

Pair-Bonded (an Institute story)

by Wrestlr

[M/M, MC]

Synopsis: Two Talents on the run from the Institute struggle to survive on their own. An Institute story.

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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1.

When the police hit their revolving lights, the four of you drop your spray cans and bolt. You've been through this routine before--you know what to do. First, you run.

Darvenek is a clan city, though you think calling it a city may be generous. This part of it is a sprawling, run-down slum even by Darven standards. No one lives in this area except for squatters and people who have reason to stay out of sight. People like you and Don. You like to hang out down here with friends among the dark alleys and empty streets late at night. There's nothing around here except

decrepit buildings, mostly ancient warehouses and abandoned factories. This area is not on any of the tourist maps, has been pretty much deserted since the economic downturns forced the tourism and shops to move north, so nobody's ever around to bother you--nobody except the police, that is. This is part of the game for you: The police act like graffiti and trespassing are important crimes, and in return you and your friends act like the police are a real threat. Oh, sure, this is serious stuff; there's that adrenaline rush when the lights kick on and the chase begins, but you know this area too well and they've never managed to nab you. High stakes, but a game nonetheless. Plus, you and Don have your Talents, and after four years on the run you know how to use

them.

The police can only arrest you if they catch you. The close alley means they can't use their car to pursue you quickly, which lets you and your friends get a head-start. The alley opens into a street, and a quick right takes you into an abandoned parking deck. "Split up!" Don yells; he veers hard right. Your other two friends, locals practically indistinguishable in the dark from any other Darven-clan, go left. You turn right, following Don.

You and Don obviously aren't Darven-clan. In a country built around eugenics, where selective breeding has resulted in a population with a standardized look--

curly blond hair, two allowed facial types, five body types--out-clan people are regarded with suspicion, unless they're money-wielding tourists in the markets or at the beachfront resorts a few miles to the north. You and Don obviously aren't tourists.

The police car turns in and tracks you, faster now in the open area and closing.

You're getting winded. Don's edging farther ahead. You round the corner after him, into another alley. "In here," he hisses, pulling the bottom of an old loose board away from the wooden fence, an opening large enough for you to barely squeeze through. He follows. Car doors slam: the police are coming after you on

foot.

Your latest safe house is ten blocks to the west--you never play this game close to home because you have too much to lose if you're ever caught. Nor do you head directly back. You have to lose the police first. You can't be followed.

You turn the corner. The police are getting smart--they've called in reinforcements, and they've already blocked off the other end of this alley, cutting off your usual escape route. "C'mon!" Don growls, and runs back the other way.

Two officers are coming up from behind you. You think you can dodge by them, but one grabs your arm and holds on tight.

He's typical Darven-clan--curls, blond, lithe--but he's strong. You can't shrug him off. Don has seen and is coming back for you. The officer's partner is closing from the opposite direction.

Plan B: You slam your other hand onto the policeman's arm and push your Talent into his skin. He shrieks in pain and surprise, but he lets go. A pile of trash nearby bursts into flames--Don's doing--which distracts the other officer, who stumbles, trying to decide whether catching you or stopping the fire takes priority. You and Don tear out as fast as you can run.

Pick a different direction. Your Talent isn't telepathy, not exactly, but the connection between you and Don is

strong. You can't tell exactly what he's thinking, but you get the general idea. He's thinking the police know too much--they know your route, and the two of you need to throw them off by going elsewhere. You know he's right because he has a good head for strategy, and you follow his lead as he zigzags through more alleys and side streets. In the four years you two have been on your own, Don's left being a suburban high-school jock behind; he's gotten street-smart. You wouldn't have lasted this long without him.

You're tiring. You can't run much farther. Stop and pant a moment. This is a fenced, vacant lot. Don scurries diagonally across it. Maybe he knows where he's going, but you don't--you suspect he doesn't either.

You haven't investigated any buildings in this area for use as a safe house. The two of you are on your own. You tear out after him.

Down another alley, across the connecting street, down another alley. You hear the police yelling to one another behind you. There are more of them and they have vehicles. They're less winded and you can't outrun them--you need a place to hide.

You whistle, quick and low, to get Don's attention. *In here*, you motion in the silent sign language you and he worked out long ago. You point to the building to your left. Your Talent tells you it's empty--no minds, no people inside. He nods, trusting

you. Don slams his shoulder into the generic door into the generic building, and it bursts open. You run in after him and press the door shut. Listen closely. Quiet the sound of your panting as much as you can. You hear the police' footsteps rush past in the alley and fade down the street. You look at Don in the near-darkness and grin. You're safe, for a while.

You both nod in relief and grin at each another. You both know the routine without having to say it: stay put until the police give up, and don't make any unnecessary noise; that means no talking.

You and Don don't barricade the door. You both learned long ago that what keeps the outside out also might keep you two

trapped inside if you have to run again. While your Talent revealed no minds here when you broke into this building, someone might show up later.

Look around. This is a storeroom of some sort, abandoned when this area went to seed. The previous tenants left tables and shelves of junk lying around, as though they intended to come back for it, then decided it wasn't worth the effort. On a set of metal shelves, you find some cans of spray paint. In the dark, illuminated by a flickering streetlight through a grimy window, you can't tell what colors they are, but they feel at least half-full when you shake them softly. You stash all of them except one into your pack.

Don's looking around at some old tools and stuff on a table, probably assessing whether he can sell it for scrap. You aim for the nearest wall and test the remaining spray paint can. The police will never hear the quiet hiss it makes. The night is too dark for you to identify the color, but you think it's black or brown or dark red maybe. Somebody's been here before you--other tracks of graffiti mar the wall, one spiraling off through an open door into the dark beyond--but not for some time. The layer of dust has been undisturbed a long while.

Don's still nosing around. He makes a circuit of the room, then sticks his head through the back doorway, peering into the black. Two steps through, and he's

swallowed in shadow.

Old paint clogs the nozzle. You stop and set the useless can down softly. That's when you realize how quiet everything is. You should be hearing Don bump into stuff in the dark, or at least the sound of him moving around. But there's nothing. You whisper, "Don?"

Nothing.

Take a step through the door. Concentrate. You can feel him in there. No matter where he is, you can always feel him. He's too far away for you to sense what he's thinking--that fades over distance, but even at this range you should pick up on what he's feeling through the bond. All

you're getting is a vague edginess. That's not helpful; you're on edge too. Maybe he's distracted by something. Whisper again: "Don?"

Still nothing.

You follow him into the darkness.

It's not like Don to not answer. Life on the streets for the last four years since you escaped has made him too serious; he doesn't joke this way. Your eyes are adjusting--it's not as lightless as you imagined. The room opens and the wall curves away to your right, into a flight of stairs. You climb them. Don's not to the left, but you feel him ahead and to your right, so you follow the wall's arc. "Don?"

You can't tell what this building once was. The broad sweeping turn of the wall carries you around gradually into pitch black.

"Don?"

You can feel him. You can feel his thoughts, the nervousness--which might be leftover adrenaline from avoiding the police. Your Talent is good at detecting minds, but you've never been very good at reading specific thoughts. You know generally where he is in the dark, closer now, nearby. You don't know what he's doing or why he doesn't answer. Maybe he's just being overly cautious. Your anxiety feels like a slow electrocution.

Someone touches your left arm--doesn't grab it, simply grips it firmly. You jump anyway and try to pull away. You hiss, "Don, you asshole ... You scared the shit out of me!"

Still no answer. He pulls you into an adjoining room. There's more light here, moonlight, streetlight, through a grimy window. You discern why he brought you here: There's a mattress on the floor next to one wall. How long has it been since you slept on a real mattress?

He looks at you, motions a hand-sign: *Check*. You nod a confirmation. You know what he wants; you always know what he wants. This close, you can partially read his thoughts--he's the only

one you can. He waits you to do your thing.

Concentrate. Close your eyes. Imagine your mind is like those sonar displays you used to see in movies, back when you went to theatres like any other suburban kid. Reach out for other minds. Try to sense their positions and distances, like blips on a sonar screen. You make the *boop ... boop* sound in your head but don't smile, because you want Don to know you take this seriously. You're an adult now, just like him.

After four years on the run, you and Don have developed several nonverbal signals, because sometimes communication must be silent. *Two*, you

indicate, and point in the direction.

He nods and indicates *Stay here*, then moves off into the hallway and the darkness beyond. You know not to argue or follow.

You can track Don the same way you track the other two minds. You can feel through the connection that he's tense, the anger in him raging particularly hot, demanding to be let out.

Don advances only so far though, then stops. He isn't going to confront the two people you detected, only to reconnoiter. He wants to make sure. After a while, he returns to tell you what you've already sensed: "They're gone."

You build a quick barricade at the foot of the stairs. If anyone enters this building, they won't come this way without making noise, enough to warn you. A warning is all you'll need.

Now you can relax, though Don remains on edge, wary, like always when you have a brush with the police. You fish through your pack. You still have some of the venison jerky you swiped from that street vendor two days ago, and you still have the second hard bun you stole today.

You're an excellent thief. Your Talent tells you which tourists at the street markets are loaded with cash they want to spend, that certain eagerness in their heads, or when the vendors are distracted. And sometimes the little fires Don can start with his

Talent help with the distraction. Ma'm Mar'shon, who runs the barbecue kiosk, swore to everyone who would listen that her grill was haunted after the sudden roaring flare-up that kept everyone from noticing you as you swiped a pair of buns from the baker's booth nearby. You and Don ate one for lunch. You wrapped the other in cloth for later. Now you unwrap it and tear it into fist-sized halves and hand him one, along with half of the jerky.

You have food to eat tonight. You don't every night.

You've shaken the police, but they'll be watching the streets for you tonight, especially after what you did to the officer's arm. You only gave him a light

dose--no permanent damage. He'll recover the use of his hand, you're sure. You and Don have done this before and, unspoken, you know what you'll do now: Stay here, wait until daylight, then slip away back to your safe house.

You call the places you squat *safe houses*, after something you saw in a movie once, as if you and Don are merely hiding out in some undercover protection program until you can safely resume your old life. Don indulges you by calling them safe houses too, though you know the safety such places provide is fleeting at best.

There's nothing to do now but wait. You could pull out your music player and ear buds, the only thing you have left from

your life before, but that seems too solitary. Don wants something else. He's looking at the mattress, the reason he brought you to this room, the reason you stayed in this building.

He takes hold of one side of the mattress, and you grab the other. Lift it; turn it over, slowly, to not kick up the layer of dust that coats the top of it. Don sits on it, pulls off his shirt and boots. You find a stack of cloth tarps, probably meant for use in packing before the owners abandoned this place. You pull one out of the middle of the pile, thinking it will be less dusty. It will do as a sheet to cover you. A carryover from your life before: The idea that a real bed requires a real sheet.

