

Operation: Snowball



REVOLUTION

by MultiMapper

Revolutions Universe

Paradise 2 - Operation: Snowball

**Copyright 2016 - 2021 by MultiMapper
and The Revolutions Universe Partnership**

All Rights Reserved

Chapter 1

Alvin had become accustomed to working long hours and grabbing a few hours of sleep when it was absolutely necessary for him to do so. However, this day was different in that he couldn't seem to get fully to sleep because something was nagging at the back of his mind.

Finally giving up, he went to his computer to go over all the relevant facts one more time in hopes of discovering whatever had been eluding him.

"Alvin, please excuse the interruption, but I believe that I may have just uncovered something rather disturbing." Daisy said suddenly, breaking him out of his concentration.

"That's fine, Daisy. What have you come up with?" Alvin asked as he maintained his gaze on the various maps on the screens in front of him.

"By all indications, enemy forces are massing to stage an offensive."

"Yes. I'm aware of that. I'm just trying to figure out what they're up to."

"From the way that they're staging their assets, I have concluded that they're planning to launch a major offensive against Edwards Air Force Base. But that's not what's concerning me."

Alvin quickly looked over the maps, before saying, "You're right. From where they've positioned themselves, Edwards would be the perfect target. Hold on while I contact them."

"As I said before, that's not what's concerning me." Daisy informed him rather urgently.

Alvin finished his high-speed spate of typing before asking, "What's bothering you?"

"From all the information that's been gathered, there appears to be a very deliberate effort to stage a sustained battle. They're not planning on winning, they're planning on keeping us busy and distracted." Daisy said somberly.

"What do you think their *actual* target is?" Alvin asked as he looked at his maps again.

"I have insufficient information upon which to base a cogent theory. But it stands to reason that if they're trying to keep our attention diverted, that it would make most sense"

for them to launch either a surgical strike or covert incursion team to achieve their actual objective." Daisy said somberly.

Alvin looked over the maps again, then paled as he said, "If this is that important to them, then that might also explain their recent activity in the south."

"That would seem to be a reasonable conclusion." Daisy agreed.

"I'd better alert the commanders along the border to brace for an attack." Alvin said as he started typing again.

"Agreed. But I believe that this is yet another distraction. Perhaps we should consider dispatching a team from here to deal with whatever is the true objective." Daisy carefully suggested.

"Everyone's stretched pretty thin right now. Actually, that might be another part of their strategy. If we're fighting on all fronts, that makes it the perfect time for them to launch a new offensive." Alvin said consideringly.

"I hope you'll forgive my presumptuousness, but I've compiled a list of available personnel that could be dispatched to deal with a developing situation." Daisy said as she opened a window on one of Alvin's less important screens.

"Some of these people aren't medically fit for combat." Alvin said as he looked over the list.

"If it comes down to a hand-to-hand struggle, then we've probably already lost. We need people with experience on the ground to assess the situation and make split-second decisions." Daisy said seriously.

"You know what? I'm just going to go with you on this. There's a chance that the forces massing to attack Edwards aren't anything more than they appear to be. But in the event that you're right, and that they're trying to achieve some greater goal, we might be grateful to have a team in the air once we've discovered what their actual target is." Alvin said as he began typing again.

There was a moment of nothing but clickety-clicking sounds in the air as he typed, then he suddenly said, "Daisy, contact Fairchild Air Force Base and let them know that we're going to need a C-130 ready to take off ASAP."

* * * * *

"Does anyone know what our mission is?"

"We were just told to scramble."

"Everyone, get strapped in, we're waiting for one more person to arrive. We're going to take off as soon as he's aboard."

"Yes sir!"

"It would help us to prepare if we knew what our mission was."

"Right now, our mission is to get into the air. As soon as I know more, I'll pass it on."

* * * * *

"Do we have anyone here who knows the communications equipment?"

"Yes sir. Staff Sergeant Barnes, I'm an IT specialist."

"Go to the forward compartment and get your equipment up and running. We're supposed to report directly to Colonel Hayes as soon as we're in the air."

"Yes sir."

"Lieutenant Miller?"

"Yes sir."

"According to this, it looks like you're my second in command. So far the only information I have about our mission is this roster. Take a minute to verify that we've got the right people."

"Yes sir."

* * * * *

"Major Stanley?"

"Yes. What is it Lieutenant?"

"We seem to have someone aboard that's not on the list."

"Oh, yes. The list I gave you was Air Force personnel. Sergeant Douglas was brought in from the outside to be included on this mission. He was the one that we were waiting for."

"He looks so young. What's his specialty?"

"All I know about him is his name."

"Would you like for me to ask him?"

"Until we know what our mission is, I can't see that it matters."

"Yes sir."

* * * * *

"Major Stanley?"

"Yes Sergeant?"

"I've established a secure connection with Colonel Hayes."

"Good work."

"He insisted that I remain here while you're being briefed, for security reasons."

"Understood."

* * * * *

It took incredible effort for Major Stanley to achieve a standing position. He never had a moment of regret for the actions he had taken in the heat of battle which led to his injuries. And he was grateful that the field medics and doctors had been able to keep him alive and eventually patch him back together.

But the nearly constant pain and new physical limitations imposed on him sometimes made him feel that it would be better if he had chosen to take the easier path and continue his military career behind a desk.

As Major Stanley slowly walked into the forward cabin, his eyes went wide with surprise when he saw the man looking back at him from the laptop computer screen.

"Mr. President?"

"Major Stanley, let me be frank with you, there is a situation developing and I have the feeling that time isn't on our side."

"Yes sir."

"Edwards Air Force Base has just reported that they are under heavy attack."

"I don't see what good a handful of airmen will be in that type of conflict."

"None whatsoever. The fact of the matter is that we were anticipating the attack, as well as increased activity along our southern border. But it has been suggested that all of this chaos might have been staged to mask another objective, a covert incursion into our territory."

"Do you know what the target is?"

"Not yet. But from the way things are developing, I'm expecting them to make their move anytime now." The president said seriously.

After a moment to consider, Major Stanley cautiously asked, "And once you've determined their objective, you're going to divert us to try and stop them?"

"As soon as we've determined what the target area is, we'll dispatch the appropriate troops to mitigate the situation. Your group is in the air so that you will be the first on the ground to evaluate the target and report back so that we can determine the appropriate response before we're committed to a course of action."

"Yes sir. You can count on us."

"From this point forward, you and your team will be coordinating with Colonel Hayes. Don't be put off by his young age. He's the one who alerted me to the possibility of an attack on Edwards. He's aware of the bigger picture and other ongoing operations and may be able to put the pieces together with the information you provide him. I'm going to hand you off to him right now to continue your mission briefing."

