Different Paths: A Novel

An Honors Thesis/Creative Project (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

This creative piece stems from the belief not only in the existence of extrasensory perception, but also that it is possible to actively participate in it. The novel attempts to explore the potential for such talents to be used against the world and the necessity for a blockage of such attempts. The project follows several characters as they engage in the classical battle of good and evil, while learning what sacrifices may be necessary in order to preserve the greater good. The novel culminates when friend becomes foe and the group must work as a whole to defeat the evil and save their friend.

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Amber stared at the clock, swearing she could feel every second, every click of the second hand as it snapped into place. *Come on, Eric...this was not supposed to take this long.* She walked the length of the altar once more, running her fingers along the polished surface. There were times when it would have been to have had a faith. *Then again,* she thought as Eric burst into the room, *sometimes faith in your friends works just as well.*

“The next time you send me to a place like that it would be helpful to have a little more warning, Am,” he said, not quite joking. “What were they doing in there?” The normally light hearted man was ill at ease. His eyes scanned the room, checking for what he was not sure, but given that he had just spent the better part of two hours observing people plan what had to be one of the largest offensives he had ever seen, the wariness was not without cause. He studied Amber silently for a moment more. One of his best friends since grade school, she had always been quiet, pensive even, the thinker, the peace maker, always the perfect one. He couldn’t quite remember ever seeing Amber and thinking she looked out of place. Now, though, she was pacing, biting her lip, looking—he was not sure what that look meant.

Eric unfolded his long body from the cramped pew and covered the ground between them silently, regardless of the military issue boots on his feet. He touched her arm, causing her to jump nearly a foot backwards. “Hey, sorry,” he began, but she was already starting forward again. He tried again, this time grabbing her hand. He could feel the tremors up through his own arm. “Amber?” She turned to face him, letting the curtain of thick brown hair fall over her face. “I should not have let you go.” He slid the customary big brother arm around her shoulders. “We should get out of here and go somewhere with a little more privacy.” *Or at least a little less bad feeling.* They were halfway to the door when he heard the whispers start. He paused, feeling her stiffen. He could just make out the shadowy outline at the door when she ducked out from his arm and bolted to the left, leaving him with no choice but to follow. *Never thought I would find myself hiding under a replica of the Ten Commandments.*
The thought barely registered before the doors blew open and several people Eric recognized from the conference walked in, moving slowly, a sharp contrast to the entrance they made. He somehow doubted that holy ground meant much to them. Beside him, Amber drew in a deep breath, shut her eyes, and concentrated. Eric felt the moment she shielded them both. *I suppose now is not the time to start having doubts in Amber's ability...* but still, he would give anything for a semi-automatic and the cover of darkness. She stood up, directly in the middle of the crowd, and no one noticed. “Come on, Eric,” she said, yanking at his arm. “I cannot do this for very long.” They walked out the door and had just made it into the yard when Amber exhaled sharply. “I hope you have still got some running left in you,” she half-whispered, “because it is still quite a way to the car.” He nodded, and at some unknown signal they both sprinted across the lot into the denser cover of the trees, never breaking stride as they raced across the edge and toward Amber’s car, still some fifty yards away.

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Mig doubted she was really getting much studying accomplished, but all the same he was quiet as he set another drink down in front of the text. Instantly her head popped up and she grinned. “Mig! Boy, it is busy tonight!” She reached for the glass and took an experimental sip, raising her eyebrows at the fire that suddenly flooded through her throat. She raised her eyes to him, as he said, “You asked for something to keep you awake...and if that does not do it, you are prolly dead.”

“I would have to agree.” Caren’s hair fell in her face again, and she impatiently swiped it back. “You know anything about cranial-sacral manipulation?” gesturing to the open text. He glanced at it. “Nope. You?” She laughed. “Not a chance.” *But I am here tonight anyway, pretending to be getting some studying done in the middle of a noisy, crowded bar, when I*
should be disappearing into the depths of the library like the rest of my class. Then again, my study group does not have Mig. She tossed the rest of the drink down, and grinned up at him again. "I do not really wanna chase you off, little bro, but believe me, I do not want to be taking this with me this weekend." He nodded, and slipped back into the throng of people back to his place behind the bar. I bet people would really be upset if they found out their favorite bartender was barely eighteen. She turned back to the text in front of her. The blood supply to the.....

Across the bar, a rather proper English gentleman was stirring the ice in his gin and tonic, watching the exchange between Mig and Caren with a smile. It helped to have a distraction, while he waited for Amber to return. He did not need to look at his watch to know they were late. He could feel it. He supposed it was an ordinary father’s concern for his daughter, only, an ordinary father would not have sent his daughter with a Navy commander into a conference of telepaths with the destruction of a sizable part of the world on their agenda. He took a slow drink. I should not worry...she can take care of him.

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The tires protested against the speed of the turn, squalling loud enough to be heard a few blocks away. So much for a quiet escape. Eric’s hands gripped the wheel, expertly maneuvering through the twists and turns of the winding streets. He was really going to have to thank whoever dreamt up the morning runs they did on base. Amber’s slight frame was nearly lost in the seat beside him. He smiled, remembering that she always did have quite the talent for disappearing when she wanted to. “Where to, ace?” he asked, deliberately keeping his tone light. She glanced in the rearview as she spoke. “We were supposed to meet Sydney at the bar. I am sure he will wait for us. And really, it is the easiest point for everyone to meet at. Besides, I could really go for a stiff drink about now.” He nodded, finally turning the car back on the highway and pointing it toward the quiet town of Ann Arbor.
Nearly two thousand miles away, Jess Harding sat at her desk, her fingers pressed deeply into her temples as she tried (and failed) to ease some of the tension that had built all day. She stared at the desk in front of her, its surface completely covered in file folders and post-it notes, most of which made little to no sense to anyone but herself. The office was quiet. She was not surprised. It had been over two hours since her last co-worker had tossed a cheery good night over her shoulder as she went home for the night. Her co-workers thought she must have a truly problematic client as they passed the desk and saw the mountain of papers Jess had buried herself in. The folder was not on one of Jess’s clients, though. It would have been much easier if it would have been. What she has been staring at and pouring over for the last five hours was a collection of information on a rather dangerous group of telepaths, people which even Jess, in her advanced state of ability, didn’t relish running into.

She blinked again and rubbed a little harder, beginning to think that maybe a bottle of Tylenol might be useful, when she was suddenly very aware of a presence behind her. A presence, she noticed, that was trying very hard to be invisible. She made no indication of having noticed, however, but simply reached into the drawer as if for another pen. Her fingers easily found the catch and pressed upwards, releasing another panel that hid her handgun. 

*Telepath or no, she mused, I do not take chances.*

Her timing was impeccable. Just as the person came in directly behind her, she pulled the gun free and spun around, aiming perfectly dead center at the stranger’s heart. “I am sorry, but our office is closed.” The woman’s eyes traveled from the gun in Jess’s hand to her face, not in any apparent hurry. Jess found in hard to hold her arm steady. *Great. All the burglars in the world and I get the one with telekinetic power.* Experienced though she was, Jess simply lacked
the ability to hold the woman off, and her arm slowly slid down to rest in her lap. Jess glanced heavenward and sighed. *I am really starting to dislike Thursdays.*

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The announcer’s voice could barely be heard over the roar of the crowd. Colin paid the cheers no attention as he wrapped the worn white tape around his hand and wrist, running through the checklist that would hopefully bring him the ride tonight. He had drawn well, a quick red roan named Desperado. If he stayed on, it would be-*a miracle*, he thought dryly. *Darn horse is a nightmare.* He eased into the saddle, wrapping the rope around his hand several times. “Hey, Colin-try not to break something out there, okay?” *Sure, Meg,* he muttered, not even looking up. He took a deep breath, nodding to the men at the gate. The world erupted in a sudden thrill of spinning, bucking, and the pounding of adrenaline racing through his veins. For Colin, the world was silent. He did not hear the crowd, or the music, instead feeling the twist of the animal underneath him. Up, around, and back to the earth, his spine absorbing shock after shock of hooves on dirt that just couldn’t give enough under the pressure. *Five seconds....six....seven....* He was going to make this one, in just one more-and he was suddenly cartwheeling across the ground, without a good indication of what had actually just happened. *Damn.* He got up, tipping his hat to the crowd and then making his way off to the chutes, ignoring the sharp stabs from his left leg.

His roping partner was leaning against the railing. “Almost had it there, Colin. Good ride.” Colin raised his eyebrows, nodding at the older man. “We will just do better in the roping.” He hadn’t gone more than three steps when he was struck by a bullet—a small blond powerhouse in black jeans and spurs. “Get shot off the fence, Meg?” he asked his sister. He knew she did not like the riding. Then again, he did not like her dancing. “You are limping, big brother.” *Was I?* “Guess so,” he said after a second. “It is fine.”
"I bet Amber could fix it in a couple of minutes," she continued, following him to the pen where he would get his saddle off the mare that ate his money that night. "Amber has more important things to do, kid," he said. She shook her head and ran back to her horse, swinging into the saddle as easy as Colin had ever seen. Like saving the rest of the world from the link of psychopaths. He wondered how things were going halfway across the country. Amber sure had sounded strange when she called that morning, but then again, she had not been feeling the best and she had to have been tired. Flying to Michigan to track down a ring of nuts had to be wearing on a person, even if she did do it pretty often. He finished putting his saddle back in the truck and turned to join Brian back on the railing. He stepped experimentally on his left leg, feeling it give slightly. Be just fine in the morning. He made his way to the top bar, taking his place to watch the barrel racing. "Meg’s up after this one."

The crowd cheered as another racing team made their way out of the arena. Meg and her chestnut horse Daisy entered the arena, making a quick circle before they flew past the timing light and into the first turn. Meg pulled up and they whipped around the barrel, making a clean path for the second, which she judged just as expertly as the first one. "One more." Colin never realized he spoke out loud. He had been taught Meg to ride almost before she could walk. Granted, she got a lot fancier than he did, and sometimes he figured she had the edge in what they were doing. There were still times, though, when she would come running up to him to ask what she should have done. He thought it was just to make sure he was paying attention. Then again, after the death of their parents, Meg was pretty much his only family. She cleared the third barrel and tore off in a cloud of dust back past the timing light, a path commonly known as running home. He listened through the crowd for the score. 12.9 seconds...nice way to win, Meg.
The door shut behind him, barely admitting an audible click. It had been a very long day. Joker made his way to the bathroom without the aid of the hallway light, going through the motions of his normal routine. The room smelled faintly of citrus. Amber must have gotten home already. He smiled as he entered the bedroom. The pale stream of light barely illuminated her figure through the curtain. She turned toward him just as the glass door slid shut. “It’s a beautiful night.”

For most of his life, Joker had been used to living in a silent world. It didn’t really bother him much anymore. However, there were the times when he would give anything to hear Amber’s voice in his ears. Although...she was rather good at giving off other subtle little clues of her feelings. He never had to hear her voice to tell how she was feeling. And tonight, just like the last four, she was hiding something. Preoccupied, jumpy, hazy even. He wondered if she thought she was hiding it. It was very possible. It was not his place to question her just yet, though. Amber, for all she trusted him with, and all she revealed, could never tell him everything...all the secrets of her life that played the largest role in making Amber who she was. He wondered how many times she had to choose between what she loved and what she had to do.

He slipped across the room until he was standing in the same circle of light as she was, wrapping both arms tightly around her waist. “I would say it is more a beautiful girl than a beautiful night.” Her hands found his clasped at her navel and she idly played with the gold band on his finger. “I cannot believe it is going to be a year tomorrow.” And are you going to love the surprise I have for you...but that will have to wait. She dropped her head against his shoulder, and he was perfectly content just to stand there, enjoying the peace and quiet that they never seemed to have very often. After a few moments, she stepped away suddenly, so that the light illuminated her face and he could easily read her lips. “Can we just go away? Tomorrow,
without telling anybody, and just have some time for us? I think we deserve it, and if we stay someone will need me to fix something, or Sydney will figure out what the next step in stopping that group is, and I just want some time with you.”