Don stretches out on the mattress and smiles. You and he have slept in the same space ever since that night, but the nights you've slept on a mattress have been few and far between. Tonight will be a luxury.

You pull off your boots and shirt too. Keep your pants on. You've learned you may have to wake up and run with little warning.

You spread the tarp over the bottom half of the mattress, covering Don's legs, then slip under it yourself.

The mattress is soft, a luxurious comfort under you, much better than the makeshift bedding at your current safe house. The mattress smells musty, like the rest of this

building, but no paradise is perfect.

Lying on your sides, face to face, you and Don are inches apart. He likes women; you accept that. But he knows your needs are different. He knows you like men and that you're in love with him. You've been in love with him since that first day.

Because of the bond, you need each other, and sometimes he is willing to share himself with you. You wonder if tonight will be one of those times.

He smiles and nudges your forehead with his. The bond was forced upon you four years past, but you long ago decided it has been a good thing. Without it, you wouldn't have Don; he would have left you, slipped away to survive on his own.

But too, Don wouldn't have you; he wouldn't have you to help control the rage inside him.

Don tweaks one of your nipples playfully and snorts a soft chuckle. Brush his hand away and whisper, "Stop that." But you're grinning too. The mattress moves gently under you as your weight shifts.

This close, the bond fills your mind. He looks you in the eye, and you look back. You reach gently into his thoughts. Your Talent isn't telepathy, not exactly, but this close, with Don, the bond allows you to imitate telepathy. You slide gently into his thoughts until you find what you're looking for: the place where his anger coils around his Talent. Don is a pyrokinetic--

he can start fires with his mind. The anger inside him is a separate fire, but to him they feel conjoined, like two burning snakes coiling into a ball around each other, one fueling the other. He feels the constant risk of loss of control, of one or the other getting loose, anger or fire, raging uncontrollably.

You can separate them for him, ease the anger from his Talent. You can soothe the parts of his mind from which the anger grows. The anger tries to coil around you, tightens, a reflex, but you stroke it, soothe it, coax it gently toward stillness. You can push it temporarily into sleep.

Don hums a little note of gratitude softly into the air between you. What you're

doing makes him groggy. Without his anger to give him an edge, he gives in to his exhaustion at the end of the day. He pushes his hips toward you, a gentle urging. Yes, tonight will be one of those times.

He takes hold of your wrist, guides your hand down his abs to his fly. You can feel his erection waiting there. He hasn't been with a woman in a while--you'd have felt it through the bond if he had. He needs this. You need this.

You don't have much time. The sleepiness you set off in his brain will spread.

You fumble with the fastening to his pants, unzip his fly. His hard cock wobbles out

into the air between you. Wrap your hand around it. The head and an inch of shaft sticks out of your fist. Stroke it, slowly, gently, with long strokes and a firm grip, the way he likes. *Stroke, stroke, stroke.*

"Mmm ..." he hums again, and his cum spurts out into your fingers, across your wrist. "Mm-nngh ..."

You roll away from him for just a moment, search over the edge of the mattress for the cloth you'd left there after you unwrapped the bun. Roll back toward him. Wipe his cum from your hand and forearm. Gently clean the cum from the head of his sensitive, softening dick. Don breathes deeply, already asleep.

You don't have much time. The sleep that has shut down most of his brain will spread through the bond into yours soon too. You're too exhausted to resist once that happens.

Open your own pants. Your cock needs attention, and badly. You yawn, already feeling the drowsiness, but you need this. You need to take your cock in hand. You need to stroke it urgently. You need to push your hips forward and bite your lower lip and try hard not to make a sound as you ejaculate, spurt after spurt, into the cloth, your cum alongside Don's.

Toss the rag over the side of the mattress. Your hands feel leaden. You don't have much time. You can feel sleep

overwhelming you. Tuck away Don's cock and fasten his pants. Do the same for yours. Nuzzle your head into the hollow between his chin and chest. Sleep.

2.

Four years ago, you were fourteen, and Don was fifteen. You didn't know each other at the time. He was a year ahead of you in school, had different classes, ran with a different crowd. You don't remember whether you ever saw him in the hallways before that day; if you did, you didn't notice. You didn't know his name. You weren't friends.

This was before you and Don met, before you escaped from the Federated States and ran south to the backwater clan countries like Darven, where the Institute supposedly could not reach you.

You were a typical suburban teenager. You lived your sheltered life in another country, filled with other typical suburban people just like you. Don was a typical suburban teenager too, though more outgoing and jock-ish. When you finally did meet, he seemed so much more mature and worldly to you.

The assembly was announced for Friday, second period: a motivational speaker coming to talk about the importance of staying in school, studying hard, and when you graduate please consider a career in our fine military or public service. Attendance was mandatory.

Your friend Denny said the speaker was some kind of "recruiter." Everybody knew

about the screening, the ones that detected Talents. You'd had yours the year before when you were thirteen. Everybody knew about the detection scanners too. There was one over every door to the high school--you passed by it every day. Denny said they weren't one hundred percent foolproof, though. Sometimes Talents slipped by undetected, or hadn't manifested yet, or maybe weren't strong enough to trip the detector. Parents felt a lot better knowing that, the moment a Talent was detected, officials were ready to sweep in and remove the kid from the school and ship him or her off to the Institute, though whether for the kid's safety or the general population's was a matter of some debate. Most good citizens didn't want Talents anywhere around--

psychic powers like mind-reading or moving objects around with just a thought or knowing the future were not normal. Normal people were supposed to be equal. No citizen should have a psychic special advantage over any other.

Denny said the speaker was a "recruiter" for the Institute. He was coming to your school to try to detect students who had slipped past the screenings and the scanners. The speaker was probably a filthy Talent himself, Donny grumbled. Denny and his family didn't much like Talents. You figured Denny should know what he was talking about; he was practically an expert on how these things worked, since his older cousin had gotten "recruited" and shipped off to the Institute

a couple of years back. But the "inspirational" speech part sounded insufferable. Plus, you had a secret that you'd managed to keep, in spite of the screening and the detectors. You'd probably be just one more kid lost in the crowded audience, but you were thinking why chance it? You were thinking you shouldn't risk being around this recruiter.

You were ready to sneak away and skip the assembly, maybe head to the mall half a mile's walk to the west; but the teachers announced they'd be taking attendance there, and then they rounded up everyone--*Come on, don't dawdle, no stragglers now!*--and shooed them and you into the gymnasium, the only building large enough for the entire student body to fit into at

once.

So, at the appointed time you and every other student at your high school sat on uncomfortable bleachers. You and Denny sat on the far side of the gymnasium, in the fourth row, just four meters from the exit.

The speaker was introduced. He was a good-looking man, maybe thirty. You'd also recently begun admitting to yourself what liking to look at good-looking men probably meant--yet another secret.

He started talking, and you were looking at the double doors, wondering if you could climb over the three people between you and the exit, slip down to the floor, ease through the door. If somebody

tried to stop you, you could say you had to pee really, really badly. Once through the double doors, you'd have to pass the restroom, cross twenty feet of foyer, and you'd be out the exit door. You could be gone and halfway to the mall before anyone noticed.

You had a bad feeling about this. Something itched at the back of your head, like a worry you couldn't shake. You turned back to Denny, ready to tell him your plan. You'd sneak out, then he'd follow a few minutes later--you'd leave together. The mall was always more fun when you were with someone. But Denny wasn't looking at you. He was looking at the speaker after all, and his face was rapt, half-smiling, practically staring. You

nudged him. He paid you no heed. You looked around. All of your fellow students were paying close attention to the speaker, practically enthralled. You looked over at the speaker again and it seemed like he was looking right at you; and, yeah, you completely understood what he was saying. You felt as though he was speaking directly to you. The itching in the back of your head was a distraction, but you could ignore it. Why would you want to sneak out and miss this? You decided he was fascinating.

When the assembly ended, Denny asked if you still wanted to slip away and go to the mall. You could skip third-period French, he said. You blew him off, told him you had something else you needed to do,

you'd see him later. What you wanted, needed, to do was go talk to the recruiter. You wanted to tell him how much you enjoyed his presentation. Given what Denny had said earlier, you decided you should go talk to the recruiter without him.

A few other people had come up to the podium to say hello to the speaker: the guidance counselor, the student council president, the usual sycophants. They shook his hand, nodded, said a few things--*Thank you for coming, such an important message, so persuasive*--and then moved on back to their boring lives as the next one stepped up.

That itching in the back of your head was back, and you scratched at it. You found

yourself standing off to the side with four other students, all male. Maybe they wanted to speak to the recruiter too. You didn't know three of them, though you thought the tall jock-type was kind of hot. The only one you sort-of knew was Vance, though his friends called him Vlad, and everybody made fun of him because he dressed all goth and wore eyeliner like a total freak. You didn't want to stand too close to him for fear his freak-hood was contagious. The last thing you wanted was for people to see you standing near Vlad the Vampire-Wannabe and assume you two were friends. You'd never live that down.

You'd never met a Talent before. Was this man one? His uniform tunic bore a

stylized lower-case *i* symbol, more like a corporate logo than a government or military seal. You seemed to remember hearing somewhere that symbol meant the Institute. Had Denny been the one telling you that?

When the last glad-handler was done, the recruiter turned to the five of you and said, "Ready, boys?"

You followed without question. Maybe he wanted to talk to you someplace private. He led you deeper into the gym, past the locker room door, past the coaches' office, to the big equipment storage room. "Line up right there, boys," he said. "This won't take but a second and then you can get back to class."

The five of you formed a line, facing him, shoulder to shoulder. You didn't ask why because it all made perfect sense for you to be here, doing this. Somehow you knew exactly what to do. You just wished that damned itching in the back of your head would stop.

He started at the far end of the line. "Have your ID cards ready, boys." You and the other four held yours out.

The recruiter--you never did learn his name; later you would simply refer to him as the Telepath--took the first boy's ID card and swiped it through his handheld device. It looked like a portable phone, only a little larger. He consulted the screen. "Isaac Michael Thompson," he

said, looking at the boy whose name he had just read out. That itching in your head got stronger. The Telepath frowned at the boy, Isaac, for a long moment. "False positive," the Telepath said finally, and he poked a few buttons on his device before handing Isaac's ID back to him.

The next boy was the hot-ish jock, a little older than you.

The Telepath took his ID and repeated the swipe-and-read procedure: "Donald James Remson." Then he stared into the jock's face. "Well, well--what do we have here?"

Donald--or *Don* as you would later learn he preferred--frowned, seemed to be

perspiring, trembling to hold something back.

"Now, now, dont be uncooperative ..." the Telepath began.