"Yes sir. Thank you sir."

Major Stanley watched as the president leaned forward and pressed a button, then the screen split to show a bright-eyed boy looking back at him.

"Alvin, it's in your hands now. Contact me if you need anything."

"Yes sir. I will." Alvin said professionally.

The president nodded once, then his side of the call disconnected and the view on the computer went full screen with Alvin's image.

"Major, before we start, I need to explain something to you. The enemy forces wouldn't go to all this trouble unless they were promised a worthwhile return on their investment. That means that they'll be willing to fight to the death to achieve their goals. Your primary mission is to gather intelligence for us. Once we've determined what their true objective is, we can react appropriately. Go in, gather intel and report back. That's the mission."

"Yes... sir." Major Stanley finished uncertainly.

"If you can't make yourself say it, you can just call me Alvin. We don't have time to be screwing around with age-based prejudices."

"No thank you sir. I'll find a way to manage. What else can you tell me?"

"Not much. We don't know where or what their objective is. The most that we can do is be prepared. That's why I've chosen the team that I have for you. You have experts in weapons, tactics, explosives, bioterrorism, and a few more things that you hopefully won't be needing."

"I noticed on the roster that I have two Security Force officers. Do they have some specialized training that I should know about or are they just here to provide a police presence?" Major Stanley asked cautiously.

"I was thinking that if you happened to secure an enemy combatant, that they might be of use to you." Alvin said frankly.

"What about the other one... Douglas. What specialty does he have that was important enough to delay the entire operation?" Major Stanley asked curiously.

"I'm afraid that that's on a need-to-know basis, Major. At this point in time, you don't need to know. But if a time comes when Sergeant Douglas feels that it is appropriate to do so, he will brief you on that."

"Understood."

"Major, if that time does come, I'm asking that you put aside any misgivings that you might have and listen to what he has to say. Remember that I *chose* him for a reason. Even if what he tells you sounds impossible, trust in what I'm telling you now. Trust in the president's judgement."

"Yes, sir." Major Stanley said confidently.

"Good. That's all, then. If you'll investigate the cargo area, you should find that you have weapons, explosives, full containment gear for a biohazard or hazmat situation and equipment to deal with a dozen or so other worst case scenarios. I suggest that while you have the time, you and your team get familiar with the tools at your disposal."

"We'll do that."

"Major, you and your team are my top priority right now. Call me if you need *anything*. I'll see that you'll have it as quickly as I can get it to you." Alvin said firmly.

"I get the feeling that you have some idea what this is all about, otherwise you wouldn't be placing so much importance on this one mission."

"No, Major. Actually, I don't. That's one of the things that's bothering me the most. When you look at the resources being thrown at the diversion that the enemy forces are kicking up, it must be something really important to them. So whatever this turns out to be, we've got to make sure that they don't get it."

"I'll consider that to be another part of our mission objective." Major Stanley said soberly.

"You do that. But the information is the most important thing that we need right now. Once we have that, we'll know what other actions are possible."

"Yes sir."

"Hey, you almost said that without choking on it this time." Alvin chuckled.

"Practice makes perfect."

"Hayes, out." Alvin said with a smile before the screen went blank.

Major Stanley took a moment to consider his orders before leaving the forward communications area.

* * * * *

Major Stanley walked back to the main cabin, putting forth the extra effort to walk normally, hiding the evidence of his decrepit physical state. As he entered the room, he noticed that his team were all standing in formation, awaiting his return.

"For those of you who don't know me, I'm Major Stanley. I've received our mission briefing. The stage seems to be set for the enemy to launch forces into our territory to achieve some sort of goal, most likely by means of a covert insurgence or strike team. Our job is to discover what they're really after and report back to base so that troops can be dispatched to prevent them from getting it, whatever it is."

"So we're just supposed to investigate and report back; not intervene?" Lieutenant Miller asked to confirm.

"At this stage of things, that's the plan. As we begin to understand what we're dealing with, it may be necessary to redefine our objectives."

"Any clue about what type of situation we're going to be walking into?"

"None." Major Stanley said simply, then continued, "I don't know any of you and there's a very real possibility that I'm going to need to call on you and depend on you in the very near future. Would each of you introduce yourselves and state your specialty so we'll all know who to go to when we need your expertise?"

"Yes sir. I'm Second Lieutenant Paul Miller. I spent eight years in the Air Force as a munitions specialist, then I've spent the last six years doing architectural design in the civilian world. When Ashwood started attacking, I re-upped."

"Good to have you aboard." Major Stanley said firmly, then looked around the group as he said, "Lieutenant Miller is my second in command. If he tells you something, it's the same as hearing it from me."

After a long silent moment had passed, Major Stanley looked to the next person in line. He felt an immediate kinship with the man. This was a seasoned veteran. Even without the scar tissue visible on the left side of his face, Major Stanley would have known from the war-torn weary look in the man's eyes.

"Chief Master Sergeant Eddie Carrol. Military weapons and tactics." The man said smartly and Major Stanley couldn't help but respect the man's professionalism.

Major Stanley responded with a firm nod in Chief Carrol's direction, then looked toward the next person in line.

"Master Sergeant Courtney Green. Logistics and resource allocation."

Although he did his best to hide it, Major Stanley was a little surprised. If he were to guess, he'd say that Sergeant Green probably worked in an office or behind a desk for her entire military career. But to her credit, she carried herself well, looking professional and prepared to do whatever needed to be done.

He betrayed no expression and said nothing as he looked to the next person in line.

"Technical Sergeant Melissa Strickland, IED and explosives expert."

Major Stanley had heard Sergeant Strickland's name mentioned before. Although he couldn't remember what he had heard verbatim, the gist of it had been that she was not only knowledgeable on a technical level, but also had gained a wealth of experience in the field.

In meeting her for the first time, Major Stanley felt confident that she would be an asset to the team.

A nod from Major Stanley prompted the next person in line to say, "I'm Captain Molly Stewart and I'm a flight surgeon."

"I'm used to having to make do with a field medic. Having a doctor along will be something of a luxury." Major Stanley said with a quick smile at her. He owed a debt to

the doctors and medics that he could never adequately repay and would always treat them with the utmost respect.

He looked past Captain Stewart to the first of the two uniformed Security Force officers.

"Senior Airman Thomas Day, Security Force." The man said smartly.

"You know, when you're deployed, you should wear your BDU's." Major Stanley said in a more informative than chastising tone.

"We were at our duty stations when the orders came through. We didn't want to delay takeoff, sir."

