays, as we strolled and probed, which added a whole new level of distraction for me. I was too professional to get a crush on a trainee, but I could certainly appreciate a good-looking young man when I saw one. No harm in that.

After we'd walked nearly the whole length of beach adjoining the tonier hotels--and found a whole lot of nothing, might I add--I hauled us over to a beachside drink stand. Tourists come and go, sure, and we were only scanning surface thoughts, but no one seemed to have fortune telling or psychic readings on their minds.

I needed a drink. I slid myself onto a barstool under the shady eaves of the drink stand. Junior slid onto the one next to me, his back to the bar, still looking away through his sunglasses at the ocean, apparently playing the distant younger trophy-boyfriend. So rude--obviously I was only a couple of years older than he, far too young to be his sugar daddy. If he hadn't been so intent on scanning the crowd and doing a thorough job on the assignment, I'd have been insulted. I decided to be impressed instead by how easily he fell into a role that seemed perfectly to fit the context of our *upscale tourists* cover story.

The handsome barista was a poster boy for Darven-clan breeding. Fortunately, I found the look hot as hell. Curly blond hair. Golden skin. Athletic. Shirt open down the front. High-wattage smile. Yum. He probably found his looks to be quite an advantage in attracting patrons and increasing the size of his tips.

I flashed the handsome barista my best *big tipper* smile and said, "Something cold and non-alcoholic for my boyfriend and me. I don't care what. Surprise us." If Junior could play the part of the disaffected wealthy, so could I.

The barista returned two minutes later with a big grin and two fruit-and-umbrella concoctions that looked almost syrupy sweet. I took the tip of the straw between my lips, sucked in a sip ... and nearly went into a sugar coma.

I forced a smile. "Delicious." At least it was cold and wet.

"Thanks," the barista grinned. "It's my specialty. Most people think it's too sweet ..."

Well, score one for the collective intelligence of the rest of the human race. Maybe the Darven-clan had found a way to breed out tooth decay.

"Oh, no--it's perfect," I assured mister barista. The ability to lie convincingly is required for field agents. And I inwardly smirked when, in the corner of my eye, Junior took a sip and had to stifle a cringe. Only my telepathy told me how hard he was having to work to keep his mask of disaffected boredom in place; visually, his face barely flinched.

Time for the real reason I sidled up to his booth. I'd decided we had the right tactic, but the wrong audience. Locals like this guy were more likely than tourists to have information about fellow beach buskers. "My boyfriend here is a little ... distraught. See, he never likes to leave the bedroom until he

consults with his psychic advisor back home, but he hasn't been able to reach her today. You wouldn't happen to know of someone around here who does psychic readings?"

The barista looked me in the eye and cranked his tip-calculating smile up to eleven. "Matter of fact, I do, but I haven't seen him today." This would normally have been the part where he expected me to ask if he knew how to get in touch with his psychic friend and then we would barter a little "finder's fee" or maybe a blowjob—or both--so that I could show my gratitude.

But there, plain as anything in the front of the barista's thoughts was the image of a Darven-clan boy, maybe about age twelve or thirteen, who he associated with the idea of psychic readings.

I slipped my telepathy into the barista's head so gently he never noticed. Never noticed how his mind went blank for a few seconds as I sorted through his memories to learn everything he knew. Yeah, this kid in the barista's mind definitely seemed like our target.

I withdrew. The barista blinked. "Well," I said, pushing a generous amount that would more than cover our drinks and a big tip across the bar to him. "We must be off. If you see your psychic friend, tell him we're looking for him. But if he's psychic, he probably already knows that, right? Heh. Come along, Ju--baby."

What was that about? Junior sent at me as he scurried to catch up.

I know where our target is, I sent back. *We're heading there now.*

Where is he? Is he here?

No, he's at his home, probably. I know where he lives now. He's precognitive, remember? He probably knows we're coming for him. If I was a twelve-year-old boy who knew twenty-four hours in advance that people were coming to get me, I'd want to spend that last day with my family.

The Colonel drove. The Colonel always drives. That man can't be separated from his firearms and, if there's driving to be done, he can't be separated from a steering wheel by anything short of a mortar round. And knowing the Colonel, he'd consider a mortar round to be foreplay. Eww.

Our target lived on the far side of Javennek, just outside the city, where the outskirts faded into the surrounding jungle--an area that could be described flatteringly as *unspoiled* but more accurately as *undesirable*. After leaving the resort area, the transition to this encompassing squalor and ruin was surprising. I was glad we had the Colonel along.

Darven's roads had gone to shit ever since the PETA Party took over the government a few years ago. The road became gravel. The house at the end of the road was ramshackle. The boy stood out front. "Hello. You're here," he said, merely stating the fact with a trace of impatience, as we got out of the car.

That's when I realized. Sure, knowing the future must take all the surprise out of life, one spoiler after another, which probably sucked at birthdays and other gift-giving occasions; but the worst part about being precognitive was probably the waiting, always waiting for the next foreseen future event to occur in its own sweet time, and then the next one ... I decided I'd stick with trying to figure out the present, thanks.

I introduced myself and my teammates. Junior said, "Hey," with a little wave. The Colonel just scowled.

"I'm Yan," the boy said.

"You know why we're here?" Of course he did. I could see it in his thoughts without even trying to read them.

He nodded and pointed to what, in a previous life, must have been some tourist's backpack, discarded when it was nearly worn out. He had repurposed it into luggage for his few belongings. "I'm packed. Please let me say goodbye, and ... Oh. Watch out."

That's when the old woman ran from the house. "You'll not take him!" she wailed and swung her frying pan at my head. I ducked but--*wham!*--she caught me in the shoulder. Had Yan not warned me, she might have fractured my skull.

She collapsed on the ground, crying, clutching the boy to her. "Ma'm!" he scolded. "I told you."

"No, no, no," she mourned.

I straightened up and tried not to wince. My shoulder would be one big bruise. I motioned to the Colonel that I was all right and to put his gun away. No need to shoot the old woman. Not yet, anyway.

Despite what the throbbing in my shoulder claimed, she wasn't a threat. She was very old--apparently she had no money for the rejuvenation treatments at the local McFleiss franchise that the better-off Darven-clan members used to stay young and clan-standard pretty. If it came to a physical fight, I was betting I could take her without the Colonel's help.

"I'm sorry," Yan said. By way of explanation, he introduced us to her as Ma'm Mar'shon, using the local honorific for *grandmother*. "She raised me after my parents died. She does not want me to leave."

I nodded as if I understood. Maybe I did, in a way. I'd been recruited when I was eleven, just a little younger than Yan, and I could barely remember my family. I remembered they seemed relieved to get rid of me, the problem child who could read and control minds. I hadn't thought about them in a while, and *familial* was not a word that described my interactions with the Colonel or anyone else at the Institute. But I knew what leaving someone behind felt like.

"I'll go with you," Yan said to me. "I've never been on an airplane before. Thank you for giving me the window seat."

I raised an eyebrow because I'm not the sort who plans out every detail that far in advance. I hadn't even thought about seating arrangements on the trip back. I was beginning to think having a precog around could be annoying.

"Will I like it there? I will be happy, yes?"

"It will take some adjustment," I said, because that was the truth, "but yes, you could be very happy there." I understood why he was asking--he wanted his grandmother to hear reassurances. Maybe too,

he wanted to hear them himself, to know he was picking the right possible future. What we were discussing, after all, lay far more than twenty-four hours away.

"I've just finished my training," Junior piped up. "The Institute took some getting used to at first, but I loved it there. You'll learn to use your Talent in ways you'd never expect. I wouldn't trade my time there, what I learned, or the friendships I made for anything."

I shot the Colonel an expression that said, *See?--Sometimes it's okay to be a people person.*

"Thank you," Yan said. He put his hand on my arm. "Please, no guns." He cut his eyes toward the jungle near the house. "Guns make everything turn black."

Why did he do that? The only reason we carried our concealed pistols was in case of trouble. I made a quick telepathic sweep of the nearby areas and ... came up with nothing.

No--not nothing. I sensed just the tiniest little something, like a bit of static where there should have been nothing. I focused on it. Five faint bits of static. They felt like the electronic "background noise" I picked up from the blocker caps Normal staffers at the Institute wore to keep telepaths out of their heads. There, just a few dozen yards inside the jungle. And they were getting closer.

"Five bogies coming our way," I whispered to the Colonel. "They're shielded. Safe to assume they're hostile." I kept the same thought at the front of my mind so Junior would pick up on it--good boy!--which he did. His face went pale.

The Colonel whispered back, "Must be the government, coming for the boy."

Yan looked at us and said, "No, they're not coming for *me*."

Fuck! Somebody had tipped off the local government that the Institute had a team on their turf.

I'd worry about that later. I drew my pistol. The Colonel, of course, already had his out.

Yan gripped my arm again. "*No guns*. If shooting begins, people die." He looked at Ma'm Mar'shon.

I understood. She would be one of the casualties.

"Okay--change of plans," I hissed at the Colonel as I tucked away my pistol. No guns--great. "Get them inside. Stay with them and keep them safe. Junior, you're with me."

The Colonel's scowl could have stopped a charging rhinoceros. He did *not* like being ordered around by a Talent, especially since he was the handler and I was the handlee. Or maybe he just didn't like the handlee denying him a gunfight. For the Colonel, that was probably the equivalent of getting grounded on prom night after he'd already bought the corsage and condoms.

"No time. Do it," I growled at him.

I ran, and Junior followed, around the corner to the side of the house closest to the jungle--closest to our incoming visitors.

"I don't get it," Junior said. "I don't sense anything."

"You're looking for the wrong thing. You know how blocker caps can give you a headache when you're around them too long? Look for that."

Junior's telepathy flared. After a moment, his eyebrows went up. "Shit!"

We needed a plan, and quickly.

"Get your clothes off."

Junior blinked at me. "Huh?"

"Get your fucking clothes off!" He probably thought I was joking, but I was tugging my shirt off over my head. Junior did the same thing. We were both naked within seconds.

I fell to my knees and slammed my face forward into his crotch. His cock started hardening when my lips hit it.

Junior hissed: "You sure about this? *Now?*"

I came off his dick and quipped: "What could possibly go wrong?" Junior responded by sending a mental image of our bullet-riddled bodies and lots of blood. Obviously he'd never been around lots of blood before because he didn't quite imagine the color right, but I didn't tell him that. *Hey, Junior*, I sent back as I grinned and licked at his ball sack, *welcome to the glorious seat-of-your-pants world of field operations. Now shut up, get hard, and make it look good!*

He got the idea. By the time I got a decent fix on our visitors, he had an erection and I was sucking away at it with gusto.

Blowing Junior was a false flag operation to distract our visitors. Whatever they'd expected to find, stumbling across two male tourists fucking outdoors definitely was not it. There they were, twenty yards away from us by then, just inside the edge of the jungle, moving into a position where they could see the house--and us--but were still hidden in the dense foliage. I knew this because their team leader, such a smart guy, decided to get a better look at us through a pair of binoculars--which partially nudged his helmet and its blocking technology back off his forehead and let a little of his thoughts bleed out. He muttered something that in his thoughts meant, *Fucking tourists*. It must have been a pun in the local dialect, because he heard a couple of his squad members chuckle quietly at the joke.