Part of a rolled-up volleyball net in the corner burst into a fist-sized flame.

The Telepath laughed. "Ah. Well. I think we can safely say you're no longer latent, Mr. Remson." He took the fire extinguisher off the wall and sprayed the powdery white foam until the small flames were out.

The jock looked mortified, as if he had pissed his pants or something. His lip quivered, but he didn't say anything or

move. The Telepath stared into the jock's face, and said, "Now, now--that'll be enough of *that*. Stop struggling. Just relax. This won't hurt a bit. That's it."

After a moment, the jock's expression relaxed. You'd only been around people who were tripping on drugs a couple of times, but now this guy sure looked stoned to you. He smiled sloppily.

Satisfied, the Telepath stepped back. He poked several buttons on his device quickly. He sounded pleased: "Donald James Remson. Pyrokinetic. Beta level. Recommend immediate recruitment."

He didn't give Don his ID back.

The third boy: "Michael Ray Pierce. False positive."

The fourth: "Vance Xavier Atwater. Possible telepath, still latent. No action at this time. Recommend rescreening in three months."

Then you. The Telepath plucked your ID card from your fingers, ran it through his device, and read your name off the screen: "Allen Ryan Lynch." He looked you directly in the eyes. That itch in the back of your head got worse, but you couldn't move your arms to scratch it.

"Hmph," he mused cocking his head.
"Well, Allen, that's unusual."

"Ryan," you said, since you went by your middle name. "They call me Ryan." You wondered why your voice sounded so clumsy.

"Of course they do," the Telepath said, more dismissing the distraction than being condescending. "Let's try this again, shall we?"

He met and held your gaze. You remembered Denny saying something about how telepaths could tell what kind of Talents people had by looking into their heads and seeing what kind of keys were associated with it or unlocked it or activated it--something like that. You decided maybe you should have paid more attention to Denny after all.

"A little too late for that, I'd say," the Telepath remarked, having eavesdropped on your thoughts.

He poked buttons on his device--a lot of them. "Allen Ryan Lynch. Talent indeterminate, but definitely beginning to manifest. I'm going to put it down as telepathy. Level indeterminate. Recommend immediate recruitment. Secondary recommendation for a more detailed assessment during intake processing."

Telepathy? You wanted to tell him, no, it wasn't like that, you weren't a mind-reader, you couldn't be a Talent.

He did not hand your ID back to you.

"Okay. We're done here. Donald and Allen--I mean, Ryan--please come with me. The rest of you are free to go."

You followed the Telepath and the jock to the guidance counselor's office. The counselor was nowhere to be seen. You and the jock sat down and waited.

And waited.

You forced your eyes open. A face drifted into view. You'd been half-asleep, but you couldn't seem to wake up. The face resolved itself into your father's. You smiled when you finally recognized him. You couldn't read his expression.

"Hello, son. Your mother and I came to

say goodbye--and--and to wish you luck."

Your mother's face floated in too, behind your father's. She looked worried.

"What's wrong with him?" your father said. "Is he drugged?"

"No, it's just a mild mentally induced trance. Think of it as a light sedative, to prevent him from doing anything rash. Nothing to be worried about. It's for his own good, of course."

"It's for his own good," your father repeated, nodding.

Your mother appeared unconvinced. "But, is this ... is it what he wants? Did he agree to this? Maybe we should call ..."

"Now, now, ma'am," the Telepath cut her off with practiced smoothness, "you know calling your lawyer will do no good. What your son wants is immaterial. The law is quite clear, and this is what the law requires."

"This is what the law requires," your parents repeated in unison, nodding.

"Goodbye, son," your father said. "Well come see you as soon as they let us." You tried to smile and nod. But their faces were already drifting away, and you were already drifting back into that half-sleep.

At one point, later, the Telepath walked in. He was pacing, arguing with someone on his phone. "Agh!" he snapped, cutting

off the call. "Well, boys, thanks to another administrative screw-up, our transport won't arrive at six p.m. tonight as expected. It'll arrive at six *a.m.* tomorrow morning. Bureaucrats! I *hate* bureaucrats!"

A cheap motel on the edge of town. The Telepath guided you and Don into a room with two beds. You sat on the one away from the door. Don sat beside you. You waited patiently while the Telepath put his overnight bag on the other bed.

A pizza and drinks arrived twenty minutes later. You were hungry; you hadn't eaten since breakfast. You still felt strangely groggy--the Telepath's doing--but you tore into the pizza in spite of that. Pizza was always your favorite.

"Bedtime, boys," the Telepath announced to you and Don. The Telepath seemed tired. Perhaps keeping your head feeling quiet like this took effort. "We have an early morning tomorrow, and then you have a long day ahead of you. Better get some sleep."

You nodded. Don nodded.

Twenty minutes later, your teeth had been brushed with a complimentary toothbrush provided by the motel, which you had to share with Don. Your bladder had been emptied. You and Don stood at the foot of the bed, awaiting instructions.

"Get those clothes off," the Telepath told you, and you wrestled out of your shirt,

then your shoes and socks and pants. You stood there in your underwear, pale gray boxer shorts. Don beside you had stripped to white briefs.

"Hold out your hands."

Don held his hands out in front of him. The Telepath fastened something around one of Don's wrists, then the other. It looked like handcuffs you had seen in movies, only instead of a chain between the two bracelets, this device had a solid bar, five inches wide, an inch high, a quarter-inch thick. A little diode changed from red to green when the second bracelet snapped shut. Because of that solid bar between the bracelets, you decided, these were more like shackles than handcuffs.

The Telepath fastened an identical device around your wrists. "For your safety and mine," he smirked. "Can't have you two sneaking out in the middle of the night, can we? There's a tracker in them--if you do get any bright ideas, we'll be able to find you wherever you go. Now get into bed, you two."

Don pulled back the covers on the bed and slid himself under them and over to the opposite side. You slid in alongside him, clumsily, unused to your hands being bound together.

"And this," the Telepath said, "is one of my favorite tricks for budding young telepaths like yourself. You get to do my work for me."

He touched the back your head. You felt that itching spread from the back of your head and around the edges of your skull. Something stretched between you and Don, some sort of ... *connection*, you decided.

You looked at Don. He looked at you and smiled. You smiled back. You were aware of him in a new way. This close, you could practically feel what he was thinking. More than just the vague impressions of memory and emotion you'd ever gotten in the past. You could practically feel his thoughts, though you couldn't quite make out how to interpret them. Don felt like a shiny new toy. The feeling fascinated you, and you felt it fascinate him too. This was the first time

you felt his anger and his Talent, beguiling in the way they were tangled, all hot and bright. He rolled toward you. You rolled toward him. Forehead to forehead, hips and legs touching. Fascinating.

"*That* will keep you two linked. I won't have to worry about one of you trying an escape if you're forced to stay together. And this part"--you felt something new injected into the connection, something dark and heavy, spreading like colored liquid diffusing through water--"*this* will make sure as long as one of you stays asleep, you'll both stay asleep. Sweet dreams, boys."

The dark heaviness spread into Don's head. You could practically watch it

spread, and that fascinated you. He yawned, his breath warm against your chin and mouth. He was falling asleep, you realized. You hadn't yet felt someone asleep from inside his head before. The sensation fascinated you, the way parts of Don's brain just faded down, and other parts took on the glow of activity.

You could feel the heaviness spreading into you too, though the connection. You could practically sense it diffusing toward you as Don's brain quieted. You yawned too, and closed your eyes to better concentrate on what you were experiencing in his head.

Somebody poked your shoulder.

"Wake up."

You opened your eyes, and it was morning. You still lay on your side against Don's body and he against yours, like puppies. Your still-shackled hands between your stomachs prevented you from getting as close as you wanted. At a year older than you, he was taller, more developed than you, but you didn't feel overshadowed. He yawned and stretched, pulling his arms and torso away from yours. The motion of his upper body away levered his lower body toward you. You felt his morning wood alongside yours, through your underwear. You had never felt another's erection in real life before either, and you froze, not wanting to lose the press of it against you.

The Telepath towered over you. You blinked up at him, blinked away sleep. He was saying something important.

"Our transportation arrives in forty minutes. I'm going out to get us some breakfast. Get up and get yourselves showered and dressed. I'll be back in twenty minutes. Be ready when I get back."

You and Don pulled apart, reluctantly, but the itch in the back of your skull was back. Something compelled you to do what the Telepath said and would not be denied. You both shuffled into the tiny motel bathroom. You busied yourself with turning on the shower while Don pissed. You tried not to stare at his cock, which

hadn't softened entirely yet.

Don slipped off his briefs, casually as if in the locker room at school, and you traded places. He adjusted the water temperature as you pissed. He stepped into the shower and pulled the plastic curtain mostly shut. You stepped out of your boxers and stepped into the shower too.

Bathing with your hands shackled, a rigid bar between the wrists, proved tricky. You and Don passed the soap back and forth. Bathing your fronts was easy. Don handed you the soap and turned his back to you. The connection between you had not faded, and though it you sensed what he wanted, not in words but in images,

impressions. You ran your soapy hands over the stretch of his shoulders, the hard muscles and bones of his back. You marveled at the round solidity of his ass. Kneeling, you soaped his legs, feeling the muscles tense and flex as his weight shifted.

You stood, and Don turned to face you again. His shackled hands were held at navel level. Beneath them you saw his cock, hard again, jutting your way. You checked his face: his expression was unreadable, his eyes closed, waiting on you.

Your soapy hand slid up and down his erection. Don moaned some little encouragement but mostly pretended to

ignore what you were doing. By turning your arms, you managed to get your other hand in position to tickle his ball sack, and through the connection you felt little lights of pleasure go off in his brain. You'd never touched another man's erection before. You'd never felt these lights in another's head before. Don gasped, flexed his fingers, balling them into fists. The lights quickly got brighter and larger, merging, and suddenly Don was cumming. His balls rode up away from your fingers. His cock jumped in your hand. His cum spurted across your arm. Light erupted in his head. The shower rinsed everything away.

Don blinked at you. You blinked back, conscious of your own erection.

Something was different.

The link between you was still there, but the dopey feeling was gone. The grogginess that had colored everything since the assembly was gone. You looked at Don. He looked at you. You understood what each other was thinking, not in words but you understood the concepts.

You both tore out of the shower, dried quickly, and dressed as best you could--underwear, pants, socks, shoes. You had no way to get your shirts on over the shackles; Don tucked his in his pants, and you carried yours. Out the motel door. The Telepath had gone right, toward the street. Don turned left, heading to the woods behind the motel. Even then you were

already following his lead.