Rather than give a response, Major Stanley turned his inquiring gaze toward the next man in line.

"Senior Airman Jared Greer, Security Force."

Major Stanley let his eyes drop disapprovingly to the man's uniform before looking toward the final person in line.

"Master Sergeant Douglas, United States Army, on loan."

Although Major Stanley had intellectually known that Sergeant Douglas was young, he was taken aback at just *how* young the string bean of a boy was.

"What's your specialty, Sergeant Douglas?" Major Stanley asked, trying to maintain the same tone of voice that he had used with the others.

"Weapons, sir."

Major Stanley let his dubious gaze settle on Sergeant Douglas for a moment, then said to the entire group, "Until the enemy makes a move, we won't know our exact destination. Use this time to familiarize yourselves with the equipment that's been provided. Dismissed."

* * * * *

"Major Stanley, I've received an encoded communication from Colonel Hayes."

"What is it?"

"Just two words. 'Hoover Dam'."

"If they're trying for maximum devastation, that would do it."

"Yes sir."

"Lieutenant Miller!"

"Yes sir."

"I need to go forward and talk to the pilots for a moment. I've just received word of the target, Hoover Dam. Let the team know. Once you have them on task, get with Sergeant Barnes and see what you can come up with as far as blueprints. If they're planning to bring it down, we need to know where the weak points are."

"Yes sir."

* * * * *

After telling the pilots their destination and asking them to try and find a place to land as close to the dam as possible, Major Stanley stopped in the forward cabin where Sergeant Barnes had established communications.

"Were you able to find what you need in regards to the dam?" Major Stanley asked Lieutenant Miller as he approached.

"These blueprints aren't very detailed, but I think they're good enough for me to get a general idea of the most likely locations to place charges if you wanted to bring it down." Lieutenant Miller said thoughtfully.

"Sergeant Barnes, contact Colonel Hayes and ask him if he can get us more detailed and up-to-date blueprints. We need to know as much as possible going in." Major Stanley said firmly.

"Yes sir." Sergeant Barnes immediately responded.

"Excuse me sir, but I have a feeling that there's more to this than what we're seeing at first glance." Lieutenant Miller said cautiously.

"How so?"

"If their objective were *really* to bring down the Hoover Dam, they could just bomb it from the air. I don't see the advantage of creating a diversion or sending an incursion team." Lieutenant Miller said frankly.

"So you believe that this might be yet another distraction?" Major Stanley asked slowly.

"Possibly. I don't know what their true objective might be, but this seems to be a lot of wasted effort to take out one non-military target. They could accomplish the same thing with a simple air strike."

"I suppose that that's why we were scrambled instead of just sending in a bunch of fighters. We need to find out what they're really after."

"Yes sir."

"Is the rest of the team taking stock of our gear?"

"Yes sir. Since we know our destination, we're placing more of an emphasis on the equipment dealing with explosives and demolition."

"Sir, I have an incoming file from Colonel Hayes. They're the most detailed, up-to-date blueprints of the Hoover Dam that he has access to." Sergeant Barnes said quickly.

"Thank you Sergeant." Lieutenant Miller said as he made a quick move to accept the incoming file on the computer he was using.

"I'll leave you to it. Dismissed." Major Stanley said before leaving the room.

* * * * *

"Chief Carrol, report." Major Stanley said as he approached.

"We've been going over the supplies that were provided. Those trained with explosives are gathering the gear that they will need. The rest are outfitting themselves with the equipment that they believe they'll be able to make the most use of." Chief Carrol said professionally.

"Good. If we get a better indication of the nature of our mission, I'll see to it that you're notified so that you can make any necessary adjustments." Major Stanley said simply, then added, "Carry on."

* * * * *

"Major Stanley, I've got us set up on an encrypted communications network." Sergeant Barnes said as she handed the Major a communication device.

"Good work. Make sure that everyone is up-to-speed on how to use the tech. It won't do much good if they don't know how to use it when they need to."

"Yes sir."

"Dismissed."

* * * * *

"Major Stanley."

"Go ahead."

"We've just received a report from the Hoover Dam staff that they are under attack. They are currently barricaded in their control room and are requesting immediate help."

"Do you know our ETA?"

"Ten minutes as the crow flies. But I can't estimate how long it will take us to reach the dam once we've landed."

"I'll talk to the pilots. Keep me posted."

"Yes sir."

* * * * *

"All personnel, you might want to strap in. We've found a stretch of road to use as a landing strip. This could be rough." One of the pilots said over the intercom.

Major Stanley keyed the mic button on his handheld device and said, "Lieutenant Miller?"

"Yes sir."

"Gather a team. As soon as we gain entry to the dam, be prepared to seek out the target areas that you've been able to identify. I'll take the rest of the team to try and secure the control room."

"Yes sir."

* * * * *

The landing was a bit bumpy, but all things considered, the pilots did an admirable job.

"We should be less than a quarter of a mile from the dam." Sergeant Barnes said as she walked into the main cabin, wearing her full 'communications' gear.

"Were you able to get a map of the area?"

"Yes sir. It's available to the team on their communication devices."

"Do we have contact with the flight crew?"

"Yes sir. I have us patched into the onboard communications system."

Major Stanley looked over his team, all wearing their full gear and ready to go.

"Let's move out!"

* * * * *

"Major Stanley, I have some information for you." Alvin's voice called over his comm device.

"Go ahead." Major Stanley said while keeping careful watch for any sign of a sniper or likely traps set for them.

"From the reports that I've just received, it appears that an undetermined number of helicopters flew in, close to the ground. By all indications, their landing location was a parking lot northeast of your current position. I received subsequent reports of the helicopters returning by the same route, which may mean that they've already gotten what

they came for. It's possible that in all the rush, they might have left us some sort of clue as to what their true objective was."

"Understood. Stanley out." Major Stanley said firmly, then called out, "Sergeant Green, Airman Day, there's a parking lot that was used as a landing zone by hostiles northeast of this location. Use full stealth on approach. Investigate and report back. Remember, this is an intelligence gathering mission. Any detail might be significant."

"Yes sir." They said in unison.

Major Stanley made a gesture toward the northeast, bidding them to go, then continued to lead his team to the northwest.

* * * * *

"No signs of trouble so far." Lieutenant Miller said as they got their first clear view of the entire face of the dam.

"Do you have your team?"

"Until we know what we're dealing with, I believe that Sergeant Strickland and I should go to investigate. Once we've found something, I may need more personnel."

"Get with her and be ready to break away as soon as we're inside."

"Major Stanley, this is Sergeant Green. We need the doctor here with us at the parking lot."

"Report."