Of course, knowing part of what he was thinking and hearing meant I was in his head. For a telepath like me, knowing what he was thinking and controlling what he was thinking were just two sides of the same coin. All I had to do was concentrate a little--while keeping up the pretense of blowing Junior--until I could muscle my telepathy past the outdated blocking technology in his helmet.

Put down your weapon--those men are not your targets, I sent into his mind. Marksman rifles. They were ready for the Colonel. Why risk an up close and personal firefight when nailing him from a distance would do the job? Chances were, the Colonel would win any gunfight that could be described using the phrase *up close and personal*--but he could be killed just as easily as anyone else if the shooter caught him by surprise with a bullet from a distance.

Take off your helmet. Tell your team to remove theirs too. This close, the blocker tech in their helmets definitely felt like an older version, but was still effective. I'd have a headache soon from the strain of

punching through even the partial block. The presence of blocker tech showed they were ready for me too, but fortunately with my face buried in Junior's crotch they didn't recognize me. Or maybe they didn't think I was as big a threat as the Colonel. The Darven-clan tend to deal with Talents by culling, so these soldiers probably didn't understand how telepathy works, especially if Smart Guy here didn't think twice about knocking back his helmet to get a better look at two fucking tourists. They certainly understood how to cull, though. After all, bullets from a distance would also deal with a telepath just fine.

And being shot at during a blow-job would be a mood-breaker.

Curious. Come closer. You want a better look.

Junior of course knew I was up to something; he felt my telepathy blazing even if he couldn't tell what I was doing. His body stiffened, and not in the good way, when Smart Guy emerged from the edge of the jungle and kept coming toward us. Junior tapped my head and mumbled, "Uh--"

It's okay, I sent to Junior without taking my mouth off his rod. I've got him.

Smart Guy kept walking our way. Back at the edge of the jungle, the four blond heads of his teammates popped out of the vegetation. Helmet-free. Vulnerable.

I came off of Junior's cock and looked their way. *I got the leader and the two on the left*, I sent to Junior. He nodded, and I felt his telepathy reach out and caress the other two's minds.

Smart guy and the two teammates on the left. I sent into their heads: *Fascinated. Mission can wait. Curious. Come closer--get a closer look.*

Smart Guy was already halfway to us. The other two took a hesitant step forward, then another, and soon were walking too.

Horny. Needy. Nothing else matters. Overwhelming. Horny.

Junior picked up on my commands and relayed the same to his two. Would he pick up on my next command too?

Strip.

Hands worked clasps as they walked. Buttons. Snaps. Shirts fell away. Hopping on one foot, they tugged off a boot, then the other. They never took their eyes off of us. Zippers. Pants were dropped and stepped out of. The soldiers kept walking toward us. Junior's telepathy fired alongside mine.

Horny. Hard. Submit. Obey. Nothing else matters.

Five prime specimens of Darven-clan breeding stood in front of us, naked and ready to do our bidding, all curly blond hair and lithe muscles and erections. I happen to find the Darven standard hot. These five men looked nearly identical, nearly clones of each other. Their dicks were their major differentiators, an extra half-inch here, more girth there. Perhaps the Darven-clan hadn't quite gotten around to standardizing that body part as successfully yet.

Well, I always complained that evil geniuses never throw armies of hot soldier-clones at us. This would have to do.

Junior leaned closer to me and thought, *I don't have enough condoms for this.*

I shot back, *Just pray that the lube supply holds out.*

They probably considered *us* the exotic ones, since both Junior and I were darker-haired and obviously out-clan. We were the outsiders in their country.

I reached out and wrapped my hand around a Darven dick. Was it Smart Guy's?--He seemed a couple of years older than the others, but otherwise was identical in looks. I didn't bother checking his thoughts to confirm. I just closed the distance between that cock and my mouth and began to suck. A little tweak of the next closest Darven mind, and the next thing he knew, he was sprawled on the ground between my knees and licking my hard shaft.

"That's a good cock-sucker," Junior growled at another man on his knees as the man slobbered on Junior's shaft. "Lick it. Lick it good." So Junior was equally adept at playing the dominant side of telepathic submission games too?--Another point in his favor.

My heart raced--my nervous system was in fight-or-flight mode. Everywhere I reached, my hand touched a smooth Darven-clan cheek, the strong bone of a jaw, the blood vessel pulsing visibly at a throat. I felt their hands on me. I reached for the swirl of hair on the back of a neck and pulled forward, my cock disappearing whole into another mouth as the soldier looked up in complete submission, open mouth packed full of my dick.

One soldier pushed another down by the shoulders with one hand, brandishing his cock with the other, the blunt raw head of which his kneeling teammate tasted with his tongue. The kneeler was Smart Guy. I shared his sense of the fat end of his teammate's cock sliding into his mouth, round and warm and slick as a freshly peeled boiled egg. While he was distracted by sucking the other's cock, I searched through Smart Guy's memories, looking for clues on who sent them. The orders came from higher up than usual; but other than that, Smart Guy knew nothing directly, nothing useful. Too bad.

Beside me, Junior drew up another soldier's foreskin with his fingers and stretched it away from the head and kept pulling until hair and balls crept up the thick shaft. I watched Junior gather those balls up into his mouth individually in their soft hair sack while pulling firmly on the foreskin. I'd have loved to have watched longer, watched this game play out to its inevitable conclusion. However ...

I extracted myself, naked, hard, from the writhing mass of bodies and pulled Junior out by the arm too. *But I haven't cum yet*, he protested, the thought of blue balls firmly in the front of his mind.

Later for that, I snapped back. *More important concerns.*

The smart play would have been to kill these soldiers or at least scramble their minds permanently. In my experience, enemies left dead or with little more than gray gelatin between their ears usually don't show up later to shoot at me again. Institute field policy said to always go with the smart play, then get the fuck out of there. Fortunately for these soldiers, I wasn't the Colonel. I already had too much blood on my hands. How did you do it, Cowboy, kill without remorse? The military trained you to be a killer, but you held on to your squeaky-clean code of ethics, except for that one mistake that led to our encounter. If it weren't for the fact that you kept on killing for a living after you left the service, you could have been a damned Kid Scout or something. And you, Dion, general jack-of-all-thugs and no stranger to killing people yourself? Was it just something you had to learn to survive in the underbelly of the cities? How did you do it?

I was only a handful of years older than Junior. How had I gotten so jaded so quickly?

I didn't scramble these soldiers' minds either, not permanently. These were just cannon fodder, just following orders and not calling the shots. Call it an attack of conscience. Or a need to conserve my telepathy in case I needed to really exert myself again later. Or maybe even a need to keep from exposing Junior to the dark side of field operations yet; I liked his youthful naiveté--maybe I should try to preserve it a little longer. I wouldn't be able to hide frying the soldiers' minds from a fellow telepath.

I used a lighter tactic. In five Darven-clan soldier minds, I made sure they had no clear memory of us, and I projected irresistible orders: *So incredibly horny. Fuck until you've cum twice, then sleep for hours. Nothing will interrupt you.*

Junior and I were dressed from the waist down and still pulling on our shirts when we sprinted back to the other side of the house.

Naturally, the Colonel scowled at our obvious getting-dressed-after-fucking routine--and at the gargantuan bulge in Junior's crotch. I flashed the Colonel my most professional stoic expression. "We were set up," I told him, "but we handled it. They didn't know anything useful though."

"We leave now," the Colonel said. Because obviously sitting around and waiting for more government troops to show up after their first squad failed to return wasn't a good alternative.

I looked at Ma'm Mar'shon. A telepathic caress, and she sighed and slumped in her chair. "She's asleep," I assured Yan. Asleep and no longer with any memory of us. I hid those memories where her conscious mind wouldn't find them, not for a while anyway. Since the government would almost certainly question her, as far as she knew Yan had just vanished. Maybe she'd decide he ran away. Maybe she would mourn for a while, but her life would go on. The government would leave her alone once they were sure she knew nothing. I didn't know whether the Institute would ever allow Yan to contact her or visit; she might never learn what happened to him. That might seem like a cruelty, but better she not know, at least for now. If she told the wrong people about those three nice men who came to take him to the Institute before we got out of the country, things might get difficult for her.

And the appearance of Smart Guy's team with marksman rifles suggested someone already knew we were on the ground. They might know our whole itinerary. We needed to change our exit plans.

The Colonel headed for the car with Yan's pack and tossed it into the trunk. We'd be heading directly back to the airport. Yan was too precious a target to risk. The Institute would arrange for covert operatives to retrieve our few belongings from the hotel later.

That headache I'd anticipated was already starting, but we still needed to do this by the book. "There's one more thing we need to do first," I told Yan. "It's standard procedure. You understand?"

He nodded, looking me directly in the eye. "It's okay. You're going to give me the window seat. Promise?"

As my thoughts slipped into his head, I said, "Sure, kid. I promise."

He grinned. "Good. Because I did not actually see that part. I have never been on a plane before. I just wanted to make sure I got a window seat."

I raised an eyebrow. Someday, this kid would be a one crazy little firecracker.

I needed to deactivate his Talent for a while. Doing so was standard procedure for the recruitment of new Talents. Being taken to a new place, a new life, like the Institute was stressful, and budding Talents sometimes lost control or lashed out accidentally. A newly manifested telepath might accidentally fry someone's mind. A telekinetic temper tantrum might do significant damage. And don't start me on the kind of chaos a pyrokinetic could cause if he lost control. Deactivating recruits' Talents until they could be evaluated and quantified was a useful safety measure.

I glided through Yan's mind, so gently he wasn't aware of my intrusion. Talents have mental keys that are used to trigger them. I felt for the keys to activating Yan's. As I probed, I got a sense of how his Talent operated. It was like looking up into the sky on a clear night, and potential future events and alternatives were like tiny stars, so incredibly distant only a dot of light could be seen. His Talent acted like a telescope. Aim it at the really distant ones, and it didn't magnify things enough—the thing was still just a bit of light. But aim it at closer events, like pointing a telescope at the moon or the closer planets, and suddenly the more detail appeared. Maybe his Talent didn't tell him how things led up to that point, or what would happen next, but he could see as much as he saw, and maybe could see a way to get there, and sometimes that was enough. Enough to be helpful. Maybe enough to be dangerous too. I sure hoped his Ma'm had given him the moral grounding to handle this kind of responsibility, because I'd hate to face Yan if he turned into one of those evil geniuses. I was betting he could scheme up more successful plots than building a horde of killer robots.

Yan put his hand on my arm, a gesture that was starting to unnerve me. "Wait," he whispered and frowned. I felt his Talent flaring again. He hadn't learned to control or target it yet. I hadn't entered the part of his mind that interpreted what he saw, so I couldn't see what his Talent was finding. I'd learned enough about his keys to know he could use it much more efficiently with a little training. Heck, if I just massaged this particular key, just a little, he'd--

He grunted. I wasn't sure if I'd hurt him or exactly what I'd done, so I backed off.

His smile crimped, as if apologizing. "You'll see them again. Soon. If you go with them, it won't always be easy. There'll be trouble sometimes, but overall you'll be happier than you can imagine." His Talent went quiet.

Vague little tease, I thought, being careful to keep that thought from bleeding out where Yan would hear it through our connection. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what future he had foreseen for me, so I didn't pry deeper to learn what he meant. I deactivated his keys, numbing those parts of his mind so that he wouldn't be able to activate his Talent by himself for a day or two. By then, we'd be back at the Institute, we'd have handed him off to the induction personnel, and Yan would be some other babysitter's problem.