He paused, startled by her quick outburst. Amber had always been the one hesitant to leave without telling everyone. She took her abilities and subsequent responsibility very seriously. But something is different now, is it not...something is scaring you, and you will not tell me what it is. If it was big enough to make her want to run, though, then he doubted he would be much help. Not that it would stop him from trying. “We could be gone first thing in the morning.” In the meantime, as always, he could not tell her no. Besides, he could get them on a flight before the morning commuters ever got out of bed. She smiled, stepping back into the circle of his arms. He felt how slight she had become, and bit his lip, resisting the urge to ask when her next doctor's appointment was.

She remembered when they had first gotten the news. It had all come down to this, she realized. An entire lifetime wasted. But it was not an entire lifetime. It was only partially finished, and yet there did not exist a person who could help her now. Wait, she corrected herself, one exists. Although for all intents and purposes, he might as well not. She was calm, a fact that amazed her to no end. She supposed, however, that might as well be, since there really was not all that much to cry about. After nearly twenty years of fighting nameless, unmentionably horrible things and facing death time and time again, the upcoming threat was not that much. She wished, though, that this was not so different. All the others were in her control. Maybe not always, but for a majority of the time, they were in her hands. There was something to be done. And now, she simply sat, and waited for the inevitable.

Not that death would be so quick in coming. She had at least six months, right? Six months. Six times to pay rent. Twelve more paychecks. One Thanksgiving, one Christmas, and
one New Year's...at least everyone would be around. Hell, for all she knew, everyone would be
dead with her by then anyway. That would be the big joke on them, she supposed. Six months to
see everyone she ever knew and cared about and tell them...six months with Joker.

She wondered how he was doing now. They had gotten home so late from the hospital
and the news had nearly killed him standing there. They had not said anything...just came home
and then nearly before she had closed the door behind her he was wrapping her in his arms, the
grip so tight she wondered if he was somehow trying to prevent her from leaving. And then they
were lying in bed, and she was crying, and being mad at herself for being weak, and he was
crying, and somehow they ended up lying in bed.

It was so painfully real and yet so outlandishly impossible, her death. I am only
24...never thought it would be over so fast. Never thought I would die this way. The water was
still running in the shower. He has been in there forever. Sometime during the night they had
fallen asleep, although she never would have guessed it. She was awake long before he moved.
And it had been so quiet...he just rolled over and held her, playing with the tangle of long hair,
and then he went to the shower.

She stretched her neck from side to side, and he immediately began rubbing the back of
her neck with one hand. “Head hurts again?” She nodded, and he winced, then picked her up
and carried her to their bed. He fished in the drawer by her side and pulled out the bottle of pills
the doctor had given her on the last visit, “just to hold her over until we figure this out.” Amber
shook her head, even though the action caused terrific booming sounds to bounce off the inside
of skull. “They knock me out, Joker, and I feel so out of it with them. It is not so bad.” He could
barely make out the words, but the look on her face was all too familiar.

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Eric whipped the car into the closest space and released the seat belt, trying to figure out what to do with the energy coursing through his veins. The past two hours had done nothing to alleviate the adrenaline created earlier that evening. He wanted to turn back around and open a can of whoop-ass on those crazy killers. Looking at Amber in the passenger’s seat did not seem to lead to that particular action. The waiting was the hardest part for him. In his line of work, the plan was made, the plan was carried out, then the plan was discussed. In this stuff, half the plan was carried out without a single physical action.

He opened the door for her, then slid an arm around her shoulders. Amber leaned into it as they entered the bar. Sydney was seated in a more private booth now, having subtly suggested to the previous occupants of the booth, a rather engaged-in-themselves couple, that they were better off at home. There are times when using mental abilities for personal gain is more than acceptable.

Eric was glancing around, trying to capture Mig’s eyes. He sat in sharp contrast to the quiet composure of Sydney and Amber, fidgeting, drumming lightly on the table, trying hard to expel the adrenaline sending his nerves on edge. Maybe it was just the contact he had experienced at the conference, or the leftover energy from the shield Amber had hastily constructed. Sure, he was usually pretty high after a run of action like that, but this...this was different than anything he’d ever experienced. Kinda feels hyper charged or something...like all my nerves are wired at once. Should look into bottling this stuff sometime. He promptly decided not to order any of Mig’s patented specials. Better stick to the basics for now. Just as he’d nearly abandoned hope of ever attracting the bartender’s eyes, Mig grinned his way and grabbed three glasses off the counter, hopping over the bar and making his way through the crowd to the secluded little booth in the corner. Eric raised a quizzical eyebrow at Amber, who simply smiled. “What? I get thirsty too.” Just as Mig reached the table, the nagging thought in the back of his mind surged to life. “Oh, damn, I forgot to call Melissa!” He jumped up and shot for
the phone in the back of the bar, digging though his jeans pocket for the necessary funds. She's going to kill me if I do not show up again.

Mig barely managed to get out of the larger man's way as he dashed for the phone. He laughed, setting the drinks down with a practiced flourish. Amber grabbed the closest one and tilted her head back, allowing the liquid to pour down her throat until the glass was empty, unaware of the two men staring open mouthed at her. Mig waited until the she set the glass back down. "This is just a guess, but did you run into some action earlier or have you just decided to chair the local chapter of AA?" She simply shook her head. "It is not just a guy thing, folks." Sydney raised his eyebrows and took a much smaller drink from his glass. "I think I will not ask how it went."

Mig looked from Amber to Sydney, taking the empty glass away from Amber. "So are we calling the whole group down, or you guys pulling hero duty by yourselves?" Amber groaned and propped her elbows on the table, dropping her head into her hands as she spoke. These headaches are really starting to get to me. She shook her head slightly, trying to clear out some of the impending fuzziness. "Um, Colin, I think, and Jess...Eric will want to keep Melissa out of this, and Caren's probably studying." She was interrupted as the brunette in question slid into the seat beside her. "One can only take so much textbook. Hey, Mig, bring me something a little less alcoholic, ok?" Mig grinned and nodded. "I will be back in a few...and I will call Colin and Jess while I am at it."

"Better wait awhile, Migs," Caren said, just before he turned away. "Colin is riding tonight...and so are Meg and Brian. And I think Jess is going out to Brad's for the weekend...she might be hard to reach." Sydney acknowledged that statement. "I agree, waiting is best. I would hate to see Colin end up roping Brian instead of the calf because he suddenly heard your
voice in his head.” They all glanced at the normally serious man, bursting into laughter at the image of the cowboys caught up in their ropes.

“So, what is going on in the world of the mentally unstable?” Caren quipped, feeling just a slight rush of excitement course through her veins at the prospect of some more psychic action. Caren was still relatively new to the world Amber and the others and never been without. She really did not have all that much talent for it, but more often than not, an extra pair of hands had proved exceptionally useful. Of course, she did serve as a stronger reminder that a physical world did exist, and usually found herself pulling the others back down from the atmosphere when things got a little heavy.

Amber rolled her eyes and leaned against the back of the booth. “Oh, just the usual. I am big, I am bad, and I-want-to-rule-the-world-with-my-dark-powers-kind of link. Nothing different, really, except there are about thirty of them to the eight of us.” And their leader can do things I have never even seen Sydney do...and even the weaker of them is probably stronger than the best of us...and they are incredible at hiding among a group of people...and they have been planning this for a hundred years or so...but no use letting her worry about that just yet.

“Thirty to eight? Sounds just like the kind of odds Eric likes.” Caren craned her neck to see around the corner, where Eric had the phone tucked into his shoulder and was gesturing emphatically to the air while talking to Melissa. “That is, if he survives putting Melissa off for another night.” Eric finally hung up and bounded back to the table, nearly sitting in Caren’s lap and proceeding to drum his fingers rapidly on the table. “If you are going to sit at the big kid’s table, Eric, would you please sit still?” He immediately stopped his fidgeting and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, kid...guess I am still a little charged up.” His hand moved forward and absenty started playing with Caren’s pen. As he spun it between his fingers, he felt a sudden burning in the back of his neck, and blinked once, shaking his head slightly.
Sydney cleared his throat as he set his glass on the counter, managing to put it exactly back into the small wet circle it had made without even looking. “Well, Amber?” He reached into the case at his feet and pulled out a leather bound notebook, glancing at the pen spinning between Eric’s fingers and opting for the one in his blazer pocket instead. Amber rubbed a little harder at her temples and took a deep breath. Honestly, all she wanted was to go home to Joker, take a long soak in the tub, and crawl into bed for the next year or so. However, the hotel room was cold and the beds were hard, so sitting at the bar might be the best experience she could get out of Michigan.

“The group is pretty much as large as we expected, although the conference was probably about twice as big as I had planned on, which made it easier to get in and out, but the main speakers were all group based. We were wrong on the leader though—it is not the girl.”

*Although I wish it would have been, since she is a little more on the same level as the rest of us...and young enough that she has not been completely corrupted with the whole evil rules thing.* “Anyway, the guy is named James, and I think Jess has some files on him, but I have not had time to go through the books to see where he comes from, or even what link he originally belonged to.” Caren’s head popped up and she grinned. “Book work? Just call me research girl!”

The books were what Eric jokingly referred to as the psychic’s battle bible, since they contained written accounts of nearly every event that rocked the psychic world and some that had the script for future encounters. In each link, there was one elder who had, as Caren said, been there, done that, about a thousand times, and this elder kept the books for that link. Since Sydney was the special half of the original eight, his books tended to be based on a link-by-link account, not completely adhering to the record what-happens-only-in-your-life-principle. As a result of Sydney’s few thousand years on Earth, there were multiple volumes, and most of them were not written in easy to understand English. Since Caren had realized early on that her part in
the link wouldn't involve as much psychic ability, she had taken to studying as much of the books as she could, hoping to serve as the knowledge in a pinch, should it ever be needed.

Sydney nodded. "You will have to get back to Boston to get those. We were traveling light this time, so I do not have any with me." Caren's eyes widened. "Gonna airmail me?" She loved doing astral projection, a process commonly known as transferring in the links. There was nothing quite like flying through what she had decided earlier had to be the matter of the earth. She gathered her bag and stood up. "I will be home in about fifteen minutes." Once through the door of her house, she could easily be sent to Boston to Sydney's apartment to begin searching. She paused on her way to the door. "Somebody is going to call me and let me know what is happening, right? I mean, in case something comes up?" Amber tossed a half-grin at the younger girl. "I will tell Mig as soon as we figure out something." Caren laughed and ducked between a table filled with rather drunk college boys and frustrated business men forcing down drinks stiffer than the starch in their shirts. Amber watched her backpack retreat through the crowd until she was lost in the shuffle.

Amber turned back to Eric and Sydney, captivated by Eric's unending motion. She noticed that Sydney was staring at the motion of the pen in his fingers as well. *Eric's always been coordinated, but this is just strange.* The pen spun around in a perfect circle, going faster with each rotation until Amber was positive he could not still be touching it. Eric was oblivious to the attention he was getting and to the pen flying in his fingers. "So, guys, what is the plan? I do not think I can sit through book work right now, but if you will point me in the direction of the nearest nutcase, I will be happy to apply a solid boot theory."

Mig appeared at the side of the table and promptly forgot about the drinks he was holding as the pen in Eric's fingers spun faster and then suddenly lifted a few inches above Eric's hands. Amber sat back against the booth and bit her lip, looking desperately at Sydney. "That is
enough, Eric," the older man said, as he reached over and placed his hand over the pen, causing it to land and clatter on the table below. Eric looked up at the stunned faces around him. "What?"