You ran down trails, through underbrush, your arms up to shield your faces from branches. "Wait," Don hissed, skidding to a stop on slick leaves. You understood what he meant: the trackers in your shackles. "Hold your hands out," he said. You poked your shirt into the waist of your pants to free your hands, then held them out as instructed.

Don frowned at your shackles. After a moment, they began to feel warm, then hot, not quite hot enough to burn you yet but becoming uncomfortable. "Don?" you said, whispering his name for the first time.

"Hush. Just another second."

Your shackles made a popping sound, a smell of burning circuits, and the diode went dark. Don blinked and grinned. "It worked!"

In two minutes, Don's shackles were dark too. In ten, you were out of the woods and running behind buildings that bordered a side street, still no destination in mind other than *away*. You followed Don. There was no question about staying together.

You wanted to run home, find your parents, call a lawyer. Don, though, was adamant: no, the Institute would be watching your homes, monitoring

telephone lines, waiting. You couldn't bring this trouble into your families' lives. Besides, what would they do?--The law would force them to turn you two, or any information about your whereabouts, over to the Institute. You got flashes from Don's memories: a belt, an angry father, blows carefully kept to the body where the bruises could be explained away as sports-related. You understood Don's opposition to going back, sensed his anger barely held in check, but you also discerned his absolute conviction that the best solution was to run, far away, as far as you could. He had thought about this before, though not under these circumstances. He already had the outline of a plan. His certainty swept you up in his wake as you followed him, as you both

ran.

"Wait," you called, because Don's longer legs were pulling him ahead, and because you recognized the store behind which you were running. Old Man Johnson's pawn shop. The time was still early, but you thought you remembered that he lived upstairs. You walked around front. The store was already open.

The bell on the door jingled as you entered. Old Man Johnson was half-blind, ancient. He always seemed like a relic from some forgotten time, the age of dinosaurs, like most of the items in his shop. But you remembered seeing something when your father brought you once here years ago. Back in the back,

next to the case with pistols and knives. He had handcuffs. Maybe he had a key.

You took a deep breath for confidence. "Mister Johnson?"

"Dude, what are you doing?" Don hissed over your shoulder.

"Don't say anything," you whisper back. "No matter what. Let me do the talking."

You heard him before you saw him. More importantly, you felt him. You had a feeling you knew exactly what would work. Handcuffs. Kids. Something Old Man Johnson remembered. How did you know that? What could you do with that?

Mister Johnson emerged from the back,

blinking behind thick glasses.

You could do this, you told yourself. You could draw on that memory.

He looked at you and blinked, unbelievably. "Billy? Is that you?"

"Hi, Mister Johnson," you said. Images. Words. A feeling of compassion--no, of pity. What were the details? Too many pieces, as if Old Man Johnson's head was filled with nothing but memories, fragments of broken mirrors, all overlapping and competing with each other. Which parts of the memory were important? Which weren't? Your head ached. You could do this. Just a few more seconds to think; you could put all these

pieces together if you just had a few seconds to think. Could you make him believe--

From behind you, Don hissed, "Who's 'Billy'?"

You jabbed your elbow back at him to make him shut up.

"Hi, Mister Johnson," you said, just like the kid in his memory--only the kid in his memory was five years younger than you, wasn't shirtless, and didn't have another boy with him. Old Man Johnson's thoughts skittered just out of your grasp, running over the top of this memory. You'd have to improvise some way to keep him from noticing the discrepancies. Fortunately his

thoughts ran slow--everyone said he was going senile. You needed to keep him focused on the reason he remembered that incident: the handcuffs. Hold your shackles up a little where his rheumy eyes behind the thick lenses can see them. Focus his memory on that.

"Your big brothers locked you in handcuffs again, huh?"

"Yes, sir. Can you help me, please?"

Old Man Johnson shook his head. "Tsk. Kids these days. Well, come over here and let's see what we c'n do."

Your head ached. This was harder than you thought. You had only managed to

pick up vague memories and emotions from people previously. You'd never tried reaching for and holding a specific memory before. You'd never tried sending back instructions of your own to control the way someone experienced the memory, the way details were recalled or weren't. You'd never tried broadcasting the way the Telepath did.

Old Man Johnson led you to a drawer and pulled out a ring of keys. "Never see'd cuffs like these before," he said, peering through the bottom of his lenses.

"They're from my brother's super-spy action kit," you improvised. The Billy in his memory, many years before, probably as old as your parents now, was trapped

in generic handcuffs. These obviously weren't.

Mister Johnson adjusted his glasses and peered at the shackles. "I might got a key that'll fit 'em, though. Most things like this don't got complicated locks."

Fourteen keys later, the bracelet popped open. You and Don swapped triumphant grins over Old Man Johnson's head as you rubbed your wrists. Moments later Don's wrists were freed too. You thanked Old Man Johnson, pulled on your shirt, and took off.

You discarded the shackles nearly a mile away, just in case they could still be tracked, so no one would connect Old

Man Johnson to your escape.

3.

Some unfamiliar noise on the street awakens you. It's still dark, well before dawn. You roll off the mattress in this unfamiliar building and edge yourself toward the window. Nothing. Stretch your Talent gently, probing for nearby minds. Nothing you can detect. A false alarm, but you've learned to be cautious.

Don is still asleep, on his back, using up slightly more than his half of the mattress. The sheet clumps at mid-thigh. He dreams. He has an erection; the head of his penis and nearly an inch of shaft peeps out about the waistband of his pants, just to the side of his navel. Probe into his head through

the bond. You can't tell what he's dreaming, but the hormones and chemicals that give you both morning wood are dancing through his system. He looks so sexy, lying there asleep and aroused like that. You wonder whether he dreams about you.

This is one of your favorite things to do.

You kneel by the bed because you don't want to disturb him. You awoke with semi-wood too, which faded under the fear caused by the noise, but now comes roaring back. Unfasten your fly. Unzip. Ease your pants to mid-thigh. Your erection bobs in the night air.

Where's that rag you used earlier? Pick it

up. It's still damp in spots from earlier. You're going to need it again.

Stroke yourself. Don looks so sexy. By now you've memorized everything about his body, but it still fascinates you. Probe gently through the bond. You don't want to disturb his sleep or his dream, but you're planning a little mischief that will bring you both pleasure. Tickle the parts of his brain that glow brightest when he is aroused. The erotic response spreads. His dreaming areas are lighting up.

Stroke yourself. Your hand feels good on your cock. Send the sensations through the link into Don's mind. Use them to amplify his excitement.

This feels good. Don moans, locked in his slumber, feeling good too. Rub the rough rag against your balls--the damp spots are your cum and Don's, mingled. Something about that seems so sexy to you. Tweak Don's arousal higher. Manipulating him like this makes you feel so mischievous. He'll never know. He looks so sexy, lying there, as if he'll let you do whatever you want. What you want is to cum. You want to make him cum too. You'll use your orgasm to trigger his. You want to give this to him. It's nearly happening. Feel your balls buzzing. The little jitter of sensation around your cockhead makes you want to stroke harder, faster, needing to get off now. Rub your balls again. Your cock is close, closing fast. Your breath comes ragged and fast. You're seconds

away. When it happens, you'll feed it all through the bond. Don will feel you cum; he'll feel everything. That will make him cum too, in his sleep. He will dream he experiences two orgasms, point-blank. You'll experience his too, a bonus.

Your dick feels so good--you're getting closer----closer--your balls are tightening, almost there. Don's stomach muscles flutter. You have to concentrate, manipulate his responses carefully--you dont want to over-stimulate him--not yet. His arm shifts a little, then a leg, just a little, reacting to the pleasure tipping him toward the point of no return, the point you're approaching now, almost there. Another few strokes and you'll be ready to push these sensations at him through the

bond and make him cum--another few seconds and you'll be cumming--another few--

Don surprises you: he climaxes first. His stomach muscles flutter again. His cockhead pulses and shoots out the first of his load onto his abdomen. His orgasm slams through the bond into you, and you gasp, caught off-guard, as your head erupts, your balls erupt, and your dick erupts. You barely get the rag in front of your cock in time to catch your load.

The intensity leaves you blind and gasping for several minutes. Finally you can open your eyes, look down. Your cock is still semi-hard in your hand. Wow. Definitely stronger than you expected--nearly made

you pass out.

Use the rag to clean your hand and cockhead. You're still gasping from the intensity. Tuck your dick away and refasten your pants. Slide back onto the mattress alongside Don. Wipe his substantial cum off his stomach with the rag. One spurt ran up alongside his closest nipple. As you clean away the semen, lean in and give that nipple a soft kiss. Toss the rag to the floor, and settle in alongside Don. His hand slides toward you, finds your arm, as his sleeping mind reassures itself of your presence. Kiss his shoulder. Close your eyes and enjoy this mattress, this afterglow, Don's warmth beside your skin and his presence in your head, as his slumber drags at you though the bond,

making you drowsy, dragging you down again. Close your eyes in hopes of sleeping for another hour until dawn.

When the barely lightening sky wakes you later, you lie there on the mattress and look up at the clouds through the window. This used to be one of your favorite things to do in your life before: Wake up early, and watch sunrise build in the sky.

You know soon you'll have to rise and start back to your safe house. Don still half-slumbers beside you--you know through your connection that he is not fully asleep. He has enjoyed the rare luxury of this mattress too, and is unwilling to officially wake up until he can no longer deny that dawn has arrived.

Don says you're maudlin when you think about the past, as you do while you watch the last stars fade in the lightening sky.

Four years ago you escaped. Don learned to live on the streets quickly. He kept both of you alive while you figured it out for yourself. Even then, Don was the strategist. He knew the two of you couldn't go back home. He knew your best chance was to go far away, hitchhike, to where no one would know you or see your photos on the news as the announcer intoned, *To report information regarding the whereabouts, call ...* Lay low, off the grid, under the radar.

Three years ago, after the Institute's agents nearly recaptured you in yet another close

call, the third or fourth such, you came south, leaving the Federated States entirely for the clan countries, where officially the Institute has no charter to operate. Clan countries do not allow the Institute to operate within their borders because they claim the Institute is unneeded. The clans' eugenics programs that produce nearly uniform faces, hair colors, and body types have also selectively bred out the Talent genes. Any throwbacks detected later are dealt with by culling, a fancy word for state-sanctioned murder. This is what you risk if the police ever catch you. But you'd both rather live under the risk of culling than turn yourselves over to the Institute.

Your days can change from mundane,

almost boring, without warning to sudden run-for-your-life terror. You and Don never stay too long in one place. Even in clan countries, you'd stumble across places where special people had managed to hide. Each time the Institute started nosing around, you'd hear about the disappearances--the girl who said animals talked to her, the boy who could tell you in perfect detail what would happen to you tomorrow--you'd hear about these special people going missing, and you would disappear into the night, heading farther and farther south, until a few months ago you ended up here: Darvenek, a resort city, the capital of Darven.