One last telepathic nudge as we climbed into the car, and I initiated a little light euphoria to keep Yan smiling, happy, and feeling good, focused on the adventure to come rather than what he was leaving behind. He wouldn't have to worry about homesickness until later.

As we drove away, he didn't look back.

4.

The Colonel drove, naturally, while I phoned the logistics staff at the Institute to set up a last-minute change to depart from a different airport in another part of Darven, just in case the government had people waiting for us at the original. And wow, the logistics staff as usual did not like last-minute changes, though successful retrieval of the precognitive certainly would make up for the inconvenience.

You'll see them again, Yan had said. No time to think about that now. I had to stay focused on appeasing this cranky logistics clerk to convince him that, yes, our departure plans really did need to be changed.

Soon, Yan had said.

If you go with them ...

That's the problem with precognition. Knowing a few facts about how possible futures might happen was only part of the picture.

I was pretty sure I knew the *who*. There were only two people, other than the Colonel, that I thought about a lot. If Yan meant who I thought he meant, the *how* and *where* and *when* parts would drive me nuts if I stopped to think about them right then. But was he really talking about who I hoped he might be? Was that even possible? Had I caused him to see something further out than his usual twenty-four hour window? Or, had I screwed up his accuracy, and what he'd foreseen wouldn't happen at all? He was untrained and hardly infallible. Did he even understand what he was seeing with his Talent half the time? Ugh. Too many questions. These were just some of the reasons I was glad precognitives were rare. Plus, I've never been one for wallowing in introspection.

My head was already aching enough from the strain of punching through the blocking field earlier. Good thing I had dealing with a pissy Institute desk jockey to distract me from my headache and all these questions.

I sat in the front passenger seat, alongside the Colonel. Junior and Yan shared the back seat. Junior leaned forward and pointed. "There. Turn there."

"What?" the Colonel and I chorused. Because the Colonel has the car pushed to the fastest safe speed on that gravel road, and a detour down the coming-up-fast side route Junior indicated wasn't on our itinerary.

"Yan's a precog," Junior said, as if that explained everything. "Turning there is our best chance for living."

Oh.

The Colonel immediately swerved toward the side road.

Half a second later, a particle beam from overhead cut across the main road, directly through the path our vehicle would have taken if we hadn't turned.

The Colonel angled the car too sharply, and it went off the loose rock, though he managed to stop short before his side of the car would have crashed into the trees lining the shoulder. The car stalled, and the Colonel immediately had his door open and rolled out into the cover provided by the forest-side of the car body.

Timing it a little fucking close, aren't you? I thought at Junior as I fell out of my door and scuttled around to the forest side of the car too. I had my pistol out and searched the skies for whatever had fired that particle beam at us. Where the fuck did the backwater Darven military get energy weapon technology anyway? But first, my more immediate question for Junior: *How'd you know?*

I've been reading Yan's thoughts. Didn't you check his last flash?--the one he had as you were deactivating his Talent?

Actually, I hadn't. I'd been too distracted by what Yan said just before that. Fuck, I'd nearly gotten us all killed. If Junior hadn't been poking around ...

Worry about that later. Junior by then had rolled out the Colonel's side of the vehicle and dragged Yan along with him. Yan giggled quietly to himself, still euphoric, as something flashed by overhead.

"Stealth hover-drone," the Colonel hissed. "Using an A.I. to target us."

Telepathy isn't just useless against killer robots. It's also useless against killer drone aircraft and the artificial intelligences piloting them too.

Our pistols were pretty much useless against the drone--it moved too quickly, like a hummingbird. The trees made getting a clear shot difficult, and the damned thing could probably withstand anything short of an armor-piercing bullet. Maybe the Colonel had a point about pyrokinetics. That kind of firepower would have come in handy right then.

The drone zipped by overhead again. By now it probably had already relayed our coordinates back to its base.

"Probably targeting us with infra-red. We can't stay here."

On the other hand, we weren't exactly equipped for a wilderness adventure-hike through the jungle either. Stumbling through the undergrowth meant a high likelihood of getting delayed until the inevitable government forces showed up. Assuming the military didn't just fire-bomb that section of the forest to save themselves the effort of hunting us down.

The drone suddenly appeared for another pass. The Colonel and I fired at it, trying for a lucky shot, as Junior dragged Yan down to safety behind the car body. The particle beam seared down at the other side of the car as the drone flashed by, barely over the treetops. Both tires on the far side of car popped and sank. Fuck!--the drone had disabled our transportation. Now our options really were limited to either staying pinned down behind the car or making a run for safety in the jungle. If we stayed there, the A.I. would likely target the vehicle's fuel tank next, in an attempt to kill us in the explosion. If we ran for it, the drone could probably still track us through the jungle and, even if it couldn't get a shot at us, would help the government troops inevitably hunt us down. Junior and I might be able to take out some of the troops from a distance, assuming they weren't all shielded by blocker tech, but we had our limits. The Colonel was good, probably good enough to get himself out of there, maybe Yan too, but he might decide some collateral losses were acceptable--meaning Junior and/or me. Being a collateral loss didn't appeal to me.

Any hope of not being a loss, collateral or otherwise, started with getting the fuck away from this killer drone. "Options?" I asked, just in case the Colonel saw some escape route I didn't.

The drone started its next run, coming in slower now, going for the kill. The Colonel and I smartly opted for shooting at it. We'd converse later.

The particle beam seared at the back of the car, ripping through the truck and then the passenger area. I wasn't terribly concerned about the passenger area, since we weren't in it any longer, but I was willing to bet the Colonel's spare firearms and the extra ammo were in the trunk. Which meant we were now down to whatever ammo we had on our persons--which wasn't much. At least it wasn't much for me.

Another pass, and the beam would rupture the fuel tank.

Junior was moving as the drone neared the nadir of its arc at us. He threw something which I first thought was going wide of the target--the phrase *throws like a girl* came to mind--but turned out to be almost exactly in the drone's flight path. The object didn't hit the drone, but it was just a few yards away from the drone when--

I realized what I was seeing and dove down behind the car. All I could think was, *Where the hell did Junior get a grenade?*

--when it exploded. The blast wave shoved the drone off-course and downward, where one wing clipped a tree trunk, which spent the craft spinning it into another. The drone broke into at least three pieces and fell toward the jungle floor. At least one of those pieces was on fire.

Fortunately we were all still temporarily deafened by the blast, because I couldn't think of anything to say.

I took it from one of those Darven soldiers we fucked, Junior thought to me, answering the question that I had apparently mind-shouted at him. Hmm, so that obscene lump in his shorts earlier hadn't been just blue balls. He must have stashed the grenade in his crotch. *Thought it might come in handy*. Apparently I was still throwing questions, because Junior added, *I turned Yan's Talent back on and used it to know when and where to throw*.

Well, give Junior--Jase, I made a mental note to start calling him *Jase* because I was sure as hell going to remember his name after this--another cookie. Hell, he deserved the whole fucking box of cookies.

By then, my hearing was coming back after the explosion. At least I could hear the sounds of the burning drone wreckage.

I put my hands on Yan's shoulders. As I slipped into his mind again, I said, "Let me borrow your Talent for a moment. I need to find the best way for all of us to get out of here alive."

5.

The military's plan was simple: use a vertical envelopment pattern to locate and encircle us with beater groups; they expected us, lacking weapons and ammo, to avoid direct confrontation and flee, which would push us toward stop groups who waited to kill from a distance with sniper rifles. Maybe they didn't want to risk taking us on in close fighting: the Colonel by himself would hand them heavy losses, and I'd already proven my telepathy could punch through their blocker tech, though they probably didn't know I'd nearly reached my limits and the resulting headache had me nearly mind-

crippled. They planned to use a tried and true method to herd us to a killing field where they held the advantage. As long as the Colonel and the Talents ended up dead, the military would accomplish its mission. Obviously, though, I objected to the whole *bullet-riddled corpses in the dirt* outcome of said mission, and I especially objected to the sheer number of possible futures where Yan's Talent foresaw exactly that outcome--not in all of them, but certainly in the majority. Mostly, I objected to the part where the Colonel managed to stay alive a whole five minutes longer than me. That just didn't seem fair.

Oh, and another annoying thing about precognition? Knowing the most likely possible futures isn't the same as knowing how to make sure they don't happen.

The Colonel and I conferred off to one side while Jase and Yan babysat each other. I kept my thoughts shielded and rewarded Jase's occasional attempts at mental eavesdropping with the psychic equivalent of a sharp swat on the wrist. But mostly, Jase kept scanning the jungle for any approaching minds or blocker tech like I'd asked him.

"I agree," the Colonel mused, though he sounded more like his teeth were being pulled by rusty pliers. Normally, he'd have been practically cumming in his pants at the thought of an upcoming firefight, but something about miniscule amounts of ammo remaining and the part I'd mentioned where we all ended up dead seemed to have drained the fun out of the anticipation.

I had scratched a quick map in a patch of base soil. The Colonel studied it. "If we go this way," he muttered almost to himself, "does that change the outcome?"

I shrugged. "Don't know." Because Yan's Talent was too episodic--just glimpses--and I had insufficient experience in manipulating it to understand how to turn it toward specific outcomes other than the ones that seemed brightest, or most likely, or whatever. The odds were stacked against us, and we needed to change the game. Unfortunately, thinking of a play that accomplished that fell to the Colonel and me.

The military planned for us to try to take the obvious path, back toward the touristy section of Javennek, where we could hide in crowds or steal a vehicle to get out of town. They also had a contingency plan in case we did something supposedly "unexpected," like head deeper into the jungle in hopes of evading the trackers in the underbrush, circling around, and finding a populated area where we could steal a vehicle. The military probably already had stealth drones ready to detect us if we pushed farther into the jungle. The problem with "thinking outside the box" is sometimes that's just another box.

The military had studied the Colonel's tactics enough to know exactly what he was likely to do--which probably left him secretly impressed but made me wonder whether our career had been as covert as we'd thought. Had someone at the Institute leaked details?

Jase waved to catch my attention, then pointed. Right. A cluster of static was heading our way: the first beater group was getting close.

"We have maybe five minutes to figure something out," I whispered to the Colonel, "before company arrives."

Just under six minutes later, four Darven troops in full combat armor came creeping through the underbrush. When they had just passed below us, the Colonel gave the sign, and he and I dropped out of the trees, landing directly behind them.

When the hero does this in the movies, he jumps down from some incredible height, like the equivalent of a three-story building. In real-life, though, a person can't do that. For one thing, he'd probably break his legs when he landed from that distance, which kind of defeats the whole *fight to get out alive* purpose. And for another, in most trees, he'd probably hit a few limbs on the way down, which would turn his jump into more of a plummet. Plummeting is definitely *not* action-hero sexy.

No, the Colonel and I plummeted--er, jumped--from a much lower height, really only a couple of meters above head-level. We got lucky because these soldiers were all two-dimensional thinkers, and no one thought to look up as they approached our position.

One of the soldiers was under the Colonel. The other three were under me as I dropped. *How did I get so lucky*, I thought.

One of the soldiers sank to his knees just as I landed, and then he toppled face first into the brush. I'd smashed through his blocker field and shut down his mind: telepathically induced coma. He wouldn't wake up for a few hours, and by then we'd be gone or dead. That left me two soldiers to deal with--and I'd have to do it the physical way because I didn't have any telepathic juice left to break through another blocker, much less two.