"Can I go with you next time, Amber? I could use the increase in speed, especially on weekend nights." The sandy haired bartender grinned and placed the drinks on the table. "Hey, Eric, hands off the glasses, okay? I do not plan on cleaning up your messes all night." Eric tossed off a mock angry scowl at Mig and reached for the pen again, only to have Sydney's hand cover his and return it to the surface of the table. "Go home, Eric."

"Come on, guys, it is just a little extra energy running around...nothing to be worried over." Amber remained against the back of the booth. Her eyes concentrated on his, giving him the concerned big sister gaze Colin would swear she perfected back in junior high. "I will talk to you tomorrow, okay? Just go see Melissa, and forget about this junk for tonight." Eric pushed back his chair and sighed. "All right, then. You know where to get me." He cut through the crowd and disappeared before anyone could get another word off. Amber let out the breath she had been holding and turned to Sydney. "We never should have taken him."

Jess allowed her gun to slip through her fingers, landing harmlessly on her lap. There were times when she would give half the world to have Amber’s active abilities anytime she wanted them. They may have had the same father, but Amber had definitely inherited much more than she had. Jess was good, in her own way, but she just did not have the control necessary to control a person with higher abilities than her own for more than a few minutes. Usually, more than a few minutes were necessary.
The woman gracefully slipped into the seat at the desk behind her, glancing over the material spread all over Jess’s work space. “Working late, I see.” Jess resisted the urge to shove the files into her drawer, choosing instead to remain as friendly as possible for the time being. The woman’s face was vaguely familiar, barely registering in the recesses of her over-worked brain. She began mentally canvassing the photos attached to the files in front of her, trying to place the woman in one of three categories. *Harmless, moderately dangerous, and time to make out your will...I think we have a winner in category two.*

“Have you figured me out yet?” She looked into the woman’s face, noting the hint of amusement she found there. “I should think it would be rather easy, with as much work as you have been putting into this.” She waved her hand in the direction of the desk between them, and immediately the files lifted until they uncovered a thick file bearing the name James, Elizabeth E. down the side and a poorly lit photography paper clipped to the front. She leaned forward, studying the picture intently. “Not my most photogenic moment, but I suppose it will have to do...although it is rather poorly done.”

“Considering,” Jess began, her voice much softer than usual, “that you killed the photographer shortly afterwards, I am not surprised he did not take the time to create the best backdrop.” Her eyes fought the impulse to linger on the smallest picture frame on her computer. Elizabeth tilted her head slightly and studied Jess. “He meant something to you?” She followed the gaze to the picture on the monitor. “That is what makes your kind so vulnerable, you know. You all do so much caring. It really limits your abilities.” *Maybe I should be glad I am where I am then...*

“Well, Ms. James, seeing as how it is rather late, and I would enjoy getting home tonight as much as the next person, I think we should conduct this visit at another time. Perhaps a lunch later in the week?” Jess was as brisk and professional in tone as she could be. She stood up,
hoping that the woman might take her example and follow, and just maybe she could get to that emergency button. “On the contrary, Dr. Harding... I believe I’m more inclined to this meeting now.” Of course. Jess sat back down. It was going to be a long night.

Eric bounded up the stairs to his apartment, fishing his key out of the depths of his pockets and flung open the door, causing Melissa to bolt upright and fall off the couch. He ducked the flurry of pillows coming his way and jumped across the floor to scoop his girlfriend up. “Honey, I am home!” He swung her around a couple of times and dropped her back on the couch, flopping down beside her and sprawling his long frame across most of the remaining space.

“No kidding,” she remarked dryly. “It is nearly one a.m. They finally let you out of the war department meeting?” She stretched back out, dropping her head in his lap. “They kicked me out of there a little while ago. I just had to run off some of this energy.” His hand drifted down and idly played with a couple of strands of long brown hair. She twisted slightly to look up at him. “So what is the story this time?”

“Well, you know how a group of people all on the same mental wavelengths can talk to each other and stuff? Colin, Meg, Amber, Mig, Caren, Sydney and I?” She nodded, saying “That is what you call a link, right?”

“That is it. Anyway, the world has hundreds of ‘em, I guess. Tons of people with different abilities in different links. It is like anything else, some of them are good, some of them are bad. So Amber and Sydney, being the police type people they are, have to protect all the good links from the bad ones. This conference we went to today was a bad link thing, I guess, and somehow we are going to have to figure out how to shut them down before they get started.”
She shifted again until she was leaning against his strong frame. “Can you get hurt in all this?” He ran his hands over her shoulders. “I could, but it is pretty safe most of the time. Amber and Sydney take care of the really intense stuff.” *Not that I would not like to have my chance at it, but I have about as good a chance as flying off a ten story building and living to tell the tale.*

“It was nuts in there, Melissa,” he said, remembering the sheer adrenaline he felt at walking among the group of people at the top of every psychic’s to-be-feared list. “They had all these rooms filled with weaponry that I have never seen before, and every person in there, no matter who they were, knew exactly how to use each thing to the best of its advantage. Even all these little kids were there, but they were not running around like most kids would have been. It was like invasion of the body snatchers or something...all these kids walking around in groups of two or three and just studying everything, taking notes for crying out loud, and the talent—”

“Eric!” Melissa’s voice finally pierced through the haze he had created for himself. “What?” he asked, trying to figure out when she had moved off his lap to the other side of the couch. “Are you all right? I mean, did you do anything different at this conference or something?” *Well, honey, other than running for our lives, no.* Out loud, he shrugged. “Nothing that different. Why?” She gestured to the tops of her shoulders, glowing a deep blue in the shape of Eric’s hands. “Your hands...they got so hot all of a sudden, and then it was like a flash freeze, and now I have these marks on me.” Eric’s eyes widened, and he stretched his hand to barely touch over the mark on her right shoulder. “Damn,” he said, almost reverently. *I hope this is something I picked up under the Ten Commandments and not at one of those lectures.*

“Damn? Sorry, Eric, but that does not quite cover it!” He looked up to see the confusion and borderline panic in his girlfriend’s eyes. “Hey, it is okay, this kind of weird stuff happens to us all the time, and Amber or Sydney could probably fix it in just a couple of minutes,” he said, and reached for the phone. “I will just call the bar and have Mig tell them, and then maybe we
Eric nodded, trying to remember when he had first found out about what Amber and Sydney actually did on all those trips to psychology events and during those incredibly long hours in the library at Sydney's house. If he was thinking correctly, Colin had sighed and leaned back in the chair, saying, "This has got to be insane, but count me in," where he had done what he felt any semi-intelligent person would have done. He burst out laughing. Eric was a commander in the United States Navy. The battles he fought were real, with weapons that attacked a man's body, and the orders he followed were clear, given with obvious reason. Half the time the damage with this stuff was mental, and most of the time he had no idea why they had to do things by methods that seemed to be colossal wastes of time. It had taken him the better part of two years to understand this stuff, and he was expecting too much out of Melissa at once.

However, that still does not fix my problem...my girlfriend is about to go spaz factor five, her shoulders are glowing blue, and I caused it, but I cannot call the two people who would more than likely know what to do. Welcome to the land of the royally screwed. "Okay, Lissa," he began, hoping that by the time he got to the next word he would have an idea, "is there anyone at all you would feel okay with me calling?" As he spoke, he instinctively reached for her and rubbed her arm, in what he meant to be a comforting gesture. The instant his hand made contact with her skin, though, he felt what he thought was an electrical charge, and the same glowing blue appeared down the line he had traced on her arm. Her eyes immediately changed from
almost panic to complete and total fear. “On second thought, maybe calling Amber and Sydney is the best idea. Right now.”

Collin turned from the collections table, where he had just picked up their winnings from the roping competition, and headed for the trailer. He was more than ready to get home. First, though, he had to figure out what Meg was doing for the night. He knew she had to dance the next night, and she would probably be heading for the apartment she kept in the city for the occasions when she had to be in town for an length of time, but it was just habit to check up on her. A habit he knew she was so fond of, as a matter of fact. Still, big brothers had their prerogatives, and keeping an eye on the guys who would rather take their prerogatives with his little sister was one of them.

He worked through the crowd of well-wishers and the spectators from the city who wanted the full cowboy experience without the full cowboy effort. You could always find the city folks...the too-shiny boots and the sharply creased hats, the belt buckles large enough to serve as dinner platters, and perfectly untouched white hands that pressed paper into his hands and snapped his picture. The women who walked around in jeans tight enough to make them stealthily undo the top button before they could even consider sitting down...the ones who pressed phone numbers and hotel room keys into the rider’s hands.

He followed the sound of laughter until he found Meg’s trailer and the rest of the barrel racers. Sure enough, there she was, surrounded by the younger rough stock riders. He waited until she looked up and caught her eye. Laughing, she disentangled herself from the newest recruit and jogged over to him. “Want me to take Daisy home?” he asked, looking at the mare who was intent on removing as much of the grass by the trailer as she could. “I am going to stall
her at Kevin’s, actually, since it is so close to my apartment, and we will come home Sunday morning, okay? I have the late set Saturday night.”

He inwardly winced and then smiled at her. “Okay. But Meg? Please be careful.” Preferably careful as in don’t dance, but that’s not likely...Megan had always been a dancer, as long as Colin could remember, and he always thought she would end up going to New York and doing something there, but instead, she had accepted the offer closer to home and now danced five or six sets a weekend at one of the popular clubs in the city. While she insisted to Colin that nothing ever came off in her performances, he was still irritated that not enough went on in the first place. Still, she was happy, and she was close to home, and he appreciated what he could get. He turned to go, saying, “Do not forget, we are supposed to get together with Eric and Melissa Sunday night.” She tossed a quick smile at him. “And I will remember to ask Mig...he is dancing a set with me anyway.”

Colin was nearly to the truck when he saw Jess, sitting in her office, and heard her voice quietly, calmly, in his mind. “Colin, I hope you are listening, because I am in some trouble here, and I need Amber.” The view changed, and he got a good look at the woman sitting beside his friend. Tell Amber she is a telekinetic, and she is good. And Colin? Tell her to hurry. “Got it.” He did not realize he had spoken out loud until Brian gave him a quizzical look. “Got what?” Colin shook his head and tossed the keys to Brian. “Trouble with Jess.”

They made their way out to the main road slowly, Brian maneuvering the trailer through the sea of vehicles dotting the grounds of the county fair, and Colin doing his best to concentrate over the sounds of the midway and the bumps of the road. Amber always said his strength and weakness stemmed from the exact same area. He was a serious guy, which benefitted his ability to close down and concentrate, but on the other hand, it limited his chances to believe in the pathways by which most of the link work functioned.
Slowly, the world around him receded enough so that he was able to look through the great void, as he jokingly referred to the network Amber and Sydney had hooked up. The link felt strange, he noticed. Usually, he could always feel a certain amount of power running through it, but this time was different. The current had an odd undertow, and most of it seemed to be centered around Eric. He decided he could deal with that later. *Amber...hey, kiddo, you around? Sydney? Either or? I am not picky.*

*What wrong, Colin?* Even in his head, she sounded tired. *Jess just talked to me...said there is some woman in her office with telekinetic power that doe not want to leave, and she could use some help.* He felt her sigh through the link. *Okay, I will take care of it. Thanks, Colin. How was the rodeo?* Colin inwardly grimaced. *Which part? Meg won, Brian and I won, Brian won, and I bombed.* He felt her laugh. *You are one of the only people that would call three of four places bombing. I will talk with you soon, Colin.*

*Brian had the music turned to low volume.* "Trouble in the land of anything-but-paradise?" Like Colin, Brian preferred to keep his faith in what he knew, and lately, all the trouble with the links had made him even more wary. "Apparently--although I am not really sure exactly what is causing the problem this time. Jess usually does not ask for help." Jess was also the only one of them stuck out in the middle of nowhere with no close friend in the link living nearby. Of course, at one point and time, they had all lived in virtually the same area.