"There's fifty or sixty bodies here. It looks like they were just mowed down with a machine gun. There are one or two of them still alive. Could you send the doctor?"

"She's on her way. Stanley out." Major Stanley said firmly, then stopped and motioned for the doctor to come to him.

Major Stanley brought up the map on his comm device so that she could see it before saying, "Captain Stewart, proceed to the parking lot due east of here. Sergeant Green has reported a massacre there with a few isolated survivors."

"Yes sir." Captain Stewart said professionally.

"Captain, remember that this is an intelligence gathering mission. Make your treatment decisions accordingly."

"Excuse me sir, but what *exactly* do you mean by that?" Captain Stewart asked cautiously.

"I'm saying that we will need your patients to be conscious and coherent enough to answer a few questions. Even though heavy pain medication or an induced coma might normally be indicated, I'm asking that you take into consideration that we will need to interview your patients as soon as it is medically allowable. Airman Day should be able to manage that side of things for you."

"Understood."

Major Stanley seemed to be satisfied with the response. He looked over his dwindling troops and finally said, "Chief Carrol. Escort Captain Stewart to the parking lot where our other team is located."

"Yes sir."

"Once she's been safely delivered and you've verified that the area is secure, I want you and Sergeant Green to return. I have a feeling that we're going to need all hands for this job."

"Yes sir." Chief Carrol repeated.

Major Stanley gave a firm single nod, then motioned for his group to continue forward.

At the same time, Chief Carrol and Captain Stewart started walking in the opposite direction.

* * * * *

As they approached the entrance, Major Stanley quietly said, "Strickland. Check the door. Everyone else, be on guard. If they were going to set up an ambush, this would be an ideal place for it."

Although they had only been a team for a few hours, Major Stanley couldn't be more proud of them.

"Clear." Sergeant Strickland finally said.

Major Stanley made a hand motion to Lieutenant Miller, indicating for him to lead the way.

* * * * *

Once inside, Major Stanley was pleased to find that a rudimentary layout of the structure was loaded into his comm device. It took a moment, but he was able to discern their current location as well as the most direct route to the control room.

Lieutenant Miller and Sergeant Strickland moved off in another direction as Major Stanley led his team deeper into the structure.

"Major Stanley, we've got a problem." Sergeant Douglas said quietly as he approached.

With a raise of his hand, Major Stanley halted the group before asking, "What have you found?"

"There's an auto-destruct sequence counting down." Sergeant Douglas said seriously.

"How can you possibly know that?" Major Stanley asked dubiously.

"I don't have time to explain that right now but trust me, that's the priority. What I can also tell you is that the people in the dam control room are fine. They're scared and keeping the door barricaded, but there aren't any enemy combatants trying to get to them. Once the self-destruct was activated, the hostiles bugged out."

"In other circumstances I'd demand to know the source of your information. But I was specifically told to listen to what you had to say, so go on."

"There was a secret base built within the structure of the dam during its original construction. There are people trapped in there... I can't tell how many. But I get the feeling that they've already determined that there's no way for them to abort the self-destruct from their location. So It will be up to us to disarm the explosives before they go off."

"Do you know where the explosives are?"

"No sir. But by all indications, they were embedded into the structure when the dam was built, so they're probably not going to be easy to find."

"How much time do we have?"

"I'm sorry sir. It's counting down. That's all I know."

"Is that everything?"

"Sir, if I may, I'd like to see to releasing the captives from the secret base while the rest of the team works on disarming the explosives. If we can't get the explosives disarmed, then the next best thing will be to evacuate the captives as quickly as possible."

"How much help will you need?"

"I should be able to do it by myself."

"I'm not letting anyone go off on their own. Take Airman Greer with you to cover your back."

"Yes sir."

"When this is all done, we're going to have a long talk."

"I'll look forward to it, sir."

Major Stanley gave a single nod, then keyed his comm device and said, "Lieutenant Miller, we have some new information..."

* * * * *

"Do you know where we're going?" Airman Greer asked as he noticed that Sergeant Douglas kept referring back to the map on his comm device.

"Yes and no. I know where we're going, but I'm not one hundred percent sure on how to get there. The entrance might be a mislabeled closet or an actual hidden door."

"So we're looking for secret passages?" Airman Greer asked dubiously.

"Yes." Sergeant Douglas confirmed, then quickly said, "This way."

* * * * *

"Are you sure that this is it?" Airman Greer asked as he watched Sergeant Douglas struggle with the locked steel door.

"No." Sergeant Douglas admitted, then took a step back.

"You'll need a battering ram for a door like that."

"I've got one." Sergeant Douglas said before kicking the door with all his might.

Airman Greer stared in wonder as the door was not only opened, but also ripped off its hinges.

"Come on!" Sergeant Douglas said urgently as he led the way.

* * * * *

"Are you sure about this? It looks like no one's been in here for a hundred years." Airman Greer asked as he turned on his flashlight.

"No. I'm not sure. I'm just hoping that this leads to where we need to go."

"How do you know that there's something down here?" Airman Greer asked as they made their way down a dusty stairway.

"I'm psychic." Sergeant Douglas said simply.

After going down several flights of stairs, Sergeant Douglas stopped at a door and tried to open it.

Airman Greer watched his companion kick the locked door open, then quietly muttered, "...a psychic battering ram..."

* * * * *

They emerged into an abandoned control room.

Although there was no one else present, the lights were on and the room appeared to have been recently used. Several of the control panels and screens were active.

"What do we do now?"

"Find the door control. We need to get those people out of there."

"What people out of where?"

"Them." Sergeant Douglas said as he pointed toward one of the CRT monitors.

Airman Greer stepped closer and was shocked to see more than a hundred people scrambling around.

"They're kids!" Airman Greer gasped.

"Yeah. Scared kids. If that bothers you then help me get them out of there." Sergeant Douglas said as he moved from one control panel to the next, desperately searching for the door controls.

"What the FUCK is going on here?!" Airman Greer barked as he started searching.

"To be honest, I don't know. I told you that I'm psychic. Well, I can pick up some of their thoughts and emotions. But the thing is, those kids have been drugged with some kind of psychic inhibitor. I'm getting muddled voices on top of voices, it's like listening to two hundred screaming whispers at the same time. I'm picking up bits and pieces, but not enough to make sense of everything."

"Is this it?" Airman Greer asked suddenly.

Sergeant Douglas ran to his side and looked at the control panel.

"It looks like it could be..." Sergeant Douglas began to say, then gasped, "Oh shit!"

"What?" Airman Greer asked in panic.

Sergeant Douglas pointed to a neighboring CRT which was displaying the self-destruct countdown.

"Oh shit." Airman Greer whispered.