You stay near cities. Resort towns are best. In cities enough people are out-clan,

either not compliant with whichever clan's breeding standard or just out-and-out foreigners like Don and you, that you two don't stand out.

You've been in Darvenek nearly six months. The beach resort north of the city is popular with tourists. You and Don go there often to help relieve the tourists of their cash. You learned long ago that youth is a saleable asset--and that tourist resorts are frequented by people with ready cash and by youths like yourselves looking to make the sale. Don at first tried to find women who were willing to buy him meals, drinks, clothes, or gifts that he could sell later. But you discovered almost immediately that the men instead are the ones who understand that their

money buys them access to your youth. Men understand the transaction in which they trade their cash for your time.

You didn't agree for the longest time to have sex with ever-renewing stream of the tourist men, wanting to save that part of your innocence, hoping Don would agree to be your first in spite of his preference for women. But your Talent made you well-suited for the work. You could sit with the men on the beach and see in their memories what they wanted, could weed out the risky and the dangerous.

The first time you let one of the tourist men suck you happened long before you came here to Darvenek. At the time, you were a month shy of your sixteenth

birthday. The tourist offered too much money for you to refuse. Afterward, when you showed Don the money, enough to buy food for the two of you for a week, he was angry, hurt. You thought Don was jealous of the money, that you had earned so much more from a man in one night than he did from women in an entire month. You could feel Don's anger through the connection. But as he ranted, you realized the real reason, and that became one of few nights you and he had slept separately since the link bonded your minds. He had felt everything. Every teasing tongue-lick, every tickle, every thrust of the mouth down your shaft, the weird feeling of the warm wetness of his throat, then the pleasure that unfolded once you became accustomed to it and his tongue worked its

magic. Don experienced everything through the bond. He was jealous, but of the sex. He loved you in his way, enough to feel possessive of you, and you being with someone else that first time enraged him. That night, he pushed you away, refused to let you calm his anger. You had misread the cause of Don's jealousy--more proof your Talent wasn't like other Telepaths': you knew the effect, but you could not always see the cause.

Don tried men too. If you could make such good money off the men tourists, so could he, he declared. You thought he was acting out of anger still. Though he did land a few, he didn't like sex with men, so he stopped. The money was not worth how degraded the sex with men made him feel,

so different from how powerful he felt during the act with women. You didn't begrudge him his times with women, even though you felt everything he was doing to them with his tongue and fingers and cock, and everything they did to him. You had as much right to be jealous, maybe more. He was popular with clan girls who wanted to piss off their families by being with an out-clan boy, or who wanted to see for themselves if the rumors about out-clan cocks were true.

Sometimes he shared himself with you. He frequently allowed you to jerk him off, even reciprocated some of the time. Now and then he would allow you to blow him, but he never blew you back.

The night of your sixteenth birthday, one month after his jealousy over your tourist blowjob, Don surprised you. You were climbing into the makeshift bed in your safe house at the time, a warehouse near the shore. Don had an erection. You thought this would be one of the nights he allowed a blowjob, but he had other plans. He pressed you down on the bedding, on your back, and climbed between your legs. He took your cock in his mouth for the first time.

He sucked you and licked you and nibbled at your ball sack, a trick you decided he must have picked up from one of his few male clients, since you couldn't imagine any woman knowing to do that. Your back arched, and you came in moments.

Don was not finished. He hoisted your legs and fumbled with a condom, fumbled with his fingers in your hole. Soon he was fucking you for the first time. He was angry, jealous again from knowing he was not the first to taste your cock, but he was the first to enter your ass. Before that moment, you had not been completely sure a penis really could fit into an ass--you'd suspected stories of butt-fucking were a myth, like unicorns. It hurt, but this was Don doing it to you. Soon it felt better, then best of all. He was the first in your ass, but he fucked you slowly, gently, tenderly. This was, you realized, his way of saying he was sorry, that he loved you, of marking you as his. Your hard-on returned quickly but he would not allow you to touch it.

He pushed your legs down and climbed atop you. Another condom, this time for your cock, and he sat back, taking your dick into himself slowly. You felt jealousy too, knowing you were not the first to fuck him, because you'd felt through the link his pain and rage each time he had let one of the tourist men enter his ass in return for money, but part of you was also pleased: pleased to have an experienced lover who knew what to do, no ignorant fumbling; and pleased that this was Don, finally giving himself to you, nothing held back, as you'd dreamed of for two years.

Sensations flooded you, though your body, through the bond--the tight clamp of his ass on your erection, the way he experienced your dick in his asshole,

more times than not rubbing a special spot up inside.

Afterward, after you'd orgasmed from just minutes of the sweet tightness of his ass, so warm around your shaft, your cum boiling up into him like lava, after he'd jacked himself and spurted his jizm onto your chest, he pressed his finger to your lips, meaning *no talking*. Though he considered himself a lover of women, not men, he loved you in his way, a way that still confused him, so different from everything he thought he knew about love before the bond, so much more intense. He knew you now knew how he felt, in ways that transcended just telling you with words, or even emotions glimpsed through the imperfect lens of the bond you shared.

You grinned and nodded to let him know you understood. You decided this was the best, most perfect, birthday gift anyone had ever given you.

Your current safe house, to the west, is much better than the one in which you gave the last part of your virginity to Don. The previous tenants had abandoned the building but inexplicably left the electricity service on. You and Don do not use the lights or the electricity--no sense advertizing that someone is squatting there--except occasionally when Don allows you to recharge your music player, the only thing you have left from your life before. You'd long ago outgrown the clothes and the shoes you'd been wearing when you escaped. You took nothing else

with you. All you have left is the music player that was in your pocket when you were taken from the school. You had to get another charger for it, but that was easy. You don't have a way to download onto your player the new music that you hear at the resorts or in the streets, so all of the songs on it are those you loved four years ago. You're eighteen now, but you still love to sit in the dark and listen and dream of your life before panhandling, thieving from tourists and street vendors, occasional prostitution, Talents, and the full-time paranoia about whether today, tomorrow, next week, is the day the Institute comes for you again.

Don says you're being maudlin when you think about the past and might-have-beens.

You tease him back by asking how a jock like him knows what the word *maudlin* means. You both laugh. He likes the little reminders of his days as the up-and-coming athlete, who would have been a favorite to make first-string quarterback the following year. If there had been a following year. It's been a long time since he was a high-school jock. He's nineteen now--he's already a man.

Your current safe house also is much better than this one where you've just spent the night, the building of unknown purpose with a mattress on the floor.

You reach over. Don half-sleeps on his stomach, still enjoying the luxury of a real mattress, his arms folded under his head

as a makeshift pillow. You rub your hand comfortingly back and forth, alongside his spine, not really massaging, just stroking, caressing. The side of his mouth curls, a partial smile, indicating he likes the sensation, as it eases his transition toward wakefulness.

There's no sense delaying any longer. The sky outside is glowing enough that dawn has arrived. Sit up. Your bladder is urgent--you need to find a place to piss. Then you need to face the day, find food, maybe money too; you need to survive.

Stand up. There's a sink in the adjoining room, which looks to have been some sort of work area. The water isn't on, naturally, but your bladder needs relief now. Unzip,

and piss into the sink. The drain is clear, and your stream disappears down it.

"Nurrrrrmm ..." Don moans as you sit on the edge of the mattress again and pull on your boots and shirt. His sound protests the lack of your hand on his back, protests the way your actions make the mattress move, the light through the window that means the night has passed. He rolls over and sits up, and you're stunned all over again by what a handsome man this formerly hot-ish boy jock is growing into. What you feel for him is too jumbled to define easily: love, lust, respect, a thousand kinds of need. He senses your feelings through the bond and smiles sheepishly back, still uncomfortable with the words after all these years, but you

feel an answering echo of your feelings from his side of the link.

He yawns and stretches, sits up, rubs the stubble on his chin. You watch the easy play of his muscles as he hauls himself to the end of the mattress, pads over to the sink to relieve his bladder too. He sits beside you on the mattress and fishes on the floor for his shoes.

Something's ... not right. You edge your way toward the window, but before you can peek out, you feel it: that itchy feeling is back, faintly, in the back of your head. By now you know what that means. Your Talent reacts when telepaths are nearby, like an early warning.

Ease your eyes around the edge of the window, and there they are in the street below, not that far away. Six men in urban tactical gear made to seem inconspicuous on a city street, like dark clothes, cluster around a nondescript minivan that's a bit too nondescript; its lack of scratches, dents, or busted windows or mirrors makes it stick out in this neighborhood. One of the men turns and you see the *i* logo in white on his gear: *Institute*. But why are they flying their mark in a country where the Institute isn't supposed to operate?

Don is finishing with his shirt. You snap your fingers to get his attention. The rest you convey in your simple nonverbal signs. Tap the side of your head twice:

Telepath. Point out the window and show him six fingers: *Six people, that direction.* Two waves of your hand: *Two blocks away.* Jerk a thumb toward you: *Coming closer.* Don nods once, quick and curt.

Grab your pack. You're ready to move.

They haven't entered the building yet. They don't know where you are, but they know you're in the area. Last night's police report--a sudden fire, an officer with inexplicable nerve injury to one arm where an out-clan graffiti punk grabbed him--must have set off alerts. But the Institute must have already been in the area, if it had these agents ready to move in just after dawn.

You follow Don along the hall, going the other direction. The way you came in last night will put you closer to the men, so instead you have to find another exit.

Another door is chained shut from the inside, but a nearby window opens when Don pushes. Your pack, and then you, drop out into an alley. Sometimes you think this side of town is nothing but alleys. Don drops down beside you. He points in a direction. Shake your head--*no*--you sense minds coming from that way. He points the other direction, and you nod.

From the opposite end of the alley, closer than you thought, you hear a man's voice boom: "Hey! You there!"

That's your cue to run.

"Stop!" the officer yells again. A gun fires behind you, and the bullet chips a brick two feet about your head as you round the corner, right behind Don.

The agent must be a lousy shot to have missed you and Don at this range, you decide. *But why guns?* you wonder as you duck your head and push yourself to run faster. You've heard the stories--the Institute can send agents who can crush your minds like bugs, or surround you with a wall of flame, or stop you a hundred other ways before you know what's happening. It also has Normal human agents. But would they shoot first? This seems calculated to make you rabbit.

You wonder if you're being herded.

For the thousandth time, you're angry that the nerve damaging side-effect of your Talent doesn't work over distances. That would be useful as an offensive weapon. Even being able to sense Don's thoughts the way you can do only close-up might give you a tactical advantage if you could communicate over greater distances, like now. The parts of your Talent that do work long-range won't help you--reading the agent's memories or emotions won't get you any closer to an escape. Don's power works across distances, would make an excellent weapon. But, as he points out: agents and police officers, or even buildings, bursting into flames would attract all the wrong kinds of attention.