What I did have was the element of surprise, and I used it. Besides, two-to-one odds are pretty damn good for someone who has trained in hand-to-hand combat with the Colonel.

I grasped a club-like length of branch that I'd left there before I climbed the tree and swung it at the knees of the nearer soldier. He sidestepped, but stumbled off-balance and fell, dropping his rifle. My fighting instincts were kicking in; adrenaline and endorphins flooded my bloodstream, helped push back the headache, cleared my head.

Someone, the remaining soldier, went for my head, but I saw him in time to duck. He struck my shoulder hard, the same one Yan's Ma'm had smacked with her frying pan earlier. I went down under the pain and tried to roll before he could aim his rifle. I landed on the comatose soldier, felt his arm, and traced it. I had just located the soldier's forearm when one of his still-awake comrades fell at me with a knife. I had enough telepathy left to know where he aimed the blade, and I slid away from it before it would have perforated a few vital organs that I preferred to keep in working order. He slashed at my face, missed, and I fell back on the comatose soldier's arm again, and there it was. I felt the bulge of his rifle butt under my shoulder when I landed. I rolled and came up with the rifle in my hands and slammed the butt down on Knifey's wrist, knocking the blade from his grasp. He froze, surprised by how fast I was. That gave me the instant I needed to slam the rifle butt into his face. Knifey went down hard and wouldn't be getting up for a while.

Which, uhm, left me a wide-open target for the third soldier, who suddenly found himself with a nice, clean line of fire directly at my head.

Even as I turned toward him, something went out in the soldier's eyes, and he toppled, dropping his rifle. The Colonel stood behind him, barely even sweating. I nodded my thanks to the Colonel. I didn't know what he had done to incapacitate the soldier, and I didn't much care. The important facts were that, one, I was still alive--oh, yeah, and the Colonel was alive, too—and two, he and I were now both

armed with better weapons and more ammo. Oh, and three, during the melee, Jase and Yan had managed to sneak away as planned and were now outside of the herding perimeter.

The military had not planned on us splitting up. They certainly hadn't planned on us keeping our best fighters in the battle zone while the other two we should have been protecting used the distraction to head laterally back toward the poorest parts of Javennek where we'd come from.

I'd promised Jase, if we both made it out alive, I'd help relieve his blue balls any way he wanted, just in case he needed an incentive other than not dying to motivate him to go along with the plan.

This wasn't over for the Colonel and me. Not yet. These beater groups were moving in pairs, one team following the other, in case we managed to overpower the first. The second group was nearly upon us.

Except suddenly there was an explosion some distance away to our left, kinda-sorta in the direction Jase and Yan had been heading, though they couldn't have gotten that far yet. Followed by rifle-fire to our right, which would have been the second beater group. Just a few shots, but suddenly I couldn't sense the blocker tech any longer.

I looked at the Colonel, but he was already running through the jungle.

I would have shouted something sarcastic like *Remind me again why your first instinct is always to head toward a giant explosion* as we ran, but I knew the Colonel would have just yelled back something vaguely insulting like *Because I'm not a giant pussy*, and I had too big a headache to devote brainpower to coming up with a retort to that. Besides, running from a "certain death" situation and into a "probable death" one is much more likely to be successful if not accompanied by shouting or other loud giveaways that help the pursuers catch up.

The tactic made sense. Explosions made great distractions. As every covert operations mind on the planet knows, when a nice, distracting explosion goes off over here, the real action is happening somewhere else--so go look for that somewhere else, and there's the real situation. The Colonel wasn't running toward the explosion, not exactly, but he was heading near it. There'd be a zone of chaos around the location: panicked people, incoming police and aid workers, the gawky curious--probably a bunch of out-clan tourists too, where a pair of non-Darven-clan like the Colonel and I would be less noticeable. If we could get into that zone, we might be able to take advantage of the confusion to steal a vehicle and get away without anyone noticing or recognizing us.

Besides, that was the same general direction Jase and Yan had gone.

6.

Near dawn the next day, after multiple stolen-car changes, driving southeast all night instead of north toward the country from which we'd flown into Darven, sneaking nearly to the border of another neighboring clan-nation; after a meal in a middle-of-nowhere diner--where, by the way, holed up in the unexpectedly clean men's room, I found the energy to finally relieve Jase's long-overdue blue balls, twice--we made it to the air strip.

Calling this place an airport would have been too generous. It was just a little private landing field attached to a tiny backwater town that like most of this country had seen better days, probably built by some local businessman or drug lord. Transport trucks, a few warehouses, and two small hangars over

here, a strip of asphalt over there for a runway, barely long enough to accommodate small emergency extraction stealth-jet sent by the Institute.

But, the strip was there, we reached it, and the extraction jet was waiting. At least the pissy logistics clerk had come through for us. The situation looked like it might turn out to be what some people call a success after all.

Those people obviously suffer from what I like to call a *premature declaration* problem. There's probably a Twelve Step program for that--oh, right, it's called "real life."

The Colonel sped us onto the tarmac and we piled out of the car. The good thing about this kind of operation on a private strip?--No need to stand in line at an airport or go through customs. The bad thing?--That would probably be likelihood of surprises, such as that warehouse over there, where one wall suddenly collapsed outward in a blast of noise and dust, and a fifty-foot robot stomped out onto the landing strip, directly in front of the jet. Oh, and twenty or so heavily armed government troops streamed out of the adjoining building.

"Trap!" the Colonel shouted helpfully. Because, right, what else could it be?

If this little surprise party knew we'd be there, then obviously the Institute had a leak in its communication channels. We'd worry about that later.

The troops had yet another simple plan: Wait until we showed up, shoot the Talents and the Colonel, smash the plane if necessary, secure the precog, and congratulate each other on a job well done all the way home. I guessed I should have been impressed that they were afraid of us enough to bring in the robot for extra firepower; but then we did incapacitate a number of their comrades the day before, so yeah, I guess we did give them the impression we were bad-ass.

The soldiers hung back, obviously not wanting to be underfoot while the fifty-foot robot did the heavy work. *Heavy work* in this case consisted of stomping toward the plane and the car, while we scattered like ants. Ants armed with pistols, telepathy, and adrenaline, none of which were that effective against a stomping-smashing metal behemoth with who knew what surprises up its mechanical sleeves--arms--whatever.

The Colonel had two pistols out, shooting in hopes of finding a weak spot.

Fall back, that way, I sent to Jase. We had to get the robot away from the plane. If we had any chance of getting out of there, the plane had to stay intact and un-smashed. Preferably un-shot too. Jets are surprisingly fragile things.

There's no operator, Jase sent back.

I'd sensed the same lack: the robot was completely automated, with no local pilot's mind for my telepathy to hit.

My reply: *Never mind that. Get Yan to safety!* I wasn't sure where safety was, but it sure wasn't out in the open here with us.

Good boy--Jase tossed Yan over his shoulder and tore out for the cover of the nearest building that wasn't spewing troops at us. Good to know Jase knew how to take the initiative and apply his instincts and his muscles to the practical problem at hand. Yan was a valuable prize for the Institute.

Now, the troops? Those I could deal with, especially since none of these had blocker tech in their helmets. Rule number one: When you're in a fight with the odds stacked against you, change the game. Hitting twenty or so minds at once takes a lot of firepower. I focused my telepathy into what was basically a thermonuclear blast for every mind in that direction and I unleashed it at the soldiers and the warehouse they'd spilled out of, just in case more were lurking. Three-quarters of the troops had what amounted to an immediate seizure and dropped, unconscious. Most of the rest would be incapacitated for the next several hours by vertigo or nausea. Two or three, on the fringes, seemed capable of standing upright enough to still be threats. Damn, I must've been losing my touch.

But I'd still evened the odds considerably. Those few remaining soldiers panicked and ran. That left the Colonel and me to focus on dealing with one last threat: the giant stomping robot. The good news?—The robot was no longer blocking the jet's escape path. The bad?—It stood between us and the jet, definitely blocking *our* path, and it had focused its attention on us.

Robots are always full of surprises. This one seemed to be bullet-resistant. Oh, and armed with a machine gun turret built into its head, judging from the twin barrels clicking into place where a human would have eyes.

What kept us alive was its sluggishness. Where the hell did the government of this backwoods country get a giant robot anyway? This thing might have been telepathy- and bullet-proof, but its A.I. didn't appear that sophisticated, and it wasn't the fastest robot we'd ever faced. In fact, it was kinda slow and clumsy--definitely not the creation of a top-tier genius. Running, we managed to stay ahead of the bullet-stream and keep it from targeting us. Time was not on our side, though--just a matter of time until we got tired, or the robot got off a lucky shot, or both. Hey, in real life, pistols run out of ammo and people get tired.

The Colonel was busy reloading while the robot swung around to face me. I was doing my best to shoot whatever looked like a vulnerable spot. That little torso-plate that looked like a sensor array?--Nope. That neck-seam?--Also nope.

That's when a shot rang out, and a bullet pinged off the robot's head. A high-powered round that, unlike our pistol fire, actually left a dent.

Who the hell was shooting? The Colonel was still reloading. The shot came from over there, and I saw a flash of something black at the roofline. Sniper? I didn't have enough telepathic juice left after my little trick earlier to probe our sniper friend, but who cared? As long as he was shooting at the robot, I'd welcome his help and name my first-borne child after him, if I were the child-siring type.

The sniper got off another shot and, a quick glimpse, the black appeared to be a cowboy hat. The only person I knew who was good with a rifle and wore a cowboy hat was ... Nah, it couldn't be Cowboy. What would he be doing--

Yep, robots are full of surprises. Now that the sniper had gotten its attention, this one pointed an arm at the rooftop and this little pod popped out and clicked into place. This surprise?--A rocket launcher. The little grenade-rocket left a smoke trail as it zipped through the air. The cowboy hat and rifle barrel rabbitied out of sight a second before the rocket hit the edge of roof. The roofline erupted in a bone-shaking *kaboom* and a cloud of smoke and dust and shrapnel-ized building materials that had me ducking for cover too.

Shrapnel bits pinged off the robot. By then the Colonel had reloaded and was unleashing his patented bullet-fury on it again, but neither he nor the debris was doing any damage. Smoke and dust from the explosion billowed over the robot, which seemed to interfere with its ability to track the Colonel, judging by how he managed to avoid getting shot by the turret-head's return spew of lead.

I found Jase and Yan behind a corner, and seconds later the Colonel joined us. Yan was just what we needed; maybe just a little peek at the future--

The freight truck rumbled in from the far side of the tarmac. By then, the robot was clear of the smoke and had spotted us again. That's when, from behind, the truck slammed into its left leg.

Three things happen when a two tons of truck traveling at a brisk speed smashes into a metal leg. First, struts warp. Second, gravity takes over, and the robot falls. In this case, the robot fell backward, directly onto the truck.

The driver popped out of the cab at the last second and rolled clear just as the falling hip and arm crushed it. Dark hair, golden skin. Was that Dion? Fuck, more dust and flailing robot body parts hid him after I got just a glance.

Oh, and the third thing that happens? Something explodes, just like in every Hollywood movie. The truck had a fuel tank. The Colonel had a pistol. He hit the tank with one shot, and the whole area under and around the robot got swallowed up in a satisfying fireball.