Sergeant Douglas keyed his mic and said, "Major Stanley, we've gained entry to a control room where the auto-destruct is counting down and we've found the hidden base. There's

just over five minutes left on the countdown, not enough time to get all these people to safety. Once I open the door it's going to be chaos. Is there anything we can do to help you disarm the explosives before we release the captives?"

"We have one explosives package disarmed and we've discovered three more that we're working on now. We should be able to disable the detonators within five minutes. Unfortunately, we can't be sure that these are the only embedded explosives. Release your captives and get them as far away from the dam as possible... Save as many as you can."

Major Stanley finished gravely.

"Yes sir." Sergeant Douglas said, then pulled the lever that Airman Greer had discovered.

* * * * *

The groaning sound as a mechanism activated was loud enough to be felt, as well as heard.

"Come on!" Sergeant Douglas barked as he ran for the door.

"Where are we going?" Airman Greer asked as he followed.

"The door is opening. We need to find out where it is." Sergeant Douglas said as he hurried into the hallway, then suddenly stopped.

Airman Greer looked around in confusion and couldn't do anything but wait.

Finally, Sergeant Douglas said, "This way!" As he took off running.

"You really *are* psychic, aren't you?" Airman Greer asked as he followed.

"Yeah. But that's less helpful right now than you would think. There are several telepaths and empaths scared half out of their minds right now all calling out at once. It's almost impossible for me to think clearly."

When they approached double doors, Sergeant Douglas didn't even bother with trying the handle, he simply kicked with all his might and it was as though the doors had been hit with an explosion. Both doors were knocked off their hinges and went skittering across the floor in different directions.

"You're more than a psychic, aren't you?" Airman Greer asked suspiciously.

"Now's not the time!" Sergeant Douglas said as he hurriedly looked around, then said, "Over there!"

* * * * *

The room was vibrating with the sound of heavy machinery to a degree that walking was difficult.

Airman Greer followed Sergeant Douglas on unsteady feet to the source of the sound just as it stopped.

"What now?" Airman Greer whispered into the suddenly silent room.

"Now we get to be the heroes." Sergeant Douglas said simply, then started walking down the long ramp.

Chapter 2

"Are you here to save us or kill us?" A sandy blond haired boy dressed in blue asked cautiously when he noticed Sergeant Douglas' multiple weapons.

"Listen, we've got people disarming the explosives right now, but we can't be sure that we've found them all. We need to get everyone out of here and as far away from this place as possible. We've got less than five minutes." Sergeant Douglas said urgently.

"Got it." The blond boy said, then turned and started issuing orders with a general's authority.

"Korbin! Will you get some of the stronger guys together to help carry out the unconscious?"

"Yeah, I'm on it. Kyle, I need you over here!" The boy in red called.

"Kenyon, will you and Jason lead the way out? Get everyone as far away from here as possible."

"We're not leaving without you." A boy in orange responded.

"I'll be right behind you. I just need to be sure that no one's left behind."

"Luke, stay with Joseph and make sure that he gets out. We're trusting you." The boy in orange, Kenyon, said firmly.

"I'll make sure he stays safe." The young man dressed in brown said earnestly.

"You ready?" Joseph asked Sergeant Douglas seriously.

"Yeah. Come on. This way." Sergeant Douglas said as he turned and hurried back up the ramp.

"Anyone who's ready to get out of this place, it's time to go! Follow Kenyon and Jason!" Joseph called loudly.

* * * * *

When they reached the stairway, Sergeant Douglas instructed Airman Greer to stop and help guide any stragglers to go in the right direction.

Once Sergeant Douglas had crested the last flight of stairs, he led the seemingly never ending flow of teenagers through the darkness and finally out to a main hallway.

"Follow this hallway and it should take you to an exit door. I need to make sure that no one gets lost in the dark." Sergeant Douglas said to Kenyon.

"No. You know where we're going. You need to lead the way. Teddy and I can make sure that people are going the right way from here." An older looking boy in gray said from beside Kenyon.

"Theodore." The boy in white corrected his companion under his breath.

"Right." Sergeant Douglas said, then handed the boy in gray his flashlight.

* * * * *

As soon as the first of them exited the main doors, Sergeant Douglas called out, "Anyone who's able, you need to run! We can't have more than a few minutes left and we need to get as far away from here as possible! Go that way!"

"Jason was right, you need to *lead* them. I'll let people know which way to go." The boy in orange, Kenyon, said as he stopped outside the exit door.

"All personnel, we've disarmed the last known explosive but there's no way to know if there are any more. Rendezvous at Captain Stewart's location in the east parking area." Major Stanley said over the comm device.

"Major Stanley, I'm leading the captives from the secret base away from the dam. There's about two hundred of them. Do you want them at the parking lot or should we go directly for the plane?"

"There's too much we don't know. As soon as we've sussed out the captives' situation, I'll contact Colonel Hayes for further instructions. Remember, we were sent here to gather intelligence. It's not up to us to decide what's going to happen next." Major Stanley said firmly.

"Yes sir. I'll do what I can to compile a summary of their situation for you." Sergeant Douglas said professionally as he glanced behind him to see that the seemingly endless marathon of running teenagers was still following.

* * * * *

There was a sudden low ::boom::, then a distant rumbling.

"What was that?" A girl in blue asked fearfully as she approached Sergeant Douglas from behind.

"I'm guessing that that was one or more of the bombs that were originally intended to destroy the dam, and kill you in the process." Sergeant Douglas said frankly.

"But what about everyone else? Shouldn't we go back and see if anyone's trapped?" The girl asked desperately.

"My team has been ordered to rendezvous in a parking area not far from here. Once everyone has assembled, Major Stanley may decide to send teams back to search for survivors. The best thing we can do right now is to be where we're expected to be." Sergeant Douglas explained seriously.

After another minute or so of running, the girl at his side said, "I'm Zarah."

"I'm on duty right now, so I'm Sergeant Douglas. But off duty, I'm Lee."

"You're awfully young to be in the army, aren't you?" Zarah asked cautiously.

"Not too long ago, I might have told you a long story about how that happened, but right now it doesn't matter. We're all just doing our best to handle the situations we find ourselves in." Sergeant Douglas said frankly.

"That's true." Zarah easily admitted.

"The parking lot should be just up ahead." Sergeant Douglas said, then was relieved to hear a voice on his comm device.

"Team members, report in and give status." Major Stanley called out over a roar in the background.

Lee keyed his mic, then calmly said, "Sergeant Douglas, proceeding toward rendezvous point."

"What's that rumbling sound?" Zarah asked nervously.