Anyway, Don still clings to one part of the less-worldly schoolboy that he used to be: he does not want to hurt people unless he has to. It occurs to you, also for the thousandth time, that *most* of what your Talent does is hurt people. Maybe Don's right; maybe you're turning maudlin. But you decide to debate that with yourself some other time, when you're not running for your life from gun-wielding agents.

Four blocks, five--how far will you have to run? How far can you run? Your body has limits. This part of the city does not wake up at dawn; you and Don are the only ones around, aside from your pursuers. It's too early, and there's no crowd into which to disappear.

A man sticks his head out a plate-metal door across the street and ahead of you. "Hey!" he calls. "In here! Quickly!"

Don veers toward the door. That itch in the back of your head reminds you there's a telepath out there somewhere, and you follow Don inside.

The man shuts the door. Bent forward, hands on his knees, Don pants. You join him, gasping. This building used to be a warehouse, maybe still is. It's mostly empty space. Hide here, or charge out the back and keep running--you'll have to make a decision and soon.

"Thanks," Don huffs, stalling to catch his breath and make his decision.

The man who called out to you is obviously out-clan. He is also old, probably close to three times your age, which seems ancient to you.

"Forgive the subterfuge," the old man says, "but I thought it was time we met."

Don frowns, confused.

"A minor deception," the man clarifies for Don. "Those weren't Institute agents, but my men. I thought it an expedient ruse to flush you out of hiding. Otherwise we might have played cat-and-mouse all day."

But the telepath ..., you think, remembering the itch in your head that hasn't completely gone away.

"--Is right here," the old man nods, touching his own forehead.

That he read the question in your thoughts is proof enough for you. You narrow your eyes and try to find your next exit without revealing your intent.

The old man, though, is more intent on his pitch. "It's overdue that we met. I've been aware of you two for some time. Small-time players, wasting your potential on petty theft and prostitution. But your activities in the last few days have increasingly encroached on my territory, and your actions last night brought police attention practically to my doorstep--"

Don begins, "Sorry about--"

"Don't interrupt. You might have even brought attention from the real Institute, had I not ... *adjusted* those officers' memories following their encounter with you. I'm tired of expending my expensive resources to clean up after you without getting something in return--"

Don: "We don't have any money--"

"Hush! Rude boy. As I was saying, this incautiousness cannot continue."

You look at Don. He looks at you. He scratches the side of his head with one finger: *Crazy*, meaning the old man. Though the bond, you sense Don coiling, ready to run. He cuts his eyes right: meaning, *That direction*.

"I've worked too hard in carving out my little niche here."

Glance that way and see a door. The itching in the back of your head, infuriating because this ancient telepath is so nearby, makes concentrating difficult but you understand what Don intends. Looking back at him, you narrow your eyelids halfway; meaning, *Understood*.

"I have too much at stake to see it all come to naught because of a couple of rogue hoodlums like yourselves."

Narrow your eyes. This telepath is doing something, but what? His talking is just stalling for time.

Wait for Don. Be ready to follow his lead. He'll give the signal any moment now.

"As a fellow unaffiliated Talent, just like yourselves, we share a lot of the same concerns."

You think, *Well, that's true.*

"We all want to carve out a little niche for ourselves. Find a place where we can profit from our skills, away from the cops and the Institute and anyone else who wants to oppress us."

You think, *That would be nice ...*

"It's in our best interests to work together. You two make a good team. You want to stay together, don't you?"

You think, *Don and me ... together ...?*

"No more life on the run. I'm offering you a place to stay, food on the table, and a little money in your pockets at the end of the day."

You think, *That sounds so nice ...*

"All I ask is that you to come work for me. I control a large operation here."

You think, *He does have the control ...*

"I have places for both of you here. You have the potential to be so much more, under an experienced mentor. I will be that mentor for you."

You think, *He does have the experience*

...

"You can be part of something so much bigger and stronger than just the two of you running small-time scams on gullible tourists."

You think, *So much bigger ... and stronger ...*

"Come, come, boys. I'm waiting. Refusal is not an option. You'll find I always get what I want."

The itching in your head is so fucking annoying--you can't focus. Won't this old man ever shut up?

Don's looking at the old man. Is he considering the man's offer? That fucking

itching is everywhere in your head, won't let you think. You look at the man too. He just stands there, smiling patiently, waiting for your answer.

Don walks over to him. Not the move you expected, but it feels right. There's something roiling though your bond. Something slips away from you and you don't feel wary any longer. You feel such trust. You walk over to the old man too. You kneel. Don kneels beside you. Head bowed, eyes downcast. Waiting. The man, the Master--yes, it feels good and right to call him Master, to give him the respect he deserves--puts a hand on your head, Don's too. How could you have ever wanted anything other than this?

"One way or another, I always get what I want," he says again, as though gloating.

You feel such devotion to him now, such loyalty. You want only to let him show you your place in the world.

He keeps his word. He takes good care of you and Don. He gives you and Don food, clothes, a place to live. The place is a small apartment in a housing building--run-down, yes, but far better than the safe house where you'd been squatting, practically a palace. You have a living area, a bedroom, a bathroom all to yourselves, and even a kitchen. There's electricity, running water, a toilet that works, a television, a large bed with soft pillows. He even provides a charger for

your music player, to replace the one abandoned at your last safe house.

He's a good mentor too. He turns you into enforcers. Don responds immediately, provides an immediate return on the Master's investment in the two of you. The maximum area Don can combust is about the size of a basketball, but he can send his Talent from place to place to place and cover an entire building in quickly. All he needs is a line of sight. In moments an entire warehouse can be engulfed in flame. In seconds, a whole store front window can be simultaneously bright with fire and black with smoke. The Master's rivals don't understand what is happening--their guards barely notice the handsome young out-clan man walking on the

sidewalk across the street and, in the chaos following the sudden fires that destroy their drug labs and front operations and warehouses, they don't make the connection. Since the rivals do not understand the cause, they don't understand the source. Manipulating them into blaming and attacking each other is easy for the Master. The Master's mercenaries, all just as devoted and loyal to him as you are, know Don in the cause. They nickname him a Darvenek word that means *the hot head*. The rash of fires, the destruction, disrupts the fragile power structure in the criminal underbelly of Darvenek, and the Master is poised to take over as his rivals lose infrastructure and status.

His work with you requires more time. Your Talent isn't telepathy, the Master explains. It's similar but not the same. The Telepath misread the keys on how your Talent works. Telepaths "talk" mind-to-mind. Your Talent lets you talk brain-to-brain, more at the level of nerves and cells than concepts and thoughts. It's a lower level than telepathy--no communication of complex ideas--but that explains why you're better at reading memories from people, or emotions. Memories in part are encoded as chemical combinations in nerve cells, and emotions are partially the result of hormones and chemicals acting on the brain. Beyond that, it's just a matter of decoding. It also explains how you can do what other telepaths can't, when you touch someone

and suddenly that part of their body is paralyzed--what you can do to nerve cells in the brain, you can also do to nerve cells in the body; you can interrupt their functioning; if you concentrate harder, you can cause them to suicide, to shut down or die. The Master shows you how you can paralyze or kill with a touch: heart attacks, seizures, nerve cells are so fragile and these are all your weapons now. You don't want to hurt people, but you want to please the Master, to earn your keep, to repay him for the time and attention he has invested in you, so you put your regrets aside and try hard to fit the role he lays out for you.

The Master's men know what you can do, though they try hard not to show their fear.

They avoid getting too close to you, knowing your Talent is strongest through physical contact. Their terror stands out, so easy to see for someone like you who reads the chemistry of emotion and memory. They nickname a Darvenek word that means *the one who touches*. It also means *demon*.

Even the Master keeps his distance unless necessary. No one is brave enough to touch you except Don.

The Master also tries to explain how the bond between you and Don works. He explains that, because the Telepath misread your keys, he didn't create exactly what he intended to. That's why the connection hasn't faded, has become such

a fundamental part of you. You don't understand the chemistry, or the biology, whatever--you have insufficient background to understand. The Master talks about *vasopressin* and *dopamine*, and *regions of the brain*, and their effect on *mating* and *selective affiliation*. All you understand is this: The bond you share with Don is the only one that transcends the devotion you feel toward the Master. The Master uses a phrase for your connection to Don: *pair bonding*. That, you understand.

His men know you and Don are practically a couple, except for Don's periodic dalliances with women. The men call you two together a phrase that means *the salt and pepper shakers*, useful alone,

but always part of a pair.

Weeks pass. Months. The Master's influence in the Darvenek underbelly grows, thanks in no small part to you and Don, the Master's salt and pepper.

A door explodes into flame. From the room inside, the shrieking of women. The Master's mercenaries kick open the burning door. The elements of surprise and shock work well for you. The mercenaries shoot the last two bodyguards dead with silenced pistols before the bodyguards can recover from the suddenness. In moments, the men have the Master's rival on the floor at gunpoint in the middle of the room, the grandmothers and wives and teenagers and children of

his family cowering and crying and screaming against one wall.

Don has done his part. Your turn. You march into the room like an avenging young angel dressed in black. Don follows, a half-step behind you and just to your right. You look down at the man pressed face-down on the floor. He is yelling, crying, begging. He thinks he is going to die. If that were the Master's plan, this man would already be dead with a bullet through his brain. No, the Master has something worse in mind. That's why he sent you.

Your expression is impassive, perhaps just a bit condescending. You don't say a word. Your silence and youth chill them

far more impressively.

The man begs, pleads for his life. He offers you money, houses, cars, anything. He offers you his teenage daughter--a virgin, he claims--only please, please spare his life. Seeing you unmoved, he offers his son. You walk over to the boy and girl, neither much younger than you. They tremble by the wall but do not cower, putting up a braver front than the screaming old women. You will, of course, accept his tribute. Put a hand on the girl's jaw, then the boy's, turning their heads as if evaluating the bargain. The son and daughter are young and comely enough; they will make good whores in the Master's brothels. The Master is always looking for pretty faces and pretty bodies,

to compete with the McFleiss franchises popular with the tourists.

You weren't sent to kill this rival, but he doesn't need to know that yet.

You reach into the boy's brain, and the girl's, and flood them with happiness and cooperation. The chemistry of emotions comes easily to you now. Nod your head toward the door--the mercenaries understand. The boy and girl go docilely when two of the mercenaries grab them and haul them through the smoldering doorway. The girl grins giddily and waves and calls out something like, *Bye-bye, Papa.*

The rival isn't begging any longer. He is

weeping, though. He waits for the inevitable. One of the mercenaries pins the rival face-down with his boot against the rival's spine, his gun barrel poked to the base of the rival's skull. The mercenary pulls back as you move closer. Plant your boot between the rival's shoulder blades. Lean forward to get a good look at him. Say nothing.