After all, even a downed robot might still be full of surprises that needed to be deactivated. The robot might have been bullet-proof, but chances were it wasn't also fire- or heat-proof. Surround the robot with enough burning fuel, and some vital internal working was likely to melt.

Take Yan and get to the plane, I sent to Jase. Getting him back to the Institute is your priority. Don't wait for us--no matter what, you get on that plane and get in the air the moment Yan is strapped in and the pilot has a clear take-off.

Jase tore off at a run, practically dragging Yan along.

I called after them: *Oh, and make sure Yan has that window seat.*

The Colonel and I needed to buy them some time to get away. After all, we didn't know whether the robot was really down yet, and we still had a few stray troops unaccounted for that hadn't been felled by my mental blast.

And if Cowboy and Dion really were here, I needed to ... What?

Worry about that later.

Minds, that direction, I motioned to the Colonel, and he nodded. Guns out, we advanced.

The robot was still flailing, but on its back--effectively immobilized but not deactivated.

I heard the jet engines kick in. Good--Jase had reached it with Yan and was following orders to get the fuck out of there. The Colonel and I could disappear as soon as the plane was airborne. Disappearing was what we did best.

Look out!

Jase's broadcast burned through my head, and I turned just in time to see the robot's arm lurch my way, grenade-launcher extended. I'd barely started to dive aside when the world exploded and went black.

When I managed to haul myself back to consciousness, my arms were draped over the shoulders of two men and they were hauling me off. Fortunately, getting my telepathy ready took another second because I recognized them before I could blast them.

Cowboy to my right. "Hi," I slurred to him, after a quick peek into his mind to confirm that he really was Cowboy and that I wasn't hallucinating my ass off thanks to some head injury.

"Hi," he stage-whispered. "We're getting you out of here."

Dion to my left--I recognized his orange eyes. Beyond him was a third man who looked a lot like him, similar features, darker hair but the same orange eyes.

"Can you walk?" Dion asked. Adrenaline made his voice tight.

I tested my legs. Sore, but everything seemed to work. "Yeah. Just shook me up."

We crept along the wall of some abandoned building. "Did the plane get away?" I asked, because all I could hear was the dying crackle of flames somewhere behind us.

Cowboy: "Yeah. Now be quiet. Your friend with the guns is still around here somewhere."

Maybe I was still groggy from the explosion, but what he said seemed odd. Why would we be sneaking *away* from the Colonel? I was thinking we should all go back to the Institute together: Cowboy might make a great handler since he was nearly as good with weapons as the Colonel, and Jase would be needing a field partner ...

We rounded the corner, and there stood the Colonel, both pistols aimed at us, and the *away* question became moot.

Yep, I was definitely still addled from the explosion, because something was definitely wrong. Namely, the part where the scowling Colonel had his guns pointed at Cowboy, Dion, and the third guy, while they all had their guns pointed at the Colonel. The wrong bit was me standing in the middle--any bullets fired would've gone through me on their way to their targets. Bullets passing through me seemed like a Very Bad Idea. I generally tried to avoid Very Bad Ideas. I said, "Uh, guys ...? Colonel, you remember Cowboy, right? And Dion, the tracker from a few months back?"

Cowboy said, "We don't want any trouble with you, sir. Let us pass."

"That's my partner. You're not going anywhere with him," the Colonel growled, never wavering. Because even though this standoff was three guns to his two and his opponents included a hit man and a street-fighter, there was absolutely no doubt that a firefight would end with everyone else dead and the Colonel suffering nothing more than a flesh wound or two--and maybe some paperwork back at the Institute to fill out since *everyone else dead* would likely include me, his standing-in-the-way partner.

Cowboy answered grimly, "He belongs with us, sir." That "sir" was not facetious; the Cowboy knew, and respected, the Colonel's reputation, and his tone conveyed that respect.

Now, I've never been big on introspection, especially not when standing in the middle of a bunch of guns, but what else was I supposed to do during this testosterone standoff? The Colonel's approach to life can be summed up as: *See it, shoot it, move on to the next assignment*. For me it's more like: *See him, fuck him if he's cute, move on*. Our methods differed, because the Colonel used his guns and I used my Talent, but generally we shared the same outlook on life. That's part of what made us such an effective field team. The Colonel, of course, was likely to have his own opinion about that *effective* part.

But did I belong with Cowboy and Dion? Where were they taking me? Were they offering me a life outside of the Institute? Cowboy, the assassin with a strong code of ethics. Dion, the hunter-tracker-fighter specializing in survival on the fringes of society. They'd both been great sex. I wouldn't have minded another romp across the sheets with either or both of them. But to leave the Institute--?

If you go with them ..., Yan had said. Did I want that? To leave the Institute? As much as the Colonel and I annoyed each other, we'd come to respect each other. The Institute had its flaws and I didn't agree with some of its methods, but it was the only life I'd ever known.

... Happier than you can imagine. If anyone other than a precognitive had said that to me, I'd have laughed in his face, or fried his brain, or both. Yan had been right so far, but he'd said that after I'd accidentally kicked his Talent into overdrive. I had no idea what that might have done to his accuracy. For all I knew, whatever potential future he'd foreseen might have a one percent chance of happening. Still, when a precog tells you something will lead to happiness, the smart thing to do is listen. Sometimes I favored doing the smart thing.

I looked at the Colonel, and I said, "Please?"

The Colonel narrowed his eyes at me.

"And do me a favor: Go easy on Jase. He's a good kid." Because obviously after this assignment, Junior had passed his evaluations. He'd make a damn fine field agent, provided the Colonel let him live long enough.

The Colonel narrowed his eyes at me even further. Could he even still see me with his eyes down to slits like that? Maybe he was thinking up good excuses to give the higher-ups when he got back to the Institute for why he'd shot me himself. *Gunned down in the melee. Crushed by the giant robot. Body burned up in the explosion*. This little airfield debacle definitely didn't lack reasons why an agent ended up dead and his body couldn't be recovered. No one would be stupid enough to probe the Colonel's mind to learn otherwise--whatever story he came up with would stand. Too, the Colonel would keep the Institute distracted by the need to ferret out the communications leak that let the Darven government set multiple traps for us. Time marches on. Soon enough, I'd be forgotten.

He hadn't shot me yet. Which meant maybe the Colonel was looking for reasons to let me go without killing me first. Maybe I'd misjudged the big lug over the years and he was a big softy inside after all. Yeah, and maybe the sun went nova yesterday. That was about equally likely. Whatever he was going to decide, the Colonel had his reasons, and that *no telepathy or I'll shoot you* rule meant I wasn't about to sneak into his head to learn what they were. Antagonizing the Colonel would be another of those Very Bad Ideas.

"You know you can't come back from this," the Colonel said to me.

I nodded and repeated, "Please?"

The Colonel's expression remained granite. "I can't let you want walk away with him if I'm able to stop you. But just this once," he said, looking past me at Cowboy, "you get a free shot. Make it count."

"Yes, sir," Cowboy said, with a quick, respectful nod. Then he stepped around me and slugged the Colonel hard in the jaw, a blow that probably would have taken a lesser man's head off. The Colonel's body slammed back into the wall and he sank, only momentarily dazed but enough that he couldn't shoot us.

"Come on," Cowboy said, pulling at my arm. "We gotta get out of here."

"Thank you," I said, to Cowboy and Dion, the Colonel, Yan and Jase, and the whole damned world.

After that, the only thing left to do was run alongside Cowboy and Dion and see what this new future of mine might hold.

7. (A Long Epilogue)

We didn't go far in our stolen car before we stopped. Dion wielded the knife, and in moments cut out the tracking chip, about the size of a grain of rice, that the Institute implanted in every Talent it recruited and every "person of interest" it brought in for testing, just under the scalp at the back of the head, just inside the hairline. The knife was sharp, and Dion knew what he was doing; Doulas, the third man, Dion's half-brother, showed me the tiny cut where Dion had done the same to him a few days before. My chip had been there so long I'd forgotten about it. I barely felt the removal.

Cowboy crushed the chip under his boot. We burned my clothes, just in case another tracking chip was concealed in them, and I put on some fresh civilian clothes they'd stolen for me.

We drove a long while, stole another vehicle, then drove it to the border. We slipped across, hotwired another vehicle, drove for hours more, then abandoned it at the edge of a semi-arid desert wasteland. For there we walked.

I couldn't go back to the Institute, of course. Our plan was to reach Dion and Doulas' semi-nomadic clan in the wasteland. No one bothered them--they went for years sometimes without seeing outsiders. Since no one but the Colonel could connect me to Dion or Doulas, the Institute was unlikely to find me.

We slept during the heat of the day, and we walked during the night. They had a tent, jerky and other foods that wouldn't spoil in the heat, camping supplies in backpacks, and a digital camouflage tarp that we stretched between the scrubby trees over the tent to hide from drones or other surveillance.

I still couldn't believe I was here with Cowboy and Dion and not back at the Institute or with the Colonel in some cheap hotel. At the end of a full night of walking, as dawn started, Dion and I set up the tent while Cowboy and the third rescuer, Dion's half-brother Doulas, went bow-hunting for something to supplement the food we had brought.

"I'm sorry," I told Dion, referring to whatever glitch had locked his tracking skill on Cowboy--and me. "I know you didn't ask for this."

They had told me early on about how they found me. When I'd encountered Cowboy over two years ago, I'd taken control of his mind, fucked him ... and somehow created a subconscious emotional connection between us. Maybe I'd fallen in love a little with Cowboy and his ideals during our time together, and I'd somehow ended up either making him love me back. The way I kept thinking about him from time to time since kept the link alive, kept him obsessed with finding me, though he didn't know how. After he got away from Johannsen's men, and figured out I'd been responsible for his opportunity to do it, he spent a lot of time finding the Institute and infiltrating it as a staff member in hopes of finding me. The problem with that plan was that, as a field agent, I was hardly ever at the Institute.

When I'd encountered Dion six months ago, I'd been curious about how his tracking skill worked, and I'd tried to use it to try to locate Cowboy. But Dion's skill only tracked people and things he had encountered, not complete strangers. Or so he thought. I'd kicked his skill into overdrive to find his half-brother Doulas during that mission for the Institute; when I did that and looked for Cowboy, I created a link that kept part of Dion's skill still searching. Dion went to the Institute with some of his clansmen and infiltrated the service staff in an attempt--successful--to rescue his half-brother; that's when he encountered Cowboy and the link closed. They realized that they were somehow connected immediately, though they needed some time to realize why and that the connection was through me. I had, after all, erased Dion's memories of me after our time together. During those months, he had been chasing something that seemed a ghost to his conscious mind; he had been seeking to fill in the hole I left in his memories and the vague sense of connection that accompanied it.

Cowboy helped Dion and his clansmen rescue Doulas a few days later; and then, just as they were making their escape, the Colonel and I showed up at the Institute to start evaluating new candidates. Before Cowboy or Dion could contact me, we left for Darven. By then, Dion knew what--and who--he was searching for. While the rest of their clansmen disappeared on their way back to their clan, Dion and his tracking skill led Cowboy and Doulas to follow us to Darven. When they'd seen the military storming through, they'd hypothesized that the Colonel and I might be the cause. Doulas headed around Javennek setting off random explosions, while Cowboy and Dion ran some hit-and-run guerilla strikes, in hopes of distracting the military. One of those explosions was what helped the Colonel and me escape the stop groups.