"I'm guessing that the dam was either breached or that some mechanism was triggered to allow a sudden unscheduled release of water." Sergeant Douglas said frankly.

"Are we going to drown?"

"No. I doubt that. The people downstream may be at increased risk, but we're high enough up that the water shouldn't bother us."

* * * * *

Sergeant Douglas and Zarah entered the parking lot rendezvous point and froze in place.

All that could be heard were gasps of horror from those who approached from behind them.

Before Sergeant Douglas could think of what he might possibly be able to do, Zarah loudly called out, "Oranges! I need for every one of you to grab a Gray and get to work! If they're even a little bit alive, I need for you to do what you can for them!"

Before Sergeant Douglas could question her orders, Zarah continued, "Greens and Yellows, start helping to get these bodies separated and laid out. If you catch any indication that they're still alive, call an Orange over to help them."

Sergeant Douglas looked at Zarah curiously and did a surface scan of her thoughts. What he found shocked him.

"Everyone else, get to work helping where you can. I know it's gross, but there's a chance that these people might have some answers to explain what's been done to us." Zarah said firmly.

When several people continued to stand around looking at her stupidly, she said more loudly, "Our answers are dying. Move!"

"You're *all* psychic?" Sergeant Douglas asked cautiously.

"Yeah. All in different ways." Zarah confirmed, then added, "Listen, now that I've had a few seconds to focus on you, I *know* who and what you are and where you're originally from. I understand that you've got lots of questions about us, so you have my permission to look into my mind and find whatever answers you might need. But right now, my people need me."

Sergeant Douglas vacantly stared at her for a long moment, then said, "I need to make a call."

"Do what you need to do..." Zarah said to him, then called out, "Come on everyone! There's got to be wounded mixed in with all these bodies! Let's help them while they've still got a chance!"

* * * * *

"Colonel Hayes, this is Sergeant Douglas from the Firebirds."

"Go ahead, Lee. Tell me what's going on there."

"I'm sure that Major Stanley will be giving you the official report soon, so I'll leave those details for him to explain. What I need to tell you right now is that the secret base hidden within the Hoover Dam was filled with about two hundred teenage psychics that were bred in the outside world, then abducted when Ashwood started his attacks. Their genetic material has been 'harvested' and from the look of it, retrieving it was the actual objective of the incursion."

"Did they get away with the genetic material?"

"It appears so. The genetic material was collected, the staff overseeing the collection and imprisonment of the psychics was slaughtered. And the self-destruct mechanism was triggered to eliminate any evidence or useful genetic materials from falling into enemy hands."

"I've received a report that there was an explosion at the dam. How many were you able to save?"

"I don't know. We started leading them out before the explosion and they're still arriving. There are at least a hundred here at the rendezvous point and there could be another hundred making their way here."

"And they're all genetically enhanced?"

"No. It's been speculated that people with naturally occurring psychic abilities were identified as early as the 1900's and recruited for this program. They were selectively bred to produce the desired offspring with increasing psychic potentials."

"I assume that since you're contacting me directly that you haven't shared these facts with Major Stanley."

"No. But I spotted the hidden base and knew about the self-destruct when we entered the dam and he's suspicious of how I knew about it. I'm going to have to tell him something."

"Give him the UNIT standard line. I'll back you up. Do your best to keep him from finding out that your new friends have abilities."

"I'm afraid it might be too late for that. Some of my 'new friends' are able to perform psychic healing. Right now they're working to find survivors among the slaughtered lab workers."

"Then we're going to have to debrief the whole team and give this entire event a 'Top Secret' classification. I didn't want to have to do it that way, but it looks like it's out of our hands."

"What are we going to do with all of them?"

"Give me some time to work on that. It might help if you let me know what they would 'like' to happen next."

"I'll ask around."

"I have another call, probably Major Stanley, I'll get back to you when some decisions have been made."

"Thank you, Alvin. Lee out."

* * * * *

"What are you doing there?" Captain Stewart called out as she looked up from the patient that she had been working on.

Sergeant Douglas noticed and hurried to explain.

"Captain Stewart, I know it's going to be hard for you to believe, but some of these kids have psychic healing abilities. If you had a full hospital and staff at your disposal then there wouldn't be a need for them to do anything, but with things being as they are..."

"I've got a live one over here!" A girl in green called out suddenly.

As Captain Stewart started to move away, Sergeant Douglas quietly said, "Watch."

As much as Captain Stewart wanted to go and investigate, she held herself back and watched as two girls, one dressed in gray and the other in orange, hurried to where the green girl had called out.

"Doctor." Sergeant Douglas said to gain her attention, "These kids have a legitimate healing ability, but they can't do *everything*. It looks to me like the best way to help the most people will be to use the healers where they'll do the most good, then focus your expertise on doing what they can't."

"I need to get back to work." Captain Stewart said tersely as she walked away.

Although she hadn't given any outward indication of it, Sergeant Douglas could tell that she *had* listened.

* * * * *

"What happened?" Zarah asked suddenly, catching Sergeant Douglas' attention. When he turned he saw that she wasn't talking to him.

"There was an explosion. First there was a loud noise, then we couldn't see or breathe." The dirt covered boy said past gasping breaths.

"Are you okay, Aaron?" Zarah asked with concern.

"Yeah. I've been running. I just need to catch my breath." Aaron said as he sat heavily on the ground.

"What about the others? Did everyone get out?"

"I think so. Joseph is right behind me. He's helping people who can't keep up."

"That sounds like him." Zarah said fondly.

"What happened here?" Aaron asked as he looked around.

"It looks like the people who were keeping us captive were massacred when their masters came to collect our genetic material." Zarah said frankly.

"That brown guy with Joseph, is he one of them?"

"Yes. But don't worry. Luke's a sweet guy." Zarah assured him.

"What should we do now? Should we keep running?"

"No. We need to stay here but... Aaron, I need your help with something."

"With what?"

"The Browns are Luke's friends and family. He doesn't need to see this. We need to go back and stop him before he gets here." Zarah said decisively.

"You're in charge here, aren't you?" Aaron asked as he looked around.

"I'm doing my best to see that everyone has something to do to keep them from worrying." Zarah said frankly.

"I'll take care of Luke. You stay here and keep everyone doing what they need to do."

"Okay. Thanks Aaron."

* * * * *

"What was that all about?" Sergeant Douglas asked Zarah quietly.

"I'm just trying to spare a good person some unnecessary pain." Zarah said simply.

"But what if it's *necessary* pain?" Sergeant Douglas asked curiously.

"I'm not going to let it happen, so it doesn't matter." Zarah said simply.

"You're a lot more than you seem."