As they made their way down the road, Colin thought back to the years they had all lived in Boston. Amber had tried to train each one of them to be able to function completely on their own, since the day would come when she was not three doors down, but not everyone was able to pick up enough active skill to do much.
“Okay, guys, there are two ways to do this. You can practice your active skills, or you might find that you cannot do that well, so you work on inactive skills. Active is best when you run into situations all the time, like the wrong people coming in to your link with bad intentions, or if you have to defend yourself. They take a lot of skill and energy though, and I am stressing the lot part, so you might not be able to do that well, in which case you turn to the inactive stuff. You can still talk to the rest of us, transfer, and create what you need in most cases. The next few days I will show you a few tricks to figure it out. A link is built on both kinds of people. The active people need the inactive people to resource and give backup energy, and the inactive people need the protection from the active ones. So it does not matter what you have, as long as you put it in the group.”

Colin and Jess had turned out to be about as inactive as they came, while Eric and Mig rivaled Amber for potential. So far, only Mig had ever been able to tap into it much, since Eric simply lacked the patience and mind-set the skill required. Amber put it much better when she said Mig existed best inside his own mind, and Eric needed more of the real world influence. Meg and Brian had both learned a little from Colin, and they could both use the link if they wanted, which was a process everyone followed with those they loved. Amber had added Joker, Mig added Caren, and Eric had finally been convinced to add Melissa.

Brian was talking about the week’s plans, yanking Colin firmly back into the present. It was going to be a busy week for them, and Colin started hoping that whatever was going on only needed a quick fix, since it was going to be nearly impossible to get everything done and figure out what else was going on in the world. Colin owned a large ranch in western Montana, and Brian split time working with Colin and Larry, the man who owned the ground he was hoping to buy someday soon. “I figure we can get the south ridge done by Tuesday, and then finish up the west ridge by Friday. That leaves Saturday morning to do some repairs, and we can still make that rodeo Saturday night.” Colin gave him a sideways glance. “Thought you were not up for
that ride.” Brian shrugged. “I hear it is going to be a nice pot, if we ride right again.” Colin agreed, knowing Brian needed to make as much money as he could, if he was going to buy his own spread. Half the time, he felt weird, being the older man’s boss, who had more experience than he could ever have. The rest of the time, he was just thankful he had someone who could help him as much as Brian did.

Back at the bar, Amber groaned and reached for the jacket pooled around her hips. “I think we are going to have to cut this one short, Syd...Jess needs some help.” As she stood up, the room swirled around in a haze of lights, music, and shadowy people. “Oh, God,” she got out, before she tipped forward, thankfully into Sydney’s arms. The pounding in her head immediately went from annoying to unbearable, and she clutched at her temples, biting her lip as waves of pain crashed over her. Sydney carefully lowered her back onto the seat, and called for Mig. Get us some water, and get Joker fast, Mig. Amber nearly passed out on me.

In no time at all the bartender was at their booth, with a glass of water and a wet washcloth. “Another one of those headaches? Maybe we should call Caren back.” Sydney nodded, carefully placing the warm towel on her forehead. “I think I will get her out to the car, then I will send her back to Joker, and ship Caren there. She was on her way to help Jess, so I need to go take care of that.” He lifted her to his shoulder, and Mig led the way out of the bar. Once outside, they looked around for anyone sober enough to notice a disappearing girl, and Sydney gently placed her in the passenger seat of his car. Airmail, Joker...coming at you. Sydney concentrated on her still form for just a second, before it neatly disappeared, leaving Mig with a half-smile on his face. “I have got to learn to do that.”
“I will show you sometime,” Sydney said, looking around for people once again. “Okay, I am going to find Jess...I will check back in later. Keep an eye out for Eric, all right?” Mig nodded, watching Sydney disappear in the same style as Amber just had, before turning back toward the bar. Caren? He waited for her response before he continued. Change in plans...you are going to Boston, with Amber, not Sydney. She just did the whole fainting maiden thing in the bar. He shook his head as he walked back in. Why do I suddenly get the feeling that we are in serious trouble?

Sydney made his way through the lower offices silently, walking right past the janitor absorbed in his headphones and mop, and up the stairs to the third floor, where he could hear voices. He immediately recognized Jess’s ‘psychologist tone’, her voice quiet and calm, yet still slightly manipulative. The other he did not know, and so he used the same process as Amber had earlier, making himself a part of the shadows instead of a visible human being.

The lighting was dim, except for Jess’s cubicle. In the light from the desk, he was able to clearly discern the striking facial features of someone he thought was long past gone. Well, Elizabeth, nice to see you again. His lips curved in what might have been a half smile. And I do believe that it will be just as nice to send you back to wherever you came from. He searched for the switch to the overhead lighting. You called, Jess? The younger girl spun around in her chair, fast enough to make Sydney wonder if she would knock the seat off the stand. “It is about time!”

Elizabeth looked heavenward and leaned back, crossing her arms on her chest. “My God, Sydney, do you not ever stay dead?” He laughed, without a trace of the man Jess had grown to know as her father apparent. “As well as you do, Ms. James.” He walked forward to join them.
placing himself between Jess and Elizabeth. *I think I would leave off late night hours, Jess. You never know what kind of people are waiting to be transferred straight to the moon.*

“I do believe that office hours are long since over.” He idly picked up a file from Jess’s desk. “Is this a social call or strictly business?” His voice was perfectly neutral. *If this was meant to be a calling card for Amber and me, it is going to be serious business.* “Can I not stop by and talk with your secondary protégée?” She caught the look on his face and rushed on. “I heard that you think you can stop them. Really, Sydney, I did not think you could be quite that stupid, but maybe your old age has finally gotten to you. What is this though, your fifth time around? You have to have gone up against them before. Anyway, I knew I could not get through to you, so I thought I would try my luck with Jess, since she tends to be a bit more impressionable than Amber.”

Reincarnation of sorts was one of Eric’s favorite link perks. The body might die, but the mind and essence were trapped in the web that held everyone together, and without fail, a new body was found and the link was complete again. Sydney’s body was about sixty years old. His psyche, however, numbered in the high three hundreds. The woman sitting before Jess was very close to that age herself, although with the mistakes she kept making, Sydney was surprised that she ever got that far.

“*Well, then, please do not let me stand in the way of your great insight, Elizabeth. If you do not mind, though, I would like to listen to this as well.*” He leaned against the desk, just close enough to Jess that he could easily step in front of her should the woman choose to try anything. *Although I highly doubt that even she would be that stupid.* Elizabeth glared at his for a moment. “It would not make an ounce of difference even if I did mind, would it now?” She exhaled, the noise demonstrating the anger she was feeling.
“They have been planning this for a long time, Sydney. I think you made them a little hot under the collar when you zapped that guy a couple hundred years ago...he was supposed to be their given leader, you know. Take them back from the brink of extinction and find their true power—all that good stuff. I think he was supposed to have the ability to get rid of you on a more permanent basis.” Sydney chuckled again and leaned slightly forward, as if to share an important secret. “Why on earth do you think I killed him then?”

“Anyway,” Elizabeth continued, less than thrilled at being interrupted, “apparently someone else managed to tap into the power that the kid was supposed to have, and he has made it his life long mission to destroy you and your link. And Sydney...they know Amber’s your kid.” That was enough to make him take notice. The quickest way to destroy any link was to go for the strongest link and obliterate it, and since Amber was the one who really held the link together, removing her would cause a psychic power surge that could have serious consequences on the rest of the group.

“She is not feeling so well, lately, is she? Must be hard, to be Amber. All that pressure from maintaining a link, going around with you, and banishing all the evil links from the world, and then trying to keep up with the expectations of being your daughter...having a link attack her head cannot be all that helpful.” Jess barely had time to blink before Sydney lunged across the desk and Elizabeth from her chair. “I swear to you, if you have anything to do with Amber’s being sick, I will not only kill you myself, but I will make sure you end up dying for a very, very long time.”

Jess pulled at Sydney’s hands, trying to disengage them from Elizabeth’s jacket. “Syd, stop it! You cannot have the information from the woman if she is dead before she can tell you!” In all honesty, Jess had next to no clue about what Elizabeth was saying. The last time she had talked to Amber, her best friend had been fine. More than fine, maybe.
Sydney finally released his grip, dropping her back into the chair. “All right,” he said, so calmly that Jess had serious doubts about him being the same person he was just a second before. “You tell me everything you know, and take me to where I need to be, and I will not use your head as my personal target practice.” Jess winced at the coolness in this tone. She knew very well what the fatherly figure was capable of...what he had, of necessity, learned to do with people threatening his link. She did not really want to see what he would do with people threatening his daughter.

“They knew you would come after them as soon as they started gathering, and they knew you would send Amber. You have some pretty powerful potential in that link of hers, you know? If they ever all realize it, you have the making of the strongest link since the original eight. Of course, that kind of power would be bad for this group, so they are going to take it down, one person at a time, and then they are going to come for you. They see Amber as the retribution for that kid, Sydney, and they are after you in a bad way.”

Jess bit her lip, trying to mentally flip through years of reading and research to find the kid Elizabeth was talking about. Hey, Caren, have you ever come across some kid getting zapped by Sydney really early on in those books? She waited for a few moments, while watching Sydney and Elizabeth face off, each trying to read through the other’s emotions and decide on the next best course of action. Jess, I do not know about you guys, but there is some seriously weird stuff going on over here, and I cannot think through a lunch menu, let along hundreds of years of research. Jess could hear the stress in the younger girl’s voice. Okay, then, just hang on a few...we will figure something out.

Sydney, Caren said they aree having trouble over there—I can go over, if you do not need me here. She looked from Elizabeth’s set face to Sydney’s impassive one. He rubbed his eyes
for a second, and then searched through the files on the desk. *Go ahead, and call me if you need me. I think Elizabeth and I are going to have a long talk.* She shoved a few things into her bag, wishing she could grab a few of the files without Sydney noticing. She was going to be swimming in the books before the night was over.

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Caren experienced the briefest sensation of weightlessness, all her senses reeling while she was trapped for a second in the time between worlds. *Gotta love astral projection...and they say a Concorde jet is the fastest way to travel. I do not think so, boys!* Gradually she became aware of a solid floor beneath her feet again. She blinked once and peered around the darkness, trying to figure out where she had ended up. *Not that I doubt Sydney’s abilities, but I have ended up in strange places before.* It did not take long to figure out that she had indeed made it to Joker and Amber’s apartment.

She dropped her bag on the nearest table, and silently made her way across the thick Oriental carpet, weaving between the antique cherry wood table and the bookcases full of psychology volumes. Caren smiled in the darkness...she remembered well how many hours they had spend studying for the admissions’ test on that same table.... how excited Amber had been for her when she found out she had made it into medical school....how Joker’s eyes had looked when he sat her down and told her that the doctors didn’t know what was causing the pain in Amber’s head. She had not seen anyone look that bad since she had to tell her first patient’s family that their son had died. Ever since then, she had put all her free time into studying what might be causing Amber’s illness, but so far she had not had any luck.

The door to the bedroom was open just a sliver, enough to let a thin beam of light shine into the hallway. She stood in front of the door for a moment, putting her professional face on
and shoving her personal feelings for the couple she loved deep inside her body. *You are no
good to anyone if you fall apart just when they need you most.* She took a deep breath and then
opened the door fully, finding the room gently bathed in the flicker of candlelight...one of the
few lights Amber could stand when her head hurt this badly. Joker was positioned at the edge of
the large bed, his frame nearly hiding Amber's, which she could barely make out beneath the
thick satin comforter.

*Joker?* Even in her head, her voice was hesitant. She mentally berated herself for not
sounding more composed and calm. *Come on in, Car...she took a few of those pills when she got
here and I think she is out for awhile.* Caren crossed the floor to stand on Amber's other side,
automatically reaching for her wrist to check her pulse and then counting the rises and falls of
her chest. *Pulse and respiration are okay...a little lower than normal, but those pills can do that
do you sometimes.* She stretched her hand to smooth some of the flyaway strands of hair on
Amber's forehead back and immediately pulled her hand away. The heat coming from Amber's
head was incredible. *Joker, where do you keep your thermometers?* He slipped off the bed
without ever moving Amber and disappeared into their bathroom, returning with the slim glass
rod, which Caren deftly slipped between Amber's lips without waking her. *Not that it would not
take an atomic bomb to do that.* She watched the three minutes tick by on her watch, swearing
she could feel the thuds as the second hand counted one hundred and eighty beats. She removed
the thermometer, slipping into the bathroom to read it by the stronger light at the sink.