The four of us sat in a circle, around the heating unit we had used to cook dinner, a large rabbit Cowboy had shot a couple of hours earlier. Food and water would be tight until we reached the clan.

I watched Cowboy and Dion. They were sitting nearly side by side, but only because of proximity--they were sitting where they could both look directly at me. They seemed ... expectant, waiting for me to do something. I drank in how handsome they both were, in their different ways. I liked their bodies, bare chests displayed in the starting dawn, the way their legs and butts and crotches filled out their snug jeans.

The early glow at the horizon signaled another scorching day was starting. Soon sunrise would officially arrive. The temperature would soar. We needed to get some sleep now, before the day got too hot, so that we'd be ready to move on again at sundown. I snuck a little glimpse into Dion's head. His tracking skill suggested his nomadic clan was still nearly two days away. Sunrise was coming, and we needed to get to sleep soon, but we still had some time, maybe all the time in the world.

I had no family ties and seldom could afford the luxury of friendship. My working arrangement with the Colonel?--Sure, we respected each other, but that was definitely not what I would call a friendship. My two-plus years of fascination with Cowboy the oddly moral hit man? My six-month fascination with Dion, no stranger to the underbelly of society himself? Those might count as the closest things to friendships I'd developed in the time since I became a field operative and got partnered with the Colonel. This was unfamiliar territory for me. I wasn't sure how to proceed. The Institute hadn't covered this in my training.

Fuck--why was there never an evil genius with an army of killer robots around when I needed one? At least I knew what to do when confronted by an evil genius and killer robots.

If I could shift the game back to the familiar physical playing field, odds were that I could buy myself time to figure out the rules. Time to change the game.

Besides, I knew what they were waiting for. They had waited a long time.

"So," I asked Cowboy, though I already knew the answer, "you two have never tried having sex together?" By then, of course, I was rested and my telepathy was back to full capacity. I could have just picked the answer from their minds; instead I asked them out loud.

Cowboy blushed and turned his head away from Dion a degree. "We, uh, tried once--"

"Twice," Dion corrected as he continued pulling off his hiking boots.

Cowboy nodded a curt acknowledgement. "Twice. But we was both too drunk to get it up the second time, so that don't count. We tried, but ... It ... We couldn't go through with it."

Their thoughts both finished, *Because he wasn't you.*

This was new territory for me, emotionally. Sure, I'd fucked around with lots of guys, but it was just sex. Ever since I got assigned to special operations work, I was in and out of people's lives, so sex was the result of either mutual lust if I had the opportunity to meet somebody during my few off-hours, or my manipulations if the assignment put me in front of somebody hot.

I readied the mental suggestion in my head. I said, "Surely you're not holding out for marriage, Cowboy." *Nudge.* "You know as well as I do: A stiff dick has no conscience." *Nudge.* "And as I remember, your dick gets very, very stiff." *Nudge.*

By now, Dion had both boots off, he knew what was coming, and he wasn't waiting for my telepathic suggestion to take full effect. He reached into his crotch and adjusted his dick, semi-stiff and rising, in his jeans. He looked down at the ridge of it pointed along one pants leg and rubbed it again, as every fragment of his awareness became concentrated on that gentle motion, the vague pressure of his hand stroking his dick through denim.

Cowboy, shifting a leg in response to his own rising erection, looked up as Dion stood and unfastened his belt. Cowboy watched him.

Dion was uncertain. For six months he'd been chasing a ghost, something connected to him that he couldn't clearly remember. He was still processing the memories I'd restored of our time together. Too, his half-brother was also here watching. I could help Dion with his misgivings. All I had to do was quiet the parts of his mind that kept throwing up objections. I made sure he knew I was sliding

into his head, and he didn't try to stop me. In fact, he seemed relieved, welcomed my entry. Dion surrendered his thoughts to me, and I stirred them into a nice stew of lust. He set to work on the snap and zipper at his fly. No underwear. He pushed his jeans to his knees. His six-inch cock, thick, bounced out into the air, pointing right at me, the foreskin already peeled nearly all the way off the head. He half-stumbled his feet out of his jeans.

Douglas stared at Dion, not saying a word, wondering what was happening, suspecting the cause. He seemed content to watch for now, so I let him.

Cowboy stood. I stood too, and Cowboy came to me. His closed-lips kiss wasn't aggressive; in fact, it was nearly passive, just his lips moving with mine, waiting for me to glide deeper into his thoughts and guide him through the next move. I cupped his stubbled jaw, and my tongue gently urged his lips and teeth apart. He put his left arm around my waist. Dion joined us and Cowboy's right arm went around his shoulders. Dion's hands between us brushed our bare stomachs, just the backs of his fingers stroking up and down from our navels, down and stopping just shy of our cocks, still trapped in our pants. I turned from Cowboy and kissed Dion, letting my tongue probe into his mouth. Even as the kiss deepened, he kept his hands where they were. Close, but not touching. There, but not. Teasing us by proximity.

I stepped back and opened my pants, pushed them down to mid-thigh. Pulling Dion to me, I turned my entire body to face him and, in doing so, pushed my cock against his hand. He gasped, shivering as we made the contact he found himself craving. His fingers tightened and released, just enough movement to say, *I'm touching you and I want you to feel me touching you.*

Dion caressed my cock gently, still kissing me until I pulled my mouth away and said to Cowboy, "Remember how much you liked sucking my cock?" *Nudge.* "I bet you'd like to suck my cock now, wouldn't you?" Another little mental nudge was all he needed to kneel.

Cowboy agreed as he sank to his knees, "There's nothing in the world I'd like better." I put one hand on the back of his head, guiding him toward my crotch, and then his mouth was around my cock-head.

I moaned. I turned my body toward him as he completely engulfed my dick, summoning my full attention to every place his hands and mouth made contact with my skin. When I had first met him, he was a virgin to cock-sucking and I had to coach him through the basics; obviously he'd spent the years since honing his new skills. He read my every response perfectly, knew exactly when to give and when to take, when to bring me to the edge and when to ease me back. I was happy to lose myself in everything he did.

As Dion knelt beside Cowboy, over his shoulder I glanced at Douglas. He shifted his legs around an obscene lump in his crotch. Maybe amusement or arousal had narrowed his eyes. Maybe disbelief had parted his lips. Whatever his expression, he was there. Watching and silent, but there.

Dion's mouth took my cock from Cowboy and took over sucking me. Cowboy stood. Cowboy was about thirty now, handsome as I remembered, dark-haired, smooth-chested, body still honed to military solidness, a few minor cuts and scrapes on his face from that rooftop explosion. I slid my hand around the back of his neck and pulled our faces together. He kissed me. Full-on--no hesitation, no coercion from me. I tasted my sweaty crotch in Cowboy's mouth as he kissed me. He devoured my mouth the way Dion devoured my cock.

Dion looked up, but his mouth didn't stop. I broke my kiss with Cowboy and looked down. Dion: dark-haired with a shoulder-length ponytail, skin the gold of honey, hairy chest, orange eyes, packing a thick six-inch uncut dick that stood perpendicular to his hips. Dion had improved at cock-sucking too—really improved. When our eyes met, his were full of hunger and lust. He came off my cock to gulp down a breath, licked his lips, then went down on me again, sucking my cock with even more enthusiasm.

Cowboy kissed up along my chest and neck, heading for my mouth again, as Dion sank my cock deeper into his throat and tugged on my ball sack with gentle fingers. I kept one hand on the back of Cowboy's neck and one in Dion's hair, holding on to both while they tasted me. No one gave head like Dion, no one kissed like Cowboy, and I'd never been so aroused.

The pure, liquid lightning coursing through my balls and up and down my dick brought a string of whispered profanity to my tongue, but Cowboy's kiss arrived to silence it. I was sure, at any moment, that I was going to cum, but Dion expertly held me back, promising with every tongue-stroke that he wasn't done with me yet.

"Fuck," I breathed against Cowboy's lips. I held the back of his neck tighter, and he dipped his head to kiss behind my ear. His hand drifted across my chest and his fingertip danced tight circles around my nipple.

"Fuck," Doulas moaned in agreement, still watching. I'd nearly forgotten about him.

"This is the wildest thing I've ever done," Cowboy murmured against my neck. "I can feel it--in my head--what he's doing to you with his mouth. It's like he's sucking my dick too ... Fuck, Dion, I'd fucking beg you to suck my cock like that right here and now, but feeling you do it to him is just too damned hot."

Dion responded with a low moan that vibrated across my skin before he deep-throated me, echoed by a moan from Cowboy.

Cowboy growled, his stubble brushing the side of my jaw, "He's going to make you cum, and"--he sucked in a breath and his voice trembled—"if he's not careful, he's going to make me cum too."

I loved the silky heat of Dion's mouth bathing my dick, the roughness of Cowboy's jeans against my bare hip and ass cheek. Dion shivered, and a ragged rush of breath whooshed across my dick-skin before he swallowed me again, moving even faster. He had surrendered: he was past the point of give and take, of holding back to make the experience last. I was supposed to be in charge here, but the sensations were too much to resist, especially with Cowboy's kiss on top of it all. My heart pounded, my body shook with unreleased tension, and every nerve in my body turned to pure electricity.

"Cum," Cowboy whispered, breath vibrating against my lips. The arousal in his voice, somewhere between a sigh and a plea, was so damned sexy. "Wanna watch you cum. Wanna see what he does to you."

Cowboy kissed me. Dion flicked his tongue underneath the head of my cock. I lost it. My cock pulsed against Dion's lips, and my moan drowned in Cowboy's mouth as my sanity buckled. Orgasm. My eyes rolled back, and my body burned with pleasure, and everything seemed to explode and collapse at once.

With one final shudder, I sank into Cowboy's arms. "Oh, fuck," I whispered, panting. Dion stood up and kissed me. My head still spun, and kissing was more important than breathing just then, so I tangled my fingers in Dion's hair and let the tip of his tongue draw mine into his mouth. The taste of my own semen on his tongue made this all real. It wasn't just a fantasy, this had really happened. And, as Cowboy kissed my shoulder, working his way up to my neck, it was still happening.

Cowboy leaned over me, cupped the back of Dion's neck and pulled him into a kiss. I knew how they each kissed, and now I was watching them kiss each other. With my thoughts in their minds, I knew exactly what it felt like when Cowboy ran the tip of his tongue across Dion's lower lip, tasting traces of my cum there; and when Dion's cheeks hollowed, I shivered because I knew his tongue was sliding into Cowboy's mouth. I found that sensitive spot behind Cowboy's ear and flicked my tongue across it.

"Lean back," Dion whispered in Cowboy's other ear. Whether Cowboy consciously obeyed or just let a passive response happen, his body completely surrendered into my arms and the mercy of Dion's whims. I leaned in to kiss Cowboy deeply while Dion knelt again.

I knew exactly what Dion was doing. Cowboy's belt buckle jingled. Then the sound of Cowboy's separating zipper made his breath and mine catch. Dion reached in and forked out Cowboy's six and a half inch erection. Cowboy pushed his face toward mine, digging his fingers into the back of my neck. *Don't pull away, his thoughts said; I need you so I can remember how to breathe.*

When Cowboy's entire body seized and he pulled the breath out of my lungs, I knew Dion's mouth was working its magic on his cock. Cowboy's fingers twitched in my hair, and our lips separated when he released a sudden, sharp breath. He held me tighter as his deep, delirious moans reverberated against my mouth.