This rival--does he have a name? Do you care?

You turn and put your hand on his left thigh, then the right. Repeat this for his right arm, just above the elbow, then his left arm. At each touch, nerve cells convulse and explode. You imagine the doctors will tell him something later like,

Nothing more we can do. They will use phrases like *catastrophic localized nerve necrosis* and *paralyzed for life*.

As an afterthought, you reach one more time and grab his cock and balls between his legs, through his pants. This time, your touch takes from him the ability to make new heirs.

The Master has remade you into a weapon, his weapon. He points you at the target, and you get the job done. What you've done is worse than killing this rival. You've humiliated him. You've taken his limbs and left him quadriplegic. You've taken his daughter, his male heir, his manhood. He lost something worth more than his life today; he lost his status,

his respect. He is no longer a threat. His organization will collapse into chaos and power struggles. The Master will reassemble the pieces under his own control.

You know you shouldn't enjoy this, but you do. Is this how Don feels when he lets his Talent out to play? No wonder he both craves and fears it. Look around. This room is filled with bundles of nerves and brains: the family members who won't hush their squalling, the mercenaries who try hard not to show the adrenaline-soaked fear that shines brightly in their brains. Your Talent could do so many naughty, nasty things to all of them.

You feel a tug through the bond. Don. A

reminder. You force yourself to turn away from the wall of screaming meat.

No, you decide, Don's right--restraint is better, more judicious. You'll keep your Talent bottled for now. You've done enough. You got the job done, maybe even exceeded the Master's expectations when he sees you've brought the rival's progeny as a bonus.

Turn and stride from the room. Don and the remaining mercenaries follow in your wake. You came, you saw, you touched. The entire operation took less than ten minutes. The Master will be so pleased.

4.

Under the Master's tutelage, Don's anger has become more manageable, easier to separate from his Talent; he has outlets for releasing both now. At the same time, too, Don has become more affectionate toward you in your after-hours time; his dalliances with women have become fewer. Don has sex with you more often. You still let him instigate, let him decide when he wants it, but you're pleased at the increasing frequency, with the open affection, even lust, in the way Don looks at you now. You like the way those emotions color Don's side of the bond when he thinks about you. You suspect, but cannot confirm, that this is another of the Master's gifts to you, a way of keeping you happy and cooperative, since the Master has come to value your Talent

particularly. You would like to think this is his gift to you both.

You asked the Master about this once, whether he was influencing Don sexually. He denied it, of course, and suggested *you* might be the one influencing him, perhaps subconsciously, now that your skill with your Talent is increasing. Perhaps, the Master muses, *you* are manipulating Don by tweaking his lust hormones and erotic reactions at the lizard-brain level, employing the bond to bind him ever closer to you emotionally and sexually. Where the body goes, the mind often follows. The mind, he says, rides on top of nerve cells and depends on them. Nerve cells are what you can control. You might be doing this without even realizing. You

thought about it, couldn't dismiss the possibility that the Master might be correct, so you decided to change the subject.

You've changed too. The fearful teenage named Ryan who always followed Don's lead is gone. You've become harder, stronger, more of a man. The confidence with which you use your Talent now, as much as what you can do with it, has the Master's mercenaries terrified of you. Even Don defers to you sometimes now, seems sometimes maybe a little afraid of you. He was never afraid of you before.

You know you're using your Talent to hurt people, but that's just the price of everything you have now, you tell

yourself. Don, this apartment, money, safety, love. Everything has its price. The Master has made this all possible for you, guided you, mentored you, showed you the way. If he made you a weapon, then being the weapon he needs when he pulls the trigger is your job. It's the least you can do in return.

But on your own time, you can still put that hardness away. You can still love-- the affection and bond you share with Don is proof of that, as is the devotion you feel toward the Master. When you're though being a weapon during the day, maybe some part of being Ryan returns to you.

You come back to your apartment after some small errand for the Master that you

performed solo, one of the few times you and Don have been apart in the last few weeks, the bitter salt without his fiery pepper. On your way home, you took advantage of the time alone and stopped by a store to take care of another, more personal errand. The little shopping bag is tucked under your arm as you fish in your pocket for your keys.

As you approach the door, through the bond you feel how excited and aroused Don is. Maybe he's masturbating? You open the door silently, hoping he hasn't sensed you coming, hoping to surprise him in the act.

The lights are off inside the apartment, and they don't come on when you flip the

switch.

From the darkness, someone shoves you against the wall, pushes the door shut. Hands grab your wrists and yank them quickly up, pressing them back. You drop the bag. You're pushed against the wall, its solidity cool against your back. Your wrists are held firmly in place against it.

"What's going on?" you whisper, because talking seems inappropriate in the intimate black. "Let me go." You know Don can sense through your bond that you aren't really afraid, but he wants to be reminded of his strength. You decide to play the role of the helpless victim anyway.

One hand holds your wrists together

against the wall. The grip is strong, but you could pull free if you wanted. Another hand pulls at the hem of your shirt, pulls it up, exposes your abdomen, the bottom of your chest.

Suddenly, you're pulled away from the wall, turned, pushed face-first against it, firmly. Your hands are pulled back, and handcuffs close around one wrist, then the other. Quickly and efficiently. Suddenly you really are helpless, at least physically. You could reach into his head with your Talent, though, and shut down his mind if you needed to. You're not helpless, but you play the role.

The grip rolls you, until your shoulders are against the wall again. A hand drops

to your pants, paws at your crotch, opens your fly. You can't help grinning in the darkness. Don isn't usually this aggressive with you, or this creative. You like it, though. You've got a significant erection.

Those hands push your pants and boxers down to mid-thigh, letting your prick jut straight out into the air. The hands slide under your shirt, caressing your ribs. A tingle is stealing through your skin as the hands increase your arousal. You can't get away because, you admit to yourself, you don't want to. You like this.

A mouth presses to yours. You return the kiss. The kisser has an incredible tongue: long and searching. You're feeling warm and relaxed, not nervous at all, not now.

He has made his point; he is in control and has no need to intimidate you now. The mouth kisses down your neck, down your chest, your stomach, until it finds your cock, absorbs it. The pleasure of it takes your nervous system by storm, makes you shudder involuntarily.

Your arousal is turning into a tension in your groin and the need for release. It begins transmuting into a tingle that saturates your limbs. One of the hands reaches behind you to grip your ass, while the other toys with your balls in their sack. Your testicles churn in response. The tingling pleasure focuses on your groin. You murmur that you're close, just in case Don hasn't caught on, but the mouth doesn't let up on your dick, and anyway it's

suddenly more important to push your hips forward and bury yourself in that throat. Your cum boils over, blazing along the length of your hard dick, and the spurting feeling in your cock turns into the rippling, radiant waves of your orgasm throughout your body.

Hands on your shoulders force you to your knees in the dark. Something bumps your lip: a penis head, leaking a pearl of slimy pre-cum. Open your mouth. The head pokes inside. Take a deep breath through your nose. Let the cock slide deeper into your mouth. In the darkness above your head, a voice moans.

Grab one of his thighs to steady yourself as you suck at the first few inches of his

dick. He is naked. Surely he can feel the handcuffs pressed against his skin as you cling to him. The feel of them reminds him he is in control here. His hips pump in answer to your bobbing head--yeah, he's getting off on this. Suddenly--*kabam!*--you feel his balls detonate and fiery-hot goo squirts into your mouth. The voice cries out again--"*Aaah!*"--as he orgasms.

Sit back on your heels. Your pants around your ankles hobble you, and the cuffs restrict your hands, so you don't try to stand up. It's still his show. Wait for him to make the next move.

You are lifted, still cuffed, and carried toward the bed. Somewhere on the floor back by the wall in the dark is the gift you

bought for him with money you've made working for the Master. There'll be time for that gift later. Now, just a moment before he drops you onto the bed you share, you whisper, "Happy birthday, Don."

The next day, you and Don rendezvous with the Master in his main warehouse, where he keeps his office and the base of his operations. You didn't get much sleep last night--you both look tired. The Master looks at you, at Don, and lifts a sarcastic eyebrow at you. You yawn, grin sheepishly at the Master, and lift an eyebrow back, challenging him to say something. His expression changes to a knowing smirk but he says nothing.

You move a little closer to Don and nudge him with your shoulder, almost imperceptibly to anyone except the two of you. Your grin now is warmer, more private, meant just for him. His lust and affection purrs back at you through the bond.

The mercenaries can never quite reconcile the always-there affection between the *salt and pepper shakers* compared to the stone-cold weapons you become, the *hot head* and the *one who touches*, as if a switch has been flipped, when the Master sends you out on assignments. The dichotomy disquiets them, but they never say anything about it, not where you can overhear them.

The Master has gathered all of his lieutenants here today to tell them about the next mission. His last remaining rival is banking on a big shipment coming in later that day. It'll almost certainly be a trap, one of his lieutenants suggests, and the Master agrees. He asks for ideas, strategies. A distraction will be needed, says the lieutenant, something they'll focus on instead so that the main assault will catch them by surprise.

The lieutenants debate strategy. The unexpected and powerful itch in the back of your head makes you flinch. "Ow!"

The Master sees. He leans aside from listening to his seconds and whispers, "Something wrong?"

Shake your head. "No, sir. I just wasn't expecting your telepathy ..."

"I didn't do anything."

Your eyes widen. "There's another telepath nearby--he just scanned us."

The Master snarls to his lieutenants that they're under attack.

The first grenade crashes through the window--gas--followed by six, seven, eight more. The doors burst open, and soldiers spill in through the windows and doors.

Hang back. You've never used your Talent in a firefight before, and you're intimidated. Don, though, reacts quickly.

Two soldiers, then a third, burst into flame, screaming. Their ammunition explodes at once. The screaming stops. You're surprised--Don has never used his Talent to hurt anyone directly before. You don't know whether to be impressed or horrified. The smell of burning flesh nearly drowns out the irritating gas.

One impression comes solidly from Don through the bond: *No more running.*

"Yessir," one of the soldiers on the periphery barks into a radio. "The tip was good. We have visual confirmation of the telepath, and at least one pryokinetic too!"

Something in his helmet blocks you for getting in to shut down his brain from a

distance, but it doesn't stop you when you sneak up behind him and grab his arm. It doesn't stop your Talent from pouring into his arm and up into his head from the inside. No time to be subtle. You give him everything. Red streaks immediately run up his neck as every nerve in his body explodes, and he falls without a scream.