"So are you. What's your point?"

"It's not often that I run into someone on my own level."

"I assume that you're not referring to military training."

"I'm talking about those of us who've been manipulated and improved, sometimes it's hard for us to relate to unmodified people."

"How old are you?"

"Don't you already know?"

"I was just trying to make a point. We're both fifteen. In that most basic way, we *are* on the same level. But I don't want to make the mistake of reading more into it than what's really there."

"Maybe I *am* over analyzing it."

"And maybe you're not." Zarah said simply, then turned suddenly when a dirt covered boy in green ran up to her with a look of urgency.

"What's up, Wade?" Zarah asked with immediate concern.

"Lee, I need your help." Wade said quickly.

"Do you know who I am?"

"The greens are all telepaths. I thought you already 'read' me." Zarah said cautiously.

"It was quite a bit to take in all at once." Sergeant Douglas told her, then turned to Wade and asked, "What did you need, Wade?"

"I've been able to sense you since we left the dam. From the strength of your shields, you've got to be the strongest and best trained telepath here." Wade said quickly.

"I suppose that's true." Sergeant Douglas said warily.

"On the way here, I was able to pick up enough psychic chatter to find out about the Browns and what was done to them. I don't know if anyone has thought of this yet, but

we've got a lot of unanswered questions and they *might* have some of the answers. You need to scan them, I mean *really* scan them. Go deep and find out everything that you can as fast as you can. Every minute that you wait could be another important fact that we're going to lose when one of them dies." Wade said firmly.

Sergeant Douglas looked to Zarah for her opinion of what Wade was asking him to do.

"It could turn out to be important. If even one of them knows who's behind all of this, it would be worth it." Zarah reluctantly agreed.

Sergeant Douglas looked over the parking lot strewn with corpses and finally said, "We'd better do it before my team arrives. They don't know anything about psychics and I doubt that they'll do anything to improve our situation."

"Wade, gather as many greens as you can get and start doing your own research. Lee doesn't know all the questions that we have, so he might not recognize the answers we're looking for when he comes across them." Zarah firmly instructed.

"Come on, Lee." Wade said urgently.

"Right behind you." Sergeant Douglas immediately responded.

* * * * *

As Sergeant Douglas dipped into the first mind, he was sickened by what he found.

Although the man had a name, it was mostly meaningless. Regardless of what potential this person might have once had, the ruthless indoctrination and constant reinforcement of bizarre religious programming made him into nothing more than an obedient slave for the elders; one of many.

After sifting through the revolting belief system, which seemed to center mostly on rules prohibiting any healthy form of sexual expression, Sergeant Douglas determined that the man didn't have any clue about the 'big picture' of what he had been trained all his life to do.

Any curiosity that the husk of a man might have once had, had been whipped out of him, mostly figuratively, over the course of his pathetic wasted life. He didn't question. He

didn't speculate. That which didn't directly impact him or what he was expected to do, was consciously purged from his thinking.

By the time Sergeant Douglas withdrew from the mind, he felt like he might vomit. He opened his eyes and looked at the face of the man that he had been scanning and noticed a gray girl and an orange girl working to save his life.

He had to fight the urge to stop them. In his opinion, the man they were devoting so much care and attention to wasn't worth saving. He was less than an animal. Alive or dead, he was barely more than a broken mannequin, no longer fit to serve any purpose.

With more than a little trepidation, Sergeant Douglas delved into the next mind. There was a slight flicker of life left in the body, but he gave a little of his own mental energy to coax the mind to awaken.

The woman he scanned was no less vile or irredeemable than the man had been.

Along with the archaic religious teachings, there was also a formidable amount of self-loathing simply for the fact that she was a woman. She had the same incurious nature and single-minded dedication to her specific job, to the exclusion of all else.

In the woman's case, Sergeant Douglas found it curious within her memories that she had a family, but she seemed to have no emotional attachment to them whatsoever. In fact, she had no emotional attachment to anyone. She had her duty, which was monotonous and repetitive and in no way fulfilling.

"That one." Wade said as he pointed to a man with multiple abdominal wounds.

"What?" Sergeant Douglas asked as he withdrew from the woman's mind and tried to somewhat center himself.

"Read him. I think he might have something, but I can't go deep enough. I don't know if it's because I'm so new at this or if it's the drugs they gave me." Wade said seriously.

Rather than question further, Sergeant Douglas insinuated himself into the man's mind and immediately found that Wade had been right. The man had at least *some* concept of self-worth and was in some sort of supervisory or middle-management role within their organizational structure.

Although what he came across wasn't as much as he had hoped, he was at least able to come up with *something*.

"Doctor, report." A stern voice commanded.

Sergeant Douglas withdrew from the man's mind and turned to see Major Stanley approaching.

"Since we've been here, eight survivors have been located, two of those have since died. Only one has achieved consciousness, although I wouldn't count any testimony he might give as being credible. All he's really done is babble religious nonsense." Captain Stewart said clinically.

"Major, I may be able to help you with that." Sergeant Douglas reluctantly interjected.

"Report, Sergeant." Major Stanley said firmly.

Sergeant Douglas glanced around as he considered the information he was about to divulge. He finally determined that regardless of his decision at that moment, everyone present would be brought into the secret eventually.

"Major Stanley, I am part of a group that was genetically engineered to be enhanced soldiers and infiltrators. We're all highly telepathic and exceptionally strong." Sergeant Douglas said calmly, then paused for a moment to allow Major Stanley to process what he'd just been told.

"Colonel Hayes?"

"He's one of us, although he's been modified even further than I have."

Major Stanley slowly nodded and finally said, "I'm not accepting everything that you're saying as verifiable fact, but I'll continue to listen."

"Thank you sir." Sergeant Douglas said sincerely, then continued, "Although I wasn't told as much, I assume that I was included on this mission in case my *unique* skills might be of benefit."

"With them not knowing what the true objective was, I can see why they'd want someone like you on the team to gather intelligence." Major Stanley conceded.

"I wasn't able to gather too much information from the injured, mostly because they didn't have any. But I was able to get an overview of the operation inside the base; the chain of command and various different duties that needed to be regularly performed. I don't know how much use it will be to us, but it might be of interest to some of the captives." Sergeant Douglas said carefully.

"What can you tell me about the captives?" Major Stanley asked as he looked around.

"Although they're not from the same program that created me, they are from a similar program. All two hundred of them have a psychic ability..." Sergeant Douglas trailed off as he watched carefully for Major Stanley's reaction.

"Two hundred telepaths?" Major Stanley asked to verify.