Later, she would remark that it was a miracle she didn't drop it into the sink right there.
*Oh, my God...this just is not possible. It just is not happening.* She rubbed her eyes forcefully
and the looked at it again, just to make sure the astral projection had not played with her vision
any. The mercury was still sitting exactly where she had thought it was. *105 degrees...she
should have brain damage, if this has been this high for any extended period of time. Of course,
your normal Joe does not have special healing abilities, either.* She shook the line of mercury
back to normal and turned to face Joker. His eyes searched through hers for some hint of what to do. In all honesty, she did not have a clue.

She stepped back into the bathroom, letting the light outline her face enough so Joker could read her lips. "I think we should call the doctor, or maybe an ambulance." And in the meantime, try to get that fever down. "How high was it?" His voice was so quiet she nearly had to read his lips. "Too high." He immediately got up and her first thought was that he was going straight to the phone, but instead he lifted a sleeping Amber effortlessly into his arms and carried her past Caren into the shower. "Maybe we can get it down ourselves." Since he was not facing her and she did not want to waste time, she immediately switched to mental conversation, at the same time automatically stepping forward and beginning to play with the water knobs, adjusting the temperature to a suitable degree.

We should not be playing games with this, Joker. I think I is a good time to step back and let the doctors handle it. Finally satisfied with the stream of water filling the tub, she began helping him work Amber’s clothes over the limp body. They cannot do anything, Car. We’ve been to every specialist in the area and then some...it is not some disease we can treat. Amber told me she thought it was psychic...some new kind of attack. She does not want to go somewhere else—she thinks Sydney can handle it. At some unseen signal they both lifted her gently into the water. Caren watched carefully for signs of immediate shock, but thankfully, nothing happened. She had envisioned steam suddenly rolling off Amber’s body.

Then we need Sydney here, but he is somewhere dealing with Jess, and I do not know who else to call. It is weird, Joker. It is like there is some big hand yanking on the link, and it just does not feel stable anymore. One minute we are fine, and the next minute there is this power surge and the whole thing ripples. And the stuff that has going wrong lately—Syd’s off with Jess, and Eric was acting weird, and now Amber is out of the here and now. The younger
girl kept her eyes on Amber’s face as she began to feel the tension she had been trying to ignore begin to tighten around her neck. She felt Joker’s hand rub her shoulder for a minute. *You have to keep the faith, Car. Just keep the faith.* She turned to face him then, her eyes a combination of fear and worry. “In who?”

Eric tried again to focus his energy on talking to Sydney. He thought he might have gotten his signals crossed with a bad television program. One moment the world was in view, the next it was out. Nothing hurt, exactly, but he was filled with a buzzing power coursing through his veins that he could not ignore. On one hand, he wanted desperately to know what had caused him to leave the freaky tattoo on his girlfriend’s body, but on the other, he just wanted to go try this stuff out. It was like the first time he flew a prototype plane that no one really knew the capabilities of. “Eric! Come on already, before you do something crazier.” He could hear Melissa, but she was coming from so far away, and the power was right in front of him...if he would just reach out and take it he could have so much more than this pleasant little buzzing. Besides, you never knew what kind of power the link might get if he could harness this.

Melissa sat on the couch, not quite two feet from her boyfriend, and watched his face change emotions faster than an actor in a soap opera. *This is more than crazy...but he cannot get anything done like this.* Taking a deep breath, she focused all her concentration and screamed names. *SYDNEY! AMBER! JESS! CAREN! MIG!* She didn’t have to wait long to hear the responses. She got three loud complaints from the last three, who were not used to controlling such an increase in volume. Amber never answered, and Sydney finally checked back in. *What is wrong, Melissa?* His perfectly calm tone irritated her, for some reason. *I AM—I mean, I am having a little problem here. See, Eric has turned into Superman with complete with glowing hands, and now he’s pulling a male Sybil on me, and I want you to come fix it.* Now.
She waited for a moment, looking around the room to see if anyone had suddenly popped up using a less conventional entry than the front door and then went to try again, only to get interrupted by the older man. *I will send Jess to you. Just sit it out for a minute and keep Eric there.* “Sure,” she muttered, “just sit there and hold back Eric. Easy for you to say. You are probably sitting in some library reading musty old books and laughing about the situations you let us get into.”

“Actually,” the voice came from right beside her head, “he was just taking care of my late night visitor.” Melissa jumped high enough to hit the ceiling and then spun to face the newest addition to her living room. “I do not believe we have met. I am Jess.” She looked at the proffered hand and gingerly shook it. “Can you fix this?” She pointed at Eric, who had not moved during the entire exchange. Jess stared at her friend, taking in the faraway gleam to his eye and the stepped toward him, only to be knocked back by a field of energy she hadn’t felt since Amber first started practicing. The sudden release of energy snapped Eric out of his trance. His brown eyes focused sharply on both of them. “Check it out, ladies,” he said, only his voice was not the one Jess had grew up with and Melissa had come to love. “Look who is the newest player on the team.” *Guys, we have a problem.* Jess tried to speak to the whole link, only to find that a pressure began tightening around her head with every word she attempted.

“Now, now, Jessica, where is the fun in getting everybody over here and ending this a little too fast?” He hopped off the couch and stretched his hands in front of him, making a deep blue spark pass from one hand to the other. He pursed his lips for a moment, then looked back at them, both women subconsciously pushing themselves back into the couch cushions. “You see, honey,” he said, dropping beside Melissa and casually tossing his arm over her shoulders. “Jess is just too tense without good old Daddy and big sister to help her out. If she would just relax a little, she might see that we can start the party long before they get here.”
Melissa ducked out from under his arm and jumped off the couch, lunging at the phone on the counter. She did not make two steps before her limbs ceased to take commands from her brain and she froze, her outstretched hand inches from the receiver. Eric chuckled, and cuffed her gently under the chin. “You are not listening either.” Without ever turning around, he waved his hand in the direction of the door. “I am being nice about this, Jess, but you are beginning to try my patience.” Jess tossed her head back and glared at the ceiling for a moment, briefly entertaining the idea of calling for help, but deciding that getting the entire link in trouble was probably not the brightest decision she could make. Okay, Jess, just sit it out awhile and see where this leads...maybe you can make some sense of it. She flopped back down onto the couch, enjoying the way the comfortable leather enveloped her body. “You gonna let your girlfriend out of her freeze or have you gotten into that whole without consent thing?”

“Now there is the dry sense of humor I expect from you,” and he tapped Melissa on the shoulder. The sudden return to motion made her crash into the counter, sending the phone flying to the floor. He promptly extended his hand and bowed low, his laughter ringing in Jess’s head. Melissa knocked his hand away and rolled against the cabinets, staggering back to her feet without ever letting her eyes leave Eric. Or whoever that is. She stood with her back to the refrigerator, her eyes frantically going between Eric and the entrance to the kitchen. He stepped back and spread his arms out to the sides. “You want through here? Nothing to it, Lissa. Just walk right by me.”

Jess watched the exchange and then looked at Eric’s back, feeling the waves of psychic energy rolling off him. Mel, just face him...go ahead, walk by. Look at me, and keep going. She could feel her immediate resistance before she said a word. Are you crazy? He has got something planned. I am not going to tick off evil guy here.
Jess really could not blame her for being hesitant. I know you have just met me, and I would not necessarily be all that trusting in this situation either, but I need you to just do this. We have to find out how serious he is, and if Eric has any control at all. Melissa remained motionless for a few seconds more, locked in a painfully tense staring contest with Eric. Jess held her breath without realizing it, hoping that somehow, things were not as bad as they seemed. She could almost see that hope shatter on the floor nearly a millisecond later.

Afterwards, she would swear that she did not understand how things happened the way they did. In fact, everything moved so fast that she was not even sure what happened first. Melissa bit her lip and dove toward the slim opening between Eric and the cabinet. She had almost made it when a sudden charge of energy bolted from Eric’s hand straight to Melissa’s head and the girl screamed, crashing onto the floor just inches from Jess. Eric whipped around and pointed his hands directly at his girlfriend and Jess watched as the blue energy between hands became a deeper blue, then purple, and finally an angry red.

He crouched beside her, making sure to space his hands on either side of her head, then lowered them so that the energy pulsed directly through her skull. Jess later remembered the screaming, and never realized that it came from her as well as Melissa. She lunged toward them, trying to break the energy field and somehow, she ended up on the opposite side of the room, trying to clear the annoying buzzing from her brain. The room went quiet. She looked up to find Eric towering over her, the field between his hands dissipated to a few erratic sparks. "Tell Sydney we have begun."

He was gone before she was finished processing the message. As the last few clouds passed through her mind, she stumbled across the floor to Melissa. The girl was lying tangled on the floor, a blank expression on her face. Jess pressed unsteady fingers to her throat, relieved to find the weak pulse there. "Melissa?" She was surprised at how quiet her voice was. She would
have expected panic. She gently touched the girl’s shoulder, feeling a chill go through her at the coldness of her skin. *She feels dead.* She tried again, this time shaking her arm, only to have Melissa’s head flop lifelessly against the carpet. Jess pushed herself away from the shell in front of her and pulled herself to her feet, using the couch for leverage. *Sydney,* she began, realizing that she was beginning to feel the shock she had been repressing, *you need to come to Eric’s. As in right now, or sooner. And tell everyone to stay away from Eric. He’s dangerous.*

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Mig was busy wiping down the last few tables, laughing at Anthony’s jokes and silently wishing the guy trying to pick Jamie up a hearty good luck. Of course, she was going to turn the guy down flat, and he half suspected that the poor man knew it, but he would never be able to live with himself if he did not at least go down trying. Jamie was the newest recruit to the psychic link scene, and if Amber and Sydney were right, perhaps the newest big player in the race for power. She was also the most popular choice of any and every breathing male in Michigan. Mig still did not know how a girl from Los Angeles ended up on the streets of Michigan, but he wasn’t going to complain. *Especially if she ends up at my house as much as she does...a guy would have to be dead to mind her being around.*

He watched as the guy finally realized he was shooting blanks, and took his drunken self home to the family that loved him, as pathetic as he was. He grinned as she hopped on up the table he had just finished cleaning. "Thought tonight was your night off, James." She tossed her trademark cocky grin at him and drummed her fingers on the glossy surface. "Would not want to leave you without your daily fix, now, would I?" She jumped back off and snatched the rag from his hands, quickly snapping him in the leg with it. "Actually, I had a weird stuff question." He ducked another attempt with the towel and glanced around, making sure their co-workers were otherwise occupied. "Shoot." She laughed. "That’s just the topic I had in mind. You didn’t happen to feel anything weird earlier, did you? Like a big power surge or something?" He shook his
head. "Nothing out of the ordinary, except Eric finding he could float pencils." She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. "Nah, it was bigger than that. And really recent, so I thought maybe something happened. Maybe I was tripping." She grinned again and blew him a kiss, turning toward the door. "So, I am going back out. You doing anything later?"