"Report!" a voice orders through the radio as it clatters against the floor. "What's the situation?"

You stomp the device to pieces.

The mercenaries and soldiers are firing at each other, conventional weaponry. The soldiers' gear is flat black, no identifying marks. That identifies them as Institute,

since they can't show their logo in this country. If these soldiers were sent by the government, they'd bear the Darven flag.

Fire has broken out around the edges of the warehouse too. Don is trying to widen his Talent radius, trying to take out more soldiers faster. That means his targeting is diffused. He gets every soldier he sees through the gas, but he is also combusting anything burnable near them, and smoke rips at your lungs.

You see and feel the bullet tear through Don's side: a burst of air and clothing, followed by red, the impact, and a searing pain through your bond. Don falls.

You're trying to run to him when you see

them. The Master and the telepath. Not just any telepath--*the* Telepath. It's been four years, but you recognize him on sight. You freeze--a moment of panic. He doesn't seem to recognize you, though. After but a quick glance your way after you screamed Don's name, the Telepath turns back to the Master. They aren't doing anything visible to the eye, but the air practically crackles with telepathic energy storming between them--some mental battle you can't see but certainly sense. The back of your head erupts like a thousand rats are clawing their way through.

Push past the panic. This ends now. The Telepath is focused on the older man, and you have to get to Don, but first you have

to help the Master. It's time for payback. It's time to show the Telepath how much you've changed in four years, thanks to him.

From behind, you grab the Telepath's arm. You're not sure your Talent will reach through the body armor he wears, so you slam everything into him: payback for every time you were running scared, every day spent missing your family, every night you went to bed hungry, everything. Red streaks rush up his neck and he screams. Push your other hand up under his assault helmet and slam your Talent into his head. You can feel the wave tear through his head and through his brain. The forebrain blackens and starts to die. A great screech of telepathic static burns through your

mind as the Telepath bellows his death-scream. The Master screams too. The Telepath's midbrain liquefies as the cells erupt and explode. His awareness lasts another second, during which the hindbrain becomes mush. His telepathy goes silent. He topples, face-first. His brain is already dead. His body will follow soon, once his heart and lungs stop working.

You pause by the Master. His brain is inactive. The death-throes of a telepath must be especially hard on other receptives nearby, like a point-blank supernova. He is dead too. Just another corpse now. Whatever loyalty and devotion he implanted to control you evaporates, and only the weapon he

created remains. You, the one who touches, the demon--and you have to get to Don.

5.

The truck bounces along the country road. Like many roads in the farming zones well outside Darvenek, this one suffers from insufficient maintenance. You lie in the back of the farmer's truck, bouncing around the metal bed as the truck jumps and shudders over the potholes as if in an earthquake.

You'll be bruised head to toe when this ride is over. Maybe it's not that bad, you decide. It beats walking. You at least can cover more ground. Plus, there's the bonus of being able to sneak small snacks from the produce that the farmer didn't sell that day in Darvenek. The farmer will never

know--he has to keep his eyes on the rough road, can't look in the mirror to check on the two out-clan hitchhikers he picked up outside the city.

This is only the third time you've eaten in the four days since the attack, but you don't eat much, just enough to quell your hunger so you can rebuild your strength, in case you need to use your Talent later. You don't want to repay the farmer for his kindness by eating too much of the produce he has to sell to survive. You don't have money to pay him. You spent nearly all of the money you made working for the Master on medical care for Don, a back-alley croaker but the best you could find in an emergency, one who knew to ask no questions in return for your cash.

And the croaker's trauma skills turned out to be better than you expected.

You understand now how Don felt all those years. The anger, always right there surging to be let out, tied in with a Talent that can damage and destroy. Giving in, letting it out, would be so easy for you. But if you do give in to the rage again, would you ever be able to rein it back in? Would you ever be able to go back to who you were before you became this weapon? Would you even want to? Don found a way to handle his anger, up until the attack when he unleashed it to defend the only home he had come to know, to defend the life he had with you.

Don sleeps in the truck bed alongside you.

You eased his brain to sleep earlier when the ride started getting rough, to spare him the pain. The bullet wound in his side would cause him agony were he awake, and you only have a few painkiller pills from the croaker. You'll save the pills for later. Better that Don sleep though this lurching ride.

It's a tricky balance, keeping him asleep, because what affects him can leak through the bond and affect you, and you need to stay awake. You have enough fine control over your Talent now, thanks to the Master; you can do this for Don. You have to keep yourself alert and ready, in case.

The Institute is still out there. It will always be still out there.

At the warehouse, when you reached Don, he was still alive but barely conscious, bleeding, going into shock. You struggled to concentrate against the noise and danger and smoke assailing you externally, and the wall of red pain that threatened to overwhelm you internally through the bond. No time to think--you had to fall back on a familiar plan you and Don used often, one you'd used before and planned for shortly after you joined the Master's cadre, just in case.

Attackers guarded the obvious exits: windows and doors. No one ever expected you to escape by going up.

You got a shoulder under Don's arm, hefted him to his feet. He was nearly

unresponsive. You had to get him away from the firefight still going on between the soldiers and the mercenaries. You needed a distraction. You'd never used your Talent on Don this way before--you'd always used it to calm him, but now you reached inside his brain, found the cells that generated the combustion. They spasmed under your stimulation. You unleashed his anger and his Talent together, using one to fuel the other. No finesse--just an invisible bolt of pure psychic rage. The far wall exploded in fire and smoke.

Suddenly everyone was running and yelling. No one cared about two unarmed youths, covered in blood, barely visible through the smoke, limping into the

shadows away from the exits toward which everyone else was running.

You got Don upstairs, up more stairs, up to the flat roof. Over to the side of the building where a narrow alley, barely wider than your arm span, separated this warehouse from the nearly identical one next to it. You and Don, early in your time here, had left a thick wood board here.

You deposited him as gently as you could. You could reach into him, quiet some of the fire running along his nerves. The most you could do was spare him the pain. You had no experience with shock, didn't know how to stop it. And you still had to focus on your escape.

You cantilevered the board in place

across the eight feet or so that separated that roof from the next one. The Institute would be watching the doors and windows for escapees. This side of the warehouse had neither. No one would be looking for you here, several stories overhead, over a narrow, empty alleyway.

The board was more than long enough to serve as a bridge, of course, but you and Don never planned on having to walk across it together, one of you practically dragging the other. It bent, but it bore your weight. Sliding your feet carefully, footstep after footstep, took forever; the closer you got to the middle, the more the board bowed under the weight of you both. But it held. You reached the other side.

You dragged the board and Don to the opposite side of the roof. Then you repeated the process to get to the next building. Prayed that the board would hold. It did. Now you were two buildings away, but not yet to safety.

The roof access door to this building was locked. You had to reach into Don's head again, scared by how much dimmer whole sections of his brain were now. You had to use his Talent to burn through the lock bolt, which took longer than you thought, took more out of Don than you estimated. Unlike yours, Don's Talent was not given to finesse, but you had to keep it focused on just what you needed to burn. Unlike the warehouse, you couldn't risk setting this building alight. You couldn't risk

calling attention to yourselves with more smoke and fire.

Once the lock bolt burned through, you were inside. From there, you made your way to street level, an entrance on the side away from the warehouse, and you slipped away in the smoke and crowd of arriving police and firefighters and onlookers.

Don survived his wound, but the croaker insisted he could not be moved for days. So you retrieved all the money you and Don had stashed just in case in a safe place well away from the warehouse, a lesson learned from having to run many times before. You had barely enough to pay the croaker, only a little left over for

food for yourself. You could go hungry if it meant Don would live.

This evening was the earliest the croaker felt Don could be moved. On a side road out of Darvenek, coming back from the markets in the darkening sunset, a farmer stopped. Your Talent tickled his brain, releasing little bursts of trust and the happy hormones like the Master taught you, and the farmer decided that, yes, he'd be willing to stop and give you two a ride, so throw your stuff in the back and climb in. He was going home to a farming town nearly two hours away; how far were you going?--And what's wrong with your friend?--He looks sick--Well, just make sure he throws up over the side of the truck and don't get it inside the truck bed,

understand?

What next is the big question. It's always the big question, because it always contains more smaller ones than you can answer, each answer leading to more questions and then still more. Can you leave being *the one who touches* behind and go back to being Ryan? Do you want to? Will Don recover? What will happen to you if he doesn't?

You remember that boy you heard about, the one who could tell people exactly what would happen to them over the next twenty-four hours, the one who disappeared. You wonder what he would tell you about your future. You wonder if he is alive and happy.

The tip was good. That was what the solder said into his radio before you killed him. The tip probably came from the Master's rival, but it makes you think you and Don may have been wrong all along: staying in cities meant more people to hide among, but maybe it also meant too much risk of being seen. Someone saw and knew what you and Don and the Master were. Time to change your pattern. Maybe you should avoid cities for a while.

Don was wrong, back at the warehouse; there will always be more running. The question is whether you focus on what you're running *from*, or what you're running *toward*.

Focus on the positive. You're both still alive. You still have your freedom. You have each other.

You have options. You can see in the farmer's memories that he needs help running his farm. Maybe you'll stay with him a few days while Don recovers, trade your labor for food and a place to sleep in his barn, maybe some second-hand clothing if he can spare it. You've traded your body for less before. His little village of clan-standard people will be suspicious of two out-clan youths but your Talent can calm their distrust, just as you did the farmer's. In the end, suspicion is just another mix of emotions, memory, and hormones, a cocktail you can control. The farmer knows of caves in the woods near

his land. Maybe you could hide out in one for a while if you need to. He knows of abandoned farms where you might be able to squat for a while. If necessary, can you erase this farmer's memories of you? Possibly; some memories can be manipulated at the cellular level, and the Master thought you had the potential for that kind of precise control. Or, if necessary, this road keeps going long past the farmer's town, and you can follow it onward.

Don will recover. He has to. What will become of you if he doesn't?

You check through the bond to confirm he is still sleeping. He is. And little parts of his brain are flaring--he's starting to

dream. A happy dream, from the mix of lights in his head. Maybe that's something. Tweak the happy parts of his brain gently. You can't tell what he's dreaming, but you want him to have the best dream ever.

Pull out your music player. You estimate the battery has enough juice for another hour, maybe a bit more. Insert the earbuds. You can worry about getting another charger later. Right now, you need to listen to the songs Ryan used to like. You need to do more than listen--you need to hear, to search through them for what Ryan liked about them, for the parts of him that were left behind in them.

You have options. Focus on the positive. Put *the one who touches* aside; focus on

being Ryan. Don will need Ryan, you, more than ever while he heals. Make the bridge and cross it, one step, then the next. Take your tomorrows the way they're given, one day at a time.