Cowboy's head fell back onto my shoulder, and his eyes shut tight. His lips alternated between tightening into a grimace and parting with the release of breath. "Oh, fuck," he breathed. A shudder ran through him, and his eyes screwed shut as his back arched. I kissed his exposed throat, tasting every tremor and moan beneath the sheen of perspiration as I mouthed my way up the side of his neck. I stopped just shy of that spot behind his ear, keeping my lips against his skin but not touching him there, not yet.

It's my turn, Cowboy, I said into his head. Let me see what he does to you.

"Oh, fuck," he moaned. "Fuck ..."

Show me, I whispered into his mind, trailing my fingertips across his chest as my lips inched closer to that sweet spot behind his ear. Show me you like it as much as I do.

"Oh--oh, man--fuck--" he whimpered softly, then shuddered, then gasped, I knew he was right there, right on the edge, and that's when I ran the tip of my tongue around the spot behind his ear and gave the pleasure centers in his mind a gentle jolt. In that instant, he started to climax so violently his body nearly levitated off the ground, but my arms around him kept him still, kept him here.

A long sigh signaled his return to terra firma, and his body sagged, fully relaxed.

As soon as Dion stood, Cowboy kissed him, holding onto him with trembling hands and gasping for breath between kisses.

"You sure give good head," he slurred, releasing Dion.

"Got any condoms on you?" Cowboy asked me. Then he looked at me and grinned—no, smirked. That filthy, sexy smirk. "I've got some in my pack, but it's way over there by the tent ..." He trailed off, but the lift of his eyebrows and the extra twist of his smirk finished the statement.

A box of condoms and a little plastic bottle of lube hit the sandy ground beside my foot with a pair of soft noises. I looked up at Doulas, who grinned and settled himself back to watch.

Cowboy and I both had to sit down for a moment to get our boots off, then finish pulling off our pants and underwear. Dion stood near me. I reached and just barely touched his cock, trailing just my fingertips lightly up and down the underside of it, up and down.

"Fucking tease," Dion groused, his voice a stew of frustration and arousal.

"Tease?" I chuckled and reached for Dion's leg and pulled him down onto the dirt with us. "Did you hear what he called me, Cowboy? Do you think I'm teasing him?"

Cowboy laughed. "I think you should suck his cock."

"After everything he's done," I said, "I think you're right." Dion's cock twitched in my hand, and his breath caught. I went to my knees, steadying him with a hand on his hip as I lapped at his cock-head.

"Aw, fuck," Dion moaned. My tongue explored every contour of his cock as if it was uncharted territory, as if I'd never tasted him before. I glanced up. Dion's head was turned and he kissed Cowboy, his free hand sliding around to Cowboy's ass as Dion's finger probed for Cowboy's hole, teasing it, poking, readying it. Their lips separated for a half-second, just long enough to let me see Cowboy's tongue slide into Dion's mouth. I moaned appreciatively against Dion's cock, making him shudder. Cowboy's kiss probably helped too. Dion's breathing became less steady, his hand trembled in my hair, a telltale saltiness on my tongue. I couldn't tell whether Cowboy's mouth or mine triggered which responses, but I didn't care. Dion was unraveling, and that was all that mattered.

I reached into Dion's mind and gave his pleasure centers a little prod. His body jerked as if he'd been electrocuted, then again. His cock pulsed in my mouth.

Cowboy whispered, telling Dion, "Cum--cum for me--cum," his voice creating a low, growling undercurrent beneath the tension building in Dion's every breath. One last prod sent him over. Dion's knees shook, and his hips mirrored my forward-and-back rhythm, and his cock twitched. Suddenly—"Aaaah!"--he released a helpless, breathless whimper, as salty-sweet semen shot across my tongue.

I kept going, stroking and sucking, using my telepathy to make sure his orgasm lasted as long as humanly possible and only stopped when he finally begged me to.

"Fuck," Cowboy whispered.

Our eyes met. I said, "I want to fuck you."

His thoughts squirmed, resisting, remembering the pain of entry from anal sex he'd tried to have since our time together, but I calmed them easily, rolling those memories under the one of how much he had loved my cock in his ass that first time years ago. The memory of my cock in his ass made him

helplessly aroused. "Please fuck me," he begged, hoarsely. He held my gaze a moment longer, then turned to kiss Dion.

I bent and reached for the condoms. My hands shook as I tore the wrapper because I was desperate to be inside Cowboy, to be touching either of them again.

While I rolled the condom on, Dion had knelt and was again sucking Cowboy's cock. I was tempted to suggest that Cowboy move, that he get on his hands and knees so I could fuck him good and hard in a position that would be easy for him, but his low whimper gave me a better idea. After I'd put on some lube, making sure to leave the bottle within reach in case I needed more, I stood behind Cowboy and put my hands on his hips. When I gently nudged his legs apart with my knee, his spine straightened. He glanced over his shoulder, eyes wide with surprise.

"I want you just like this," I said.

He started to speak, but when I pushed his shoulders forward and pressed my cock against him, he simply moaned and leaned forward, hands on his knees to steady himself.

"Oh, sweet fucking hell," he breathed as I pushed into him slowly, making sure his mind registered nothing but pleasure.

"Oh, fuck, Cowboy--you feel so good." I closed my eyes, but my head spun faster with every inch I gained, every time I withdrew and pushed back in. I took long, smooth strokes at first, just trying to keep myself from cumming or collapsing under the weight of how fucking incredible this felt.

Cowboy's knees trembled, nearly buckling. Mine weren't much steadier and, for a moment, I thought they might give out, that he and I were both on the verge of going down. I could keep my own balance, but I wasn't sure about both of us. Then Cowboy grasped Dion's shoulders, using his body to keep himself--and me--upright. With this new stability, I focused less on standing and more on fucking Cowboy's ass. I dug my fingers into his hips, and I pounded him hard and fast.

"Shit," Dion moaned as Cowboy kissed his neck. Cowboy's hand disappeared between them, and Dion gasped, throwing his head back as Cowboy's shoulder rose and fell in time with my rapid thrusts.

I couldn't hold back, not when they were both so turned on, when they looked so damned hot, when Cowboy felt so fucking good and his back arched that way and his arousal blazed against the outskirts of my thoughts and his voice slurred those profanities and my spine melted more with every stroke I took inside Cowboy and--

"Oh, fuck," I groaned. I pulled Cowboy's hips against mine, driving my cock as deep as I could, and came. His body still moved with the force of his own strokes on Dion's cock, and that subtle motion, that vague hint of a perfect rhythm, drew out my orgasm until I thought I was going to pass out.

When I couldn't take anymore, I pulled out slowly, still gasping for breath.

As I pulled off the condom, Cowboy kissed Dion, holding the sides of his neck in his hands. "Now it's your turn." Then Cowboy turned to me. "Mind handing me a condom?"

I nodded, grabbed one out of the box, passed it to him with the lube. He tore the wrapper with his teeth and quickly rolled the condom on. Dion assumed the classic hands-and-knees position, ready for

Cowboy to mount him doggy style. I crouched in front of Dion's head and pulled it to me. Holding his face in both hands, I kissed him deeply.

I kept our minds linked at the sensory level. I felt a shudder ran up Dion's spine, following Cowboy's hands on his skin before they settled on Dion's hips. The touch of cool lube made him tense and gasp. Then Dion drew in a tense breath, and the low groan from Cowboy told me he was slowly pushing his cock into Dion, and I felt Dion's response to the intrusion. What I was doing in Dion's mind ensured he felt nothing but ecstasy.

As Cowboy picked up speed, Dion's body rocked against mine, echoing the rhythm and force of Cowboy's deep, rapid thrusts. The harder Cowboy fucked him, the deeper Dion kissed me. When I met Cowboy's eyes, his lips parted and a shudder rippled through his body, then Dion's, then mine.

I kept one hand on Dion's neck and reached between us with the other, stroking Dion's cock just as Cowboy had while I'd been the one doing the fucking before. When I gently bit the base of Dion's neck, Cowboy bit his own lip, and all of the sensations got mixed up in our heads. My hand followed Cowboy's rhythm exactly, speeding up when he did, slowing down when he did. *You've never looked so fucking hot, Cowboy*, I thought. Exertion made the cords in his neck stand out, and his shoulders and biceps trembled. His mouth was somewhere between a grimace and a silent howl. Sweat rolled down his face. His eyebrows were pulled together, and his eyes were wide; wide and focused right on mine. I shivered, and my rhythm faltered slightly, making Dion's breath catch. I squeezed a little harder, stroked faster, and his cock twitched in my hand. Cowboy bit his lip and closed his eyes, trying to stay in control just a little bit longer. He looked down, watching himself fuck Dion, and released a breath, muttering nonsense syllables, too gone to form real words.

"Cum for me," I whispered to Dion. Then I did my little number in his head and, with a yelp, Dion started to cum, his body nearly collapsing against mine as his semen hit my wrist and forearm.

Cowboy's eyes flicked up and met mine. "Your turn, Cowboy. Cum for me." I reached into his head and tipped him likewise over the edge into his orgasm, hard, and his eyes had only a split second to widen before they screwed shut and he slammed his cock deep into Dion and roared through his release.

Dion collapsed against me, and Cowboy slumped behind him, resting his forehead on Dion's shoulder. "Holy fucking shit," Cowboy slurred. "That was ..." He exhaled, shuddering as he pulled out slowly.

"... So fucking hot." Dion raised his head to kiss while Cowboy stepped away to get rid of the condom.

"Definitely hot," I said.

"Yeah," whispered another voice, dark with arousal.

I looked around and there sat Doulas, still watching us. I'd forgotten about him.

"You'd like to get off too," I said, slipping into his mind. I stood. "Come here."

His thoughts twisted, trying to come up with a reason to say no, mostly centered on Dion seeing him. I smoothed away Doulas' objections and sent a comforting wave of lust and pleasure through his mind that made his balls tingle.

Come here, I repeated in his head.

How could he not? He stood up and closed the few feet between us.

He stared at my dick. His thoughts were nervous but not unwilling. I eased closer and reached for his belt buckle as I probed in his thoughts for what I needed. "May I?" I asked.

He muttered, "Yeah," as if dreaming.

I watched his eyes and thoughts as I opened his jeans, waiting for fear to flash by, before I slid my palm inside to meet his rod. The fear didn't come. He closed his eyes and sighed. I stroked him and he shuddered, surrendering his body and mind to me. He had some experience with men--I could see it in his memories—more than Dion had had that first time, but not a lot. He wasn't used to being touched by a man.

I squeezed his dick gently. "Douglas, what do you want to do?"

He looked at me, suddenly nervous about revealing what he wanted sexually to another man, especially with his brother watching.

It's okay, I calmed his mind. *Say what you want*.

"I don't know. Suck it, I guess?"

"Douglas, we don't have to do anything you don't want to. We could just kiss a while or I can jack you off if that's all you're comfortable with."