He made to come up with a reply that probably would have landed him a quick slam and an empty bed, but he was interrupted by what he had come to call the emergency broadcasting system. Guys, spread out, okay? Stay away from Eric, if you see him. Jess just said he has gone nuts or something. Sydney freaked out about it, and wants everyone to do the down under thing for awhile. He looked back up at Jamie, who had obviously heard the same message. "Guess you were right." She looked irritated, not thrilled at having her plans for the night interrupted by plans from above. "Yeah," she muttered, heading for the door. "If you need me, you know where I will not be." Mig quickly decided against returning home for the night, since Eric knew exactly where he lived, and he just was not in the mood for dealing with the guy’s enhanced abilities. He finished up the tables and grabbed his jacket, just getting outside the door before Jamie nearly ran him over. She motioned to the empty seat beside her. "Come one, get in. It is freezing out there." He slid in, mentioning that they were not really spreading out. "We are getting lost, though, and I doubt even Eric can find us where we are going."

He leaned back against the seat, trying to decide which god he was going to have to offer a sacrifice to in order to survive the driving. The silver car sped through the streets, heading for interstate on the outskirts of town. "Feel like leaving the country?" They were about half a mile from the exit when she suddenly yanked the car onto the shoulder and stopped, pounding her hands on the wheel in frustration. "This is just stupid. Did anyone ever consider that maybe he wants us to leave? Wants to get the link split up? Less power in more areas?" Mig never got a chance to answer, since she ripped the wheel left and spun gravel back onto the road. "We are going back."
Caren got the message just as she drifted off in the chair beside Amber’s bed. Amber’s fever had broken just as suddenly as it had arrived, and she appeared to finally be sleeping peacefully. Joker had crawled into bed beside her, keeping the small hand clasped tightly in his own. Caren had watched the couple for a few moments, beginning to feel the effects of the day, and decided that it could not possibly hurt to get sleep while she could. After she heard Meg’s voice, half excited, half fearful though, sleep was the farthest thing on her mind. She looked at Joker and knew he had heard the same thing, and they both realized what a target they made.

Both of their gazes fell on Amber at once, and by some unspoken signal she opened her eyes. *Did you guys hear that?* She decided to use telepathy for Joker’s convenience, ignoring the blistering pain in her head. *I need to get to Eric’s...*it is where Sydney is going to be, and you guys need to get out of here...*make it a little less easier to find you two.* She carefully swung her legs over the edge of the bed, doing her best to hide the swells of dizziness that overcame her. She felt Joker’s hand pull her back against him, and she struggled to pull away. *I am fine, Joker, and we just need to act on this, and then I will come back home, okay? Nothing to worry about.* She could tell by the look on his face that he didn’t believe a word she was saying. Caren broke in on the exchange then. *Sydney would not tell us to scatter for no reason. I think we should wait and see what is going on from a slightly less obvious location, then go and find him.* Although Joker didn’t really want Amber in on whatever was happening, he thought Caren had the better idea. There was no way Amber could go tangle with the bad stuff in the shape she was in.

Sydney stood, coming to tower over Elizabeth. “My daughter is not here anymore. You are not going to use her as your protection. They do not know much about the original groups, and it won’t do them any good. I do not know what you intended to do by coming here, but I
will tell you now, if you ever come back here, if you even attempt to make contact with anyone in my link, you'll never see another day.”

The older woman leaned back in her chair, seemingly unaffected by the quiet threat in Sydney’s voice. “Once that other link decides to go through with this, I will not be your biggest problem.” She calmly began gathering her coat. “In fact, I would not be at all surprised if you began to see the effects much sooner than you expect.” She rose and turned toward the door, pausing for a moment. “And Sydney? I am really quite sorry about Amber.”

She had not gone more than four steps before Sydney tossed her backwards against another desk. “I am not through with you yet.” She crashed painfully against the sharp metal edge, glaring up at Sydney through poison filled eyes. “You just do not get it, do you? One would think that by the time someone gets as old as you are, you would be able to discern what your real problems are.”

He came up beside her and sat down, idly rolling a pencil through his fingers. When he spoke, his voice was once again of the calm fatherly figure he so easily portrayed. “Tell you what, Elizabeth. You are right. We are both too old to be acting like this. We just need to talk about this civilly. You feel like telling me what is happening to Amber and what the plans are, and maybe I will feel like telling you what happened to your father.”

The glare in her eyes turned icy. Her father had disappeared over fifty years ago, trying to train someone with high ability and low control to be a useful member of a link. She had never really accepted the excuse, especially since it came from Sydney and his then-partner. It was no large secret that Sydney and her father had serious disagreements about the way links should be run. She personally always thought that Sydney had hooked up the wild card and her father to keep him out of the loop. The kid had been a perfect excuse: a strong cover under
which Sydney and his partner could take her father out of commission. She stared up at him.
“My father is dead, and knowing how he died will not bring him back.” *There, Liz, do not let him make you upset. Do not give him any ground.*

He nodded grimly. “Very true. However, I do not think you could live with yourself if you do not take the chance to find out. It would not hurt to have information, would it? The opportunity could be invaluable to you. It is your choice, of course, but really Elizabeth, missing is not always dead.” He took pleasure in watching her eyes fight through the waves of emotion. *Fear and anger...the two driving human emotions. People lose all sense of control when they are mad or frightened.* She eventually looked back up at him. “Can we go somewhere else?” He extended a hand and pulled her to her feet. “Where would you like to go?”

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*Mig stared at the trees whizzing by. “Maybe we should try to talk to them, use the phone or something.”* He was worried that they might be playing directly into Eric’s (*Is it even Eric? Or just someone using Eric?*) hands. Jamie drained the last of her coke and tossed the bottle into the backseat. “You wanna stop at the next gas station then?” He nodded, still watching the scenery fly by in the dim gleam of the headlights. “Okay then. Where are they supposed to be, anyway?”

“I have no idea, really. Last I heard, Caren had gone to Amber’s to see how she was doing, but I would think that they would be the first group to split up. Amber would make an easy target if she was still the way she was when she left the bar. Colin and the rest of the cowboy set was supposed to ride tonight, and they will be back working at the ranch. I guess there is plenty of space to hide on the land there.” *I hope they do not decide to play macho guys and group together or something.*
“Hey, cool! Rest stop!” Jamie yanked the wheel and the car headed off the exit ramp to the largely deserted stop. She popped the door open and looked back at Mig. “You coming in? I drank way too much coke.” He laughed and hopped out himself, looking eagerly toward the coffee vending machines and feeling in his jeans pockets for some change. She shut the door and jogged off in the direction of the barely lit bathroom sign.

A few minutes later, Jamie was still in the bathroom and Mig was beginning to swear at the machine. “Oh, come on! One cup, that is all. Nothing special, no flavors, no sugar, just coffee.” He leaned his forehead against the machine, only to jump back as a hand came from behind him and fisted the machine barely an inch below his head. A cup immediately popped out and began filling with the steaming liquid. “There you go, kid. Fresh hot motor oil to go.” Mig reached down and pulled the cup through the opening, turning to thank the man.

When Jamie came out of the bathroom, she could hear Mig talking with another man, whose voice was incredibly familiar. She hung back from the light, deciding instead to stick to and peer around the wall. The man beside Mig was half hidden in the shadows. Jamie had grown up in the ghettos of Los Angeles. She had learned early on to judge the next actions by the position the people were in, and unless she was way off, the guy was ready to cause some serious trouble.

Mig was leaning against the car hood, taking a cautious drink of the steaming cup. “Stuff really does taste like motor oil.” The man laughed, finally stepping into the light. “Well, Mig, motor oil works as well as anything else, I guess.” Jamie silently groaned and pushed herself deeper into the cold brick of the wall. Eric. Mig was no idiot, however, and he wasted no time in putting distance between himself and the man that had apparently went crazy earlier in the night. Years of living with an abusive alcoholic had taught the younger man speed, and he was locked in the front seat of the car before Eric had the chance to take another step. Jamie noticed
that he had positioned himself in the driver's seat, giving her the chance to slip away behind the building without him noticing. If Eric thought Mig was traveling alone, she had a better chance of getting help. She waited until Eric took the moment to be occupied with watching Mig and then rapidly crossed the space between the building and the grove of trees just to the right.

Mig sat in the front seat, his hands tapping on the wheel in front of him. *Caren? I think we have found Eric.* Eric shook his head and touched the door handle. Immediately, the door unlocked and it swung open. Mig sighed, resting his head against the back of the seat. Eric’s face peered in at him. “You going to come out of there?” Mig swung his legs out and slowly stood up, waiting for Caren’s answer. Eric walked over the coke machine and punched buttons. He twisted the cap off a Sprite and took a long swallow. “You know, Mig, it gives a guy a complex when all his friends are running from him. Really does not make my day.”

Mig rested against the door frame. “I can imagine,” he remarked dryly. “It must be something like having your friend suddenly go wacko. I can see where that might hurt your feelings.” He wanted to look for Jamie, but somehow he just knew that she had already figured out the game and was heading for the first possible way out. If he could just keep Eric busy for the next few minutes, maybe he could get Jamie out of there. “So what happened to you, man? You go from floating pencils to attacking your girlfriend? Decide to take a more active role in the world?”

Eric took another drink. “Yeah,” he said, “I think I did.” He looked around, scanning the nearly empty lot. “So where is Jamie?” Mig’s heart took a sudden nose dive. “I really do not know,” he answered. “You know Jamie, she just runs around all over.” And at the moment, I hope she is running the opposite direction. To his relief, Eric seemed to be appeased with that answer. “She will turn up. So, Mig, where were you going? A little late for a road trip, I think.”
Mig? What is going on? Caren’s voice was a relief, a relief which got bigger when Eric gave no indication of hearing her. Oh, not much. Jamie and I are just stuck in the middle of nowhere with Eric in an empty parking lot. Jamie has taken off, so it is just him and I right now, but what are we supposed to be doing with him? “I could ask the same question of you, Eric. You are kinda far from home.” Amber says to just go along with him. Get out when you can, without getting hurt, okay? Although Mig understood the need to keep the conversations short, he did not enjoy the quietness that signaled the end of the conversation.

“Look, Mig, I just want to talk with Amber and Sydney, okay? We do not have to do this the hard way. You know where Caren is. Caren is with Amber. Sydney is never far behind Amber. It is simple.” I wonder if just going along with him means to lead the guy directly to her. “Yeah, okay,” Mig said. “But I do not want to drive.” Eric smiled, his eyes gleaming. “Who said we were driving?”

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Joker’s eyes lingered on Amber as she carefully made her way across the floor to slip her feet into a pair of shoes. He took a quick glance at Caren, whose eyes were also following her friend’s movements. Caren was chewing on her bottom lip, her hands toying nervously with the bedspread. “Amber,” she began, “you are just not in any shape to take something else on. Why do we not just hide out and deal with it later? After you talk with the doctor some more?”

Amber turned back and slipped across the floor to hook an arm around Caren’s shoulders. “You and I both know it will not make a difference. I either wait and die here, or I can try to fight it out with whatever is going on. That way, I can at least make a difference, and make it better for the rest of you.” Caren swallowed hard, finally agreeing with her.
Amber turned to face Joker, accepting his tight embrace and rubbing her hands up and down his back. She pulled away, tipping his chin up so he could see her face. They often had an ongoing joke about stuff like that. Whenever Joker did not want to listen to something Amber had to say, he would squeeze his eyes shut and tease her, “I cannot hear you! I cannot hear you!” It never failed to break the tension from the argument and help them both laugh. She thought it would almost be nice to have that happen now, but as Joker raised his eyes to her face, she attempted a weak smile and gently brushed her thumb across his lips. “I told you it was going to be fine, Joker. It is supposed to happen this way.” He swallowed the lump in his throat and took her hand in his, squeezing tightly. She locked his gaze in hers. “I love you.” He smiled. “I know.”

She stood up then, reaching for Caren’s hand and joining it with Joker’s. “Now, the two of you, get going before I fry both your rears.” She looked back at Joker one more time, feeling the sharp sting of tears in the corners of her eyes. “Take care of each other until I get back, okay?” They nodded at the same time, Caren finally gently pulling Joker toward the door. Just before it closed behind them, Caren called back to the girl left standing in the middle of the room. “Promise me something, Am. If you need help, you will let us come back. You cannot do it on your own.” Amber watched the door close and heard the soft click, sitting hard on the bed in the near darkness of their room. She sat there for a moment more, listening to the sounds she had grown accustomed to.