"No," he decided, gliding his strong hands onto my shoulders. "I want to ... do this. I want to know why Dion was so obsessed with finding you." He pressed his body closer, and then the bare skin of his chest touched mine. He seemed to enjoy the feeling. He swallowed hard, committing himself, and I heard him swallow a whimper as he wrapped his arms around me, holding me tight. "I want to know. Being around you ..." He paused and kissed me. Of course he wanted this--after just the telepathic backwash alone from sitting so close to me having sex with his half-brother and Cowboy, Douglas would probably have done anything I asked, no coercion needed. Douglas broke the kiss. "You make me so fucking hard." He nipped my neck and squeezed my ass with both hands. "Please ... make me cum."

He sounded desperate, almost pleading. How could I deny him when he was practically begging for this? This--as well as his tongue in my ear--was all the confirmation my body needed. I pressed against him, rocking my groin into his. Douglas moaned as I pulled him down onto the ground; we practically fell the last few inches. We kissed again, and his hands roamed over me, exploring my chest, stomach, and groin. I rubbed his dick through his opened jeans.

After a little kissing and touching, Douglas eased back, and I watched as he struggled to pull off his boots and jeans. His cock bounced free. It seems a bit longer than Dion's and just as thick--tasty. I loved watching him crawl back over me. He lined his body up against mine and pressed his manhood against my hip as he kissed me again. He rocked into me a little, just enough to tease. His kisses and touches were soft, but backed by the desperation of a man who wanted to fuck--the battle between lust and uncertainty masquerading as gentleness. Fine by me; I always preferred to take the lead. I could calm his uncertainties and feed him how-to instructions telepathically.

I guided Doulas onto his back and maneuvered myself on top of him, straddling his thighs, kissing him ruthlessly to build his excitement. He slid his hands over my back like a blind man reading Braille--memorizing me. Being touched like this felt nice. Was this what true foreplay was for? Maybe I was so used to grabbing random quick sex during assignments, I'd forgotten what it was like to slow down and take some time to get to know the other man's body as well as his mind. Well, now that I'd left the Institute, I had plenty of time.

I was contemplating the possibilities when his fingers grazed my dick-head. A tingle shot through me. That was the signal--I wanted to fuck too and I needed to advance the agenda toward the part where I stuck my dick in him. I took his dick in my hand and started stroking. I pushed into his head so that I could deal with those uncertainties and encourage him to go further.

Yes, he wanted this and, as his hesitation melted, Doulas' gentle touch turned to vise grips that squeezed my ribs. He writhed beneath me, moaning and panting as I wiggled lower. I aligned my mouth with his cock-crown and licked the pre-cum from his slit. I'd never seen someone come so unglued by the slightest of touches. Doulas was practically screaming by the time I sucked him down. What would he do when he came?

But he wasn't going to cum yet. I wasn't going to let him cum yet.

I sucked up and down his beautiful erection for several minutes, and then used my hand when I needed to breathe. Meanwhile, I gave his pleasure centers little prods and jolts and jabs. His expression, dazed with lust, nearly made me laugh. He shook a few times and held his breath. I might have been torturing him if I judged by the little whimpers and cries escaping his throat. He held on to my shoulders and tilted his hips. Knowing I'd aroused him like this was exhilarating.

Doulas rolled me onto my back. He came over me aggressively this time, pinning my arms above my head as he sucked on my neck. I felt the sting; I knew he'd left a mark, marking his territory. He kissed his way down my chest and licked my erection from base to tip. He wasn't holding back any longer.

I watched as he closed his eyes and surrendered to my telepathic suggestion and went down on me.

Every blowjob is different, but there's nothing like a hot, wet mouth engulfing the most sensitive part of my body to make every trace of the world disappear and every nerve dance happily. The Institute, the world--everything disappeared for me.

Until his teeth scraped against said nerves, and the road to ecstasy hit a pothole.

"Ow!" I winced. I'd forgotten his lack of experience. "Easy there, killer. If you bite it off, there won't be anything left for later."

Doulas let go and repositioned himself next to me. "Sorry." His disappointment came across loud and clear. But instead of shrinking away, he kissed me. He pulled me closer so that our erections lined up and rubbed together nicely.

I said, "Let's try again." I cupped his balls in one palm and pushed his shoulders with my other hand, guiding him. As he relaxed onto his back, I scooted down his body and nestled myself between his legs. He was probably thinking I'd suck his dick, but I had in mind another plan.

I sat up and grabbed his jeans and rolled them into a makeshift pillow. "Put this under your hips," I instructed.

Douglas didn't question me. He allowed me to elevate his hips, and he exposed his vulnerable hole by pulling his knees toward his shoulders. The glazed hormonal intoxication in his eyes and oozing from his thoughts told me he was enjoying himself.

Casually, I licked at his sensitive scrotum, flicking my tongue around the skin underneath. I jutted my tongue down further and tickled my intended target. Douglas gasped, and his puckered hole eased open a bit. I licked again, and Douglas cooed--fucking cooed!--as his sphincter relaxed. I teased his hole with my tongue. *I can't believe I'm doing this*, Douglas was thinking. I tongued Douglas and concentrated on making him feel more aroused than ever before in his life.

I sucked and I probed, but as I did so, my own body reminded me that holding back was damn near impossible. I needed to penetrate him. First, I had to prepare him. Sucking his cock was the best distraction I knew while preparing him for entry so I pulled his cock into my mouth. I took my time with sucking him as I pawed around to find the bottle of lube. I coated my fingers and rubbed them over his sphincter, which pulsed under my touch. As he tensed, I sucked extra hard on his dick crown and swirled my tongue along the ridge. That, plus a little stroke of arousal through his thoughts, did the trick. His hips rested once again on the balled jeans, and his fingers fisted the sandy dirt in pleasure as I pumped and twisted my finger in his ass. I curled my fingers and searched out that pleasure-producing spot inside his ass. Douglas' hips buckled and he yelped, "Ah!" Bingo! He couldn't struggle against this sensation now. I brushed over his prostate again and gave the pleasure centers in his mind a little staccato dance too. He panted, "Fuck! Do that again!" I pumped and twisted my fingers before inserting a third, hearing his grunt of surprise as I gave his sweet spot another nudge. He rewarded my efforts by touching my hair and rasping, "Oh, fuck! Feels--so good."

I couldn't wait any longer. I needed release, and I wanted it to be inside of Douglas. I grabbed a condom as Douglas watched me. I positioned myself and looked into his eyes before pressing in. I could feel him shaking beneath me. I calmed him telepathically—he was feeling anxiety but not fear, expectation but not pain. I rested my weight on him and kissed him as I slowly breached his opening. He quivered and moaned against my mouth. I searched his eyes and smoothed his thoughts as he panted. "You okay? Want me to stop?"

"No. Just ... a second." Douglas closed his eyes, and I helped him will the pain away. When he opened eyes again, he growled, "Fuck me. I want to feel you fuck me." So I did. I pumped in and out slowly several times before picking up the pace. He lifted his legs and locked them over my shoulders. Douglas yelped in a pitch that only dogs could hear, and thrust his hips to meet mine. I hammered in and out, harder and harder, aggressively as an animal, until we were both moaning. Douglas took every bit of it. He gripped my ribs, and groaned loudly. His climax built smoothly. When his cock erupted, I poked into his mind to make sure his orgasm overwhelmed him. Then my climax began, and I fed the sensation into his mind too, letting him experience his pleasure mingled with mine. Overloaded, Douglas' thoughts turned into vague shards of sensation.

Spent, I sprawled on top of him and felt the wetness--his cum, our sweat--between us. Sticky and delicious. I'd made him cum so hard it felt like lava oozing everywhere that our skin connected. I hated pulling out. I wanted to stay there for hours feeling him all around me, smelling the musky thickness of sex in the air, and listening to his steady breathing, but I couldn't. I eased out of his ass.

"Fuck!" Cowboy swore.

I'd forgotten about him--and Dion. When I looked over, Cowboy lay on his back, legs up and wide apart, craning his neck to watch us. Dion crouched between Cowboy's legs, pushing his cock into Cowboy's ass. I couldn't see the details because of the angle, but Cowboy was obviously enjoying the penetration. Cowboy grinned and winked. I grinned back.

We didn't leave the tent until sundown and we hadn't gotten much sleep. Fortunately, we didn't have a schedule to keep--no one cared if reaching Dion's clan took an extra day thanks to all the time we wasted having sex. And if their nomadic clan moved on, Dion's and Doulas' tracking skills would still lead us to them.

Doulas, still naked, climbed out of the tent last. By then Cowboy, Dion, and I all had our pants and boots on, and we were about ready to start breaking camp, erasing all evidence that we'd been there.

"I don't see what the big deal is," Doulas grouched as he found his hat and parked it on his head, using his *So much cooler than you* attitude to deflect any embarrassment about everything we'd all done together. "Sure, the sex was great, but was it really worth risking our lives to bring him back with us? If you just want good sex, it's easier to hire a whore."

"So now I'm a whore, huh?" I chuckled as Doulas searched for his jeans and boots.

Doulas harrumphed, "You know what I mean."

Cowboy and Dion started collapsing down the tent. When we were done with packing it and the digi camo tarp up, the sky was darkening, the air was cooling, and we were ready to move on. While the rest of us were shirtless because the air was still hot, Doulas remained naked, except for his boots and hat.

What can I say? I liked the scenery. Nearly naked men made great scenery. Besides, it only took a couple of little telepathic tweaks to make too-cool Doulas ... simply not notice he hadn't finished dressing and his cock and balls were swinging in the air.

What can I say? I'm good at what I do.

Doulas shouldered his pack and set off. "Hell of a lot of trouble bringing him back with us, if you ask me," he grumbled.

Cowboy and Dion of course had figured out the reason Doulas just forgot to put on his pants. They snickered and grinned, thought it was funny. Doulas needed to be taken down a peg or two from time to time--and being made to show his ass without realizing it seemed fitting. Maybe around the time we made camp again, I'd let him have an *oh shit* moment and suddenly realize he'd spent the whole day strolling around naked.

"Well, come on--let's get moving," Doulas grouched, frowning at the three of us standing there doing nothing but watching him with his dick and ass hanging out in the breeze. He shrugged—"Oh, whatever"--turned around, and started walking.

"Shit," Cowboy hissed with a grin, shaking his head and drawling out the vowel in his accent: *Sheeeee-it*. "We better be nice to him," he stage whispered to Dion about me, "or he'll have us strolling bare-ass through the desert too."

I replied, "Guys, would I do that to you?"

Cowboy and Dion looked at me and said in unison, "Yes." But they were grinning.

They froze as their minds locked up. Their hands went to their crotches, opened their flies. Their jeans came off, then their boots went back on. Their jeans went into their packs. They blinked as my telepathy withdrew, not realizing they'd lost a minute or so of time, not realizing they were naked except for their boots and hats.

If the Colonel had been there, he would have grumbled at me in that conversation we'd had many times, *Please tell me you do not plan on fucking each and every damned one of them?* Then I'd have shrugged and grinned, like always. *Only the ones I like*, I'd have said replied, because I did like Cowboy, and Dion, and even too-cool Doulas. But the Colonel wasn't there. I hoped he wasn't being too rough on Jase.

We shouldered our packs and set out across the desert. We still had a full night of walking, another day of fucking and sleeping through the heat, then most of a second day's walk before we reached Dion's clan. Maybe later I'd let Cowboy and Dion realize they'd also just spend the day walking through the desert bare-assed, but for now I was simply going to enjoy every inch of the scenery on the way to this new life of mine.

"You guy coming, or what?" I teased them, and we trotted to catch up with Doulas under the last of the sunset.