*Sydney. I am going to meet Eric. Maybe you can meet me there.* She used the private channel the two of them shared. Minutes passed, with no response. *Then again, maybe not.* She took a deep breath, willing the steady pounding in her head to end. The brief respite was enough to get her up and moving again, and she stood in the middle of the room, carefully searching for a thread of Eric’s intentions. She finally located him, heading straight for her apartment, with Mig in tow. “Well,” she began, “since he is going to make this easier on me, I think I will just
wait on him to get here.” She sunk into the couch in the corner, giving herself a perfect view of the front door, but remaining hidden for at least a few minutes.

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Joker barely made it out the door before Caren started running, dragging him behind her. They flew into the parking garage and to the car before she slowed, giving him time to fish the keys out of his pocket. He started to ask her where she planned to go, especially in such a hurry, but she was already pushing him back towards the driver’s side. Once inside, he turned the key, and finally got a second to ask her what she was doing. “I know you are scared, but I do not think that running is going to do us any good.” She was impatiently waiting for the car to warm up. “No kidding, Joker. I want to get to Sydney’s house and those books, maybe figure this out before Eric meets up with Amber. She should at least know what she is going up against.” Joker threw the car in gear and backed out fast enough to make him suspect whiplash, squealing the tires on the asphalt. “Good thinking, kiddo.”

Colin? You out there? She glanced at the clock, realizing that she was probably waking him up. Then again, he had to have gotten the earlier message. She imagined he was probably already far into a field, combining work and a quick getaway. Eric would never willingly go on a long horseback ride, so Colin, Brian, and Meg were more than likely quite safe. Finally, the slightly groggy reply came stumbling back in. I am looking at the very beginnings of an incredible sunrise out here...not that I would do a lot of complaining if I suddenly ended up back in bed, but while I am out here, it sure is pretty. She smiled to herself, once again questioning how the waxing poetic man had ever ended up as a rough and tumble cowboy.

You guys needing some extra help up there? I could come in, and if Meg is not still out somewhere, she’d probably come too. In the car, minutes from Sydney’s apartment, she
drummed her fingers on the dashboard. *I am not turning down any extra help. Meet us at Syd’s in five?* She could almost see the grin cross his tired face. *Be there in four.*

Joker pulled into the lot below Sydney’s apartment, leaving black streaks on the pavement. Caren inwardly flinched at the screaming sounds, but was still out of the car nearly before it stopped running. Joker was left to wonder if she had been a track star in a past life as she sprinted across the lot and into the building.

Colin shook off the last vestiges of the astral projection fuzzies, as Meg called them, and strode through the door of Sydney’s nearly bare apartment, following the sounds of paper shuffling. The floor to the study looked like a minor tornado had gone through. *Hurricane Caren,* he thought, recognizing the brown head peeking over the top of a massive volume. She nodded to a stack of similar books near her feet. “You can start on these, if you want. We are looking for anything involving that link...past incidents, stuff like that. Connections, other than the obvious ones.”

He stared at the thick volumes, taking the top one and beginning to leaf through the pages. “Do not mean to be the voice of bad news, but there is a lot here to be looking through without a real clear definition of what we are looking for. Maybe we should ask around, see who can help.” He turned his attention to the lines of print flowing in front of him. If he knew his sister, she would be getting there as soon as she could. He almost felt bad, knowing that she had worked at the club all night, and had taken off as soon as she had heard the earlier warning. He had finally caught up with her at Kevin’s ranch, preparing to hide the rest of the day away in his spare room.

A solid ten minutes of silence passed. Joker finally tossed his book down, making Caren and Colin jump in surprise. It later occurred to him that maybe shocking tense people with
psychic ability was not the best plan. “This is just insane. We are sitting here making perfectly
good targets, and leaving Amber to fix this, when we know she is not able to... I think we should
just go there...there has to be strength in numbers.” Caren was shaking her head long before he
finished his sentence. “If we go in there, we are fighting blind and giving Amber more people to
cover for. That is not going to help her any in the long run.” Of course, sitting here in a big
group probably is not best course of action either. Might as well hang a sign. Hey, Eric, wanna
come get us all in one shot?

In the next second, Colin stepped forward to put a restraining arm on Joker, Caren found
the passage she had been looking for, and Jess and Jamie materialized literally on top of her.
Joker was almost thankful he did not hear the screech that came from the three of them, judging
by the look on Colin’s face. They barely took a moment to disentangle themselves before they
began speaking. Jamie blurted out, “Mig went with Eric to find Amber,” as Jess began, “I know
what is going on,” and Caren interjected, “I found it, and we are in trouble.” Of course, in the
commotion, although each girl knew exactly what she had said, the rest of the group heard
something along the equivalent of a dull roar.

“Well, ladies,” Colin began, “As interesting as that was, I have no idea what any of you
are saying.” They looked at each other for a second, trying to measure who had said the most
important thing. Jess finally stood up, making sure Joker could see her face. “I think I win,
guys. When I asked for help earlier, a woman had come to talk to me about this whole
conference thing. When Sydney showed up, he was really angry with her being there...but she
was talking about some kid that he killed a long time ago, and this group managed to put
themselves back together with a new leader. They are after Amber as retribution.” The words
sunk into everyone’s minds at the same time.
Caren was the first to recover her voice. "That actually makes sense. Right before you two landed on me, I found a passage about that group Eric and Amber went to check out. They are descendants of the original evil seven, I think, and someone—I am guessing that girl Syd thought was the leader—managed to dredge up the power that Sydney was trying to demolish. I am still not sure exactly how she did it, but once Eric was inside, they all focused their channeling ability on him and transferred the power over."

Jess was quickly agreeing. "It would make sense. It is common knowledge that the fastest way to take down a link is to attack it from the inside. They knew we would have to watch the conference, and we would be ready for an outside attack. Plus, you add in that belief that your own people will not turn against you, and you have a nice, easy battle plan." Jamie leaned heavily against the couch. "So why would Eric wipe out his girlfriend and not kill Mig? I mean, why the work on someone who couldn't do anything to start with?"

"Potential," Joker answered. "They had to test their work, make sure Eric could not override the power and get help from Sydney. If you ask me, Mig is insurance. You see, they are going to play on Amber's humanity. They know she could not just destroy Mig without knowing how involved he was, and in the time it takes her to make a decision, Eric can kill her." Beside him, Jamie shook her head. "I think there is more to it that. Eric seemed more like he needed something from Mig."

"A pick-up man," Colin said. He did not realize he had spoken aloud until he noticed the four blank stares. "Like when I ride...the guy who comes up after the buzzer and picks me off the horse? Maybe the power is only good in a person for so long...especially since it does not really belong there, and they have to switch it off to another person." Caren rapidly flipped pages. "That is a good point. Did not Sydney and Amber put in some provisional about negative
energy getting in our links? It gets kicked out after so long?” Jamie grinned and smacked her hand against the couch. “And when it does, we nail ‘em.”

“Has anyone heard from Sydney, speaking of the guy? It is strange that he has not said a word to me since I left him.” Everyone shook their heads. Jess flinched and quietly sent out a question to the older man. Sydney, if you are out there, we could really use your help. She waited for a moment, getting no answer. Guess we go it alone then. She turned to face them all. “Time to head for Amber’s.”

Sydney took his time driving to Elizabeth’s house. He was trying to build the tension the woman was feeling, hoping that it would force her to talk without considering the other consequences. Not that he would not hesitate to wipe her out if she did not tell him what he needed to know, but he preferred the easier method. Besides, Jess had been right. Dead people did not communicate well. He snapped back to attention when he noticed her staring at him. “So all this time taught you how to drive slower than time moves.” So you have been watching what I am doing? I guess you have been paying more attention that I gave you credit for.

He smiled grimly, and eased his foot off the accelerator a little more, feeling strangely satisfied when she flopped back onto the seat, noisily sighing in frustration. “I cannot believe you sometimes. As old as you are, and you still resort to these childish tricks! Look, you want to waste time, fine. Waste all the time you want. My father is not coming back, regardless of if and what you tell me. But you are looking at losing Amber, old man, and Jess, and God knows who else if you do not put a stop to this.” Her head snapped back when his foot punched the gas pedal and they careened around a corner, racing down the street to her house.
"That was certainly faster," she said, trying to pull her keys from her purse as he dragged her toward the front door. He glanced at her impatiently and looked hard at the door, striding through it as the door swung open. Elizabeth had no choice but to go along, considering he was nearly pulling her arm off. He finally let go, causing her to fall onto the overstuffed chair by the fireplace. "I am only going to say this once. Do not even consider trying to bluff me or get my attention elsewhere. Whatever you know about Amber and Jess, now is the time to tell me."

As he stood in front of her, Elizabeth remembered the last time she had seen Sydney in full battle mode. She had been relatively young, and she knew Amber had been as well. In fact, it was probably only the second time the younger girl had faced trouble of this kind. All through Elizabeth’s training, she had been taught that her elder would not save her, that it just was not possible to risk all the power for a fledgling trainee. She remembered the look on Sydney’s face whenever he glanced at Amber, how he positioned himself between the problem and his daughter. She knew right then that they would have a tough time beating them. They had more power in their ability with the closer link than the Elizabeth’s looking out for themselves ever could have.

She was not even sure why she had approached Jess in the first place. Really, she should just let this happen. *I suppose I could blame it on not wanting to be on the receiving end of Sydney’s anger.* She took a deep breath and motioned to the couch. "You might as well sit down." He did, although his posture was more suggestive of a mountain lion waiting to spring. "You know Sara—the girl you and Amber thought was in charge. She managed to tap into that power you thought you destroyed. They had been planning on just wearing her down, with the brain tumor thing, but then once she found that, they just allowed you to find out about it, knowing you would send Amber, and since she is sick, she would bring someone else. Whoever went with her would be the vessel for the power, so to speak."
She paused for a breath. "It is really bad that it is Eric, you know. He is just too undisciplined to fight it very well, and once it leaves him, it will be stronger now, especially since it will have the ability Eric gets from your link. Plus Amber is already weak, which Eric knows, and the power has all his knowledge, so he will know exactly where to strike. Once Amber is done, he will go for Jess, and then he will go back and wait for you."

"Why not just come straight for me, then?" Sydney was back on his feet, pacing the floor. Elizabeth expelled the breath she had been holding. She was really quite surprised to still be alive herself, considering that until about five hours ago, she had been in on the planning sessions for all this. "You are still stronger than that power. It has been around forever, but it has not had any chance to get stronger, or even get controlled. You could more than likely win, especially if you had Amber with you. If you are angry, if you are not thinking straight, then you will make mistakes. Come on, Sydney, you know how this works. Emotion decreases your ability."

He stopped, mid-pace, and spun to face her. "Then if we are all there to back Amber up, we could take it." He headed for the door, once again taking hold of her arm. "You are coming with me." She let herself be drug back in the car, not saying a word until they were zipping through the streets again. "There is something else you should know," she began. He groaned, turning his head slightly toward hers. "You cannot just eliminate the power this time. You have to kill the vessel." Sydney turned back to the road, his face set. "I set guards in place against that. I just need the time to keep her busy until the power gets kicked out."

She looked at the clock glowing brightly on the dash. "You planning on driving there? Because if so, you might want to go a little faster. He will be there any minute, if I am right." He rolled his eyes and pulled into the first parking lot, getting ready to send them both via Caren’s favorite method of travel. "This is different," she said, before he could gather his
concentration. "This is not something some idiot cooked up as a chance of getting into your link. It has been planned for hundreds of years, and they can get right by your guards. You have too many holes in your link." She barely got the sentence finished before she felt the familiar twinge, then disappeared into nothingness for a moment.

Jess had been exceptionally quiet during the entire ride back to Amber's apartment. Caren finally spun around from the front seat, perching her knees on the seat and facing the silent girl. "Jess?" she began, uncertain if this was the time or place. "What happened back there? Is Melissa dead, or just out of it for awhile, or sleeping, or what?" Jess finally looked up at her, her eyes a painful shade of red. "I do not really know if she is dead beyond what Amber and Sydney can do, but for right now, she is just not there. And I could not do anything to help her." Her shoulders shook for a second, before she continued. "What if I cannot do anything here? Everyone knows I do not have the active ability."

Since Caren had been wondering along much the same lines, she was at a loss for words. She searched for a moment, finally deciding on earlier advice she had received. "We keep the faith, Jess. And then, to quote Jamie, we nail 'em." She was relieved when Jess broke into a smile, even if it was lost in the fear in her eyes. *And we hope and pray Syd gets here.* She returned to the normal position as Joker pulled into the lot, followed by Jamie and Colin. They were all silent as they entered the building, using some unspoken set of signals to get to the apartment.

Jamie did not realize how many stairs there were until she climbed them in the complete darkness, trailing behind Colin and having plenty of time to think about the coming meeting. She really hoped Eric was not already waiting for them in the apartment, with a dead or half-dead Amber. It was not that she had not seen plenty of her friends die, with gang fights and
drug busts and all, but she had more control over those situations. Although she knew she had
the ability within her, she also knew she did not stand a chance against someone who had
practiced for years. She also knew that the link she was in would give it everything they had to
protect someone. It was a new feeling for her.

Joker never hesitated when he reached their floor. He strode directly to the door and
turned the knob, walking in without looking around. He instinctively turned toward the couch
where Amber was half-hidden in the shadows. She immediately rose and met him in the middle
of the room, taking in the crowd behind him. "I cannot believe you guys, " she said, shaking her
head. "This is dangerous stuff. You should not be here."

"Funny," Colin drawled, swinging a long leg over the chair. "You never seem to realize
that when you are saving us. And this time, kiddo, I think we know a little better than you what
to expect." As Amber turned too fast to argue with him, the dizziness in her head finally won
and she would have fallen to the floor, if Joker had not been fast on the draw. "We are definitely
in better shape," Jamie put in. "You are not going to last a minute on your own."

"Well, Mig, would you look at this? Someone had a party and they forgot to invite us."
Caren thought she heard popping as everyone swung their heads toward the figures in the open
doorway. Eric was leaning casually against the frame, a smile on his face. Beside him, Mig
shifted uncomfortably, looking apologetically at Caren. She offered him a smile, trying to
convey the understanding. "Sorry," Jamie snapped back, "but this party was not bring your own
murderer."

"Ouch," he replied. "Might hurt someone with that mouth, Jamie." She made to move
forward, only to have Caren's hand latch onto her forearm, giving her patented don't-be-stupid
squeeze. "So what iss everyone doing?" He strode into the room, making everyone involuntarily
step back. “You know, it looks like a planning session. Which, if you are planning to stay out of my way and then join me later, is a good idea. Anyone who has a different idea might want to check their life insurance.” As if to punctuate his statement, he raised his hands and began bouncing light energy back and forth.

“Oh, cut out the light shows already,” Jamie said, stepping between Eric and the still-recovering Amber. “Just get to it, okay? The whole I-want-world-domination and all that?” Eric laughed, a chilling sound that made Caren flinch. “If that is the way you want it, I am more than happy to oblige.” He glanced around, his gaze lingering on each of them for a few seconds. “Who is first?” Once again Jamie stepped forward, only to have Colin stand at the same time. “We act together, man, so it is all or nothing.” He nodded to Jess, who joined him standing up, then Caren, then Mig, and finally Joker and Amber. “You cannot have her without us.”

Eric looked at Mig for a moment. “You sure about that choice, buddy? I can give you a lot more.” Mig considered his words carefully. “Not really.” Eric shrugged. “Have it your way.” He smiled then, the smile that Jess recognized from their earlier encounter. Watch it guys, he really enjoys doing this.

Almost immediately the same blue energy blots came from his hands and headed directly for Jamie, who ducked a second too late, and crashed against the wall. She wasted no time in getting up and promptly returned a round at him. Mig realized his opportunity and concentrated hard, sending smaller but equally effective twin blasts after Jamie’s. Good, guys, keep it coming. The rest of us should make it harder... block for each other and get moving... split up and make him work, Caren sent. She grinned and dove for the floor, using the only ability she had ever really mastered: the power to prevent attacks, or shield. As long as he was not shooting at her, she could easily shield the attackers and let them reserve their energy.
Amber was moving slower than she would have liked, but she still managed to keep some powerful shots heading his way. Granted, the pain in her head increased each time, but the ones that hit home were doing well. Colin was doing his best to shield and shoot at the same time, although he just did not have the efficacy the others did. He was still concerned that the fire fight was going to end up with more bad than good. *Maybe we can focus on just closing him in, instead of shooting.* He quickly abandoned that thought as one of Eric’s marks hit home, causing him to land on his back on the floor. He could feel the tingling in every part of his body.

Caren made to dash from the under the table at the same time that Sydney finally arrived. “All right! The cavalry!” she yelled, before another bolt smashed the area directly above her head, sending her scuttling back underneath. Sydney ran into the room, shouting in a language they had never heard, and immediately all activity stopped. Elizabeth ducked into a corner, trying to make herself as unseen as possible. By an unspoken signal they all moved into more neutral positions. Caren knew that Jamie was directly in front of her, and still ready to fight. She could see the heaving of Joker’s chest, and knew he was ready to rip Eric apart for even considering hurting Amber. Sydney stood inches from Eric, both men sizing each other with even stares.

“This ends. Tonight.” Sydney stated, and held up his hands directly in front of Eric’s face. The other man tried to duck away, but his power was draining fast, and he was not able to block the older, more experienced man. Sydney yelled over his shoulder to everyone in the room, “He cannot fight this much longer— you shield yourselves so this power cannot jump to someone else and start all over again. It is going to look like a glowing ball, so just do not move and let me handle it.” Eric struggled to raise his hands, and in the second it took everyone to realize that Sydney would kill Eric to save Amber, managed to get out one last burst of energy that went directly to its intended target. Joker had enough time to watch Amber stagger
backwards, and then true to Sydney’s words, a brightly glowing smoke flowed out of Eric and he collapsed limply to the floor.

For a second, no one moved. The glow moved to the center of the room, and Caren crossed her fingers and prayed that everyone’s shields held up. Sydney dropped his hands and walked underneath it, reaching up and waving one hand through it. It immediately curled around his hand and he pulled it in front of him. He repeated the words he had said earlier, and slowly it wrapped around his arm, becoming a solid part of him. “Are you crazy?” Jess nearly screamed. “It is all right,” he returned. “I just changed what it is used for.”

Joker and Colin were on the floor by Amber. Caren decided she would never forget the look on Joker’s face. For the years to come, she would often wake up to the same recurring nightmare, and that expression was a large part of it. He looked up at Sydney, his eyes pleading. “Change this then.” Sydney stiffened and knelt on the floor by her head, placing his altered hand on her chest. They watched as the light suffused throughout her body, and she turned to Joker, her eyes opening just the slightest bit. “Hey,” he got out, before he nearly squeezed her to death.

As they turned away from the more private moment, Caren was feeling Eric’s throat for a pulse. “You did not kill him, if that is what you were planning to do.” Sydney shook his head. “He will not ever do any of this again, but he will live.” He turned toward the corner where Elizabeth was hiding. “The vessel is technically destroyed. His abilities are gone, so what carried the power is gone as well. He will be fine once he wakes up.”

“What are you going to do with that?” Jess asked, gesturing toward his arm. “Take it away for good,” he answered. “You guys keep things under control for awhile, all right? I am going to be gone for some time. I have someone to look up.” He headed for the door, gesturing towards Elizabeth. “I know someone who will be very happy to see you.”
Epilogue

Caren ran full tilt into the bar, waving a thick packet of paper. “Look who got the highest grade in her class!” She skidded onto a bar stool, practically shoving the papers under Mig’s nose. “Hey, that is great!” he said, pouring a celebratory drink. “It will be good news to announce at Amber’s party tonight.”

“Oh, God, I almost completely forgot!” she groaned. “It has been so busy lately.” She downed the glass in one gulp, laughing at Mig’s expression. “What? It is a long run from my apartment to here!” The bell over the door rang and she turned to see Eric slip in. It had been almost five months since that night, and Caren still had not quite gotten over the twinge she got seeing him. Still, she motioned to the empty seat beside her and smiled.

“How is the commander doing?” she asked. He grinned. “Finally out of Melissa’s bad graces.” Mig laughed, asking how many dinners that took. “None, actually...just having Amber and Jess fix her and then, of course, this did not hurt,” as he pulled small black box from his jacket pocket. “I hope she was not scared to say no!” They all laughed, and turned the topic of discussion to the business at the bar and the upcoming party.

Joker slid an arm around Amber’s shoulders as she talked with Jamie about the latest practice session. In the five months since the attack, Amber had been headache free. The doctors called it a miracle. They called it daily life. He knew she wondered where and how Sydney was.
but they rarely discussed the topic. Once he was gone, her abilities came back in full force, allowing her to undo the damage Eric had caused to Melissa, even helping her to get over the fear that had accompanied it.

Throughout the night, people dropped in and out of the apartment. As members of the link stopped to talk to each other, they shared a secret smile. Five months to the day, and ever since, not a single problem. Life was back to normal, or at least as normal as it could be in a world where the paranormal was ordinary. Colin, Brian, and Meg arrived directly from the rodeo, their boots and jeans a sharp contrast to the dresses and suits of the room. “How did it go?” Caren asked, ignoring the smears of mud on Colin’s jeans. He laughed. “Exactly as it always does.”

Finally, they were the only people present. Eric and Melissa claimed the couch, while Joker and Amber took the chair and the rest of them found spots on the floor, while Mig played bartender from the kitchen. They were engaged in a loud discussion over the merits of tequila over vodka when the door swung open and Sydney strode in. There was complete silence for a solid minute, finally broken by Amber’s scream and Jess’s charge across the room. He remained silent, looking around the room at each of them. “I am not staying.” Amber looked up, startled. “It is over for me now. You will understand soon enough.” He handed Caren a smaller book and smiled. “This will explain most everything.” The door was closed as fast as it had opened.

Caren immediately ripped open the cover, scanning the lines of text as fast as possible. When she was finished, she looked up at the expectant faces above her. “I hope you have all had a nice vacation, because we have got a new player to deal with.” The silence of the room was quickly broken by the a collective groan. Melissa bolted from the couch and landed on the floor beside Caren, reading the words over her shoulder. When she finished, she promptly smacked the younger girl’s shoulder. “Are you nuts? You are going to give us all heart attacks.” Caren
laughed, handing the book up to Amber. “Just working on job security. It is just a collection of what happened here, all the details and stuff.”

“So what does that have to do with Sydney? He does the report, so he does not have to come back? If I would have known that was the case, I would have done it earlier.” Jess said, sliding over to read over Amber’s shoulder. The older girl finished the page, and smiled. “No, he just wanted to leave us with better instructions. I think Syd finally made peace with some of his demons, or at least got rid of the ones that followed him this far.” She looked at the girl by her feet. “You ready to do all the recording from now on?”

Caren nodded, glancing over at Mig. “If he does not mind doing all the proofing, I do not mind at all.” Mig raised his glass in salute. “As long as someone shows me how to do that whole airmail thing.” As they began discussing all the techniques they still wanted to learn, Amber slipped into the next room, taking the book with her. Joker immediately followed, touching her back gently to let her know he was there. He traded for Elizabeth’s father, you know, and he gave all his stuff to me. I am it now. He rubbed her shoulders and rested his chin on the top of her head. Would not want to argue with you now, but I think the phrasing on that should be we are it now. She turned back to face him, looking through the open door to the room full of her link. “I think you are right.”