"No sir. Two hundred people with different psionic abilities. From what I gathered from talking with them, only twenty to twenty five of them are telepaths... they're the ones in green." Sergeant Douglas added as an aside.

Major Stanley looked several feet away at Wade, who was leaning over a body.

As soon as he did, Wade looked up and said, "Yes, I am."

"Sir, I've contacted Colonel Hayes about the two hundred captives, so that he would have time to consider the options."

"On whose authority?!" Major Stanley barked.

"His, sir." Sergeant Douglas stated simply, then continued, "I have no doubt that this entire matter is going to end up being classified as 'Top Secret'. He needed to know the facts from the beginning if we were going to have any chance of containing it."

Major Stanley seemed to be considering for a moment, then looked around the parking lot littered with corpses.

"What are they doing?" He asked as he pointed to a gray boy and an orange girl at the side of a body.

"They're a healing team. The people wearing orange have a psychic healing ability. The ones in gray can sense pain and direct the healers to where the healing is needed." Sergeant Douglas said slowly.

"Can the doctor verify any of that?" Major Stanley asked cautiously.

"You'd have to ask her. Unless I'm given a compelling reason to do so, I don't read the thoughts of the members of my team." Sergeant Douglas said seriously.

"Is that it? Is your report complete?" Major Stanley asked cautiously.

"Yes sir."

"Then let me tell you what *I* think." Major Stanley said slowly. "You came into this knowing *exactly* where we were going and what our mission was. You knew about the self-destruct countdown and were sent here to rescue those captive teenagers. All this crap about psychic abilities is just a smoke screen to keep anyone from demanding answers to inconvenient questions. Everything from here on can be explained away as being a 'psychic vision' or some such nonsense so you'll never have to reveal who's pulling your strings and what you *really* know."

Sergeant Douglas remained silent as he watched the Major's facial expressions carefully.

After a moment to calm himself, Major Stanley said in a more reasonable voice, "Either way, the explosives were disarmed... well, most of them. Although there was *some* damage, the dam wasn't destroyed. Beyond that, the captives were rescued. The presence of supposed *psychics* doesn't change those facts. And since the president and Colonel Hayes seem to be supporting you in your story, I'll consider it a moot point."

There was a long silent moment as Major Stanley considered his next words.

"I think that since you claim that you are psychic and that these children are as well, that you should be in charge of them. You speak their language. I'm going to contact Colonel Hayes and see what he wants us to do next. Try to keep the kids from wandering away or getting into too much trouble." Major Stanley said firmly.

"Yes sir." Sergeant Douglas said smartly.

"Dismissed."

* * * * *

"Colonel Hayes, we've left the dam and have rendezvoused at a parking area to the east. There was an explosion at the dam and some release of water."

"I've just been in contact with the staff at the dam. They report that the damage to the dam is significant and are requesting aid to make repairs. I've already dispatched work crews to assist them. The staff assured me that their personnel have all been accounted for and that they will be able to manage until the work crews arrive."

"Sergeant Douglas mentioned that he had already reported to you about finding the secret base. Are we going to evacuate them or establish a camp for them in the local area?"

"Considering the lengths that the enemy forces have gone to to eliminate them, I think that evacuation is our best option. I've dispatched two more planes to aid in their evacuation. All tolled, how many casualties are you reporting?"

"Captain Stewart reports six survivors among the fifty or so who were massacred at the parking lot. On my way here, I counted approximately eight unconscious children being carried by their comrades. It's possible that there are more, but those are all that I'm aware of."

"Major, we can't be sure that there isn't an airstrike inbound. Load the casualties and the leaders from the secret base on your plane and take off as soon as possible. Return to Fairchild and await further orders."

"Yes sir."

* * * * *

"Sergeant Douglas, we have new orders." Major Stanley said as he approached.

"Yes sir." Sergeant Douglas said as he snapped to attention.

"Walk with me." Major Stanley said as he started walking, not waiting to see if Sergeant Douglas was going to follow.

Sergeant Douglas fell in beside Major Stanley, matching his pace.

"Can you really read minds?" Major Stanley asked cautiously.

"Yes sir. I really can." Sergeant Douglas said simply.

"And all the other stuff that you claimed about your new friends, you really believe all of that?"

"Yes sir. They're young and their abilities have just awakened, so they don't have the power or the skill to use their abilities effectively, but they *do* have abilities."

"If what you're saying is true, and I'm not saying that it is, then humanity may have just taken a fatal turn. In their quest to create a better person, they've lost what it means to be human. In essence, they've made themselves obsolete by creating creatures that can surpass them in every way." Major Stanley said thoughtfully.

"Sir. We're looked upon as genetic experiments... or weapons. We weren't created to replace you, we were created to be controlled and used by you. *We're* not the monsters." Sergeant Douglas said calmly.

"I suppose it's the age-old question of the sins of the father. You had no say in your own creation, yet you still have to bear the consequences."

"Yes sir. But regardless whether we were conceived in a womb or a petri dish, we're still people. Despite how or why any of us were created, we've each got a personal responsibility to help each other and try to do what's best for all of us."

Before they could say more, they arrived at Captain Stewart's side.

Major Stanley keyed his comm and said, "Sergeant Barnes, I need you to meet with me at Captain Stewart's location in the east parking lot."

"I'm right here, sir." Sergeant Barnes answered before Major Stanley had released the mic button.

"I've been given our new orders. More planes are being dispatched to evacuate the captive children back to Fairchild. To do that we're going to need to split the load *at least* three ways. That also means splitting the team three ways. Sergeant Barnes, if you have the equipment to do so, I'd like for you to make arrangements for us to be able to stay in contact with each other whether we're here, on the plane or in Washington state."

"Yes sir. It may take a few minutes, but I think I have everything I need." Sergeant Barnes responded.

"Get to it then. Dismissed." Major Stanley said simply, then turned and continued, "Captain Stewart, we're going to evac all your patients to the plane, they'll be going out on the first flight. Commandeer anyone you need to help you relocate the survivors and start moving them as soon as you're ready."

"Yes sir." Captain Stewart said immediately.

"Sergeant Douglas, Colonel Hayes has said that he would like the leaders of the captive group out on the first transport. Gather them and get them loaded."

"Yes sir."

"I noticed on the way back from the dam that they also had some casualties. Make sure that they also get loaded and that Captain Stewart has a chance to have a look at them."

"Yes sir." Sergeant Douglas said again.

"Dismissed."

* * * * *

"Zarah, do you have a minute? I need your help." Sergeant Douglas asked cautiously.

"What do you need?" Zarah asked while keeping the majority of her attention on what was going on with the Browns.

"We've been ordered to gather the leaders of your group and take them back with us on the first flight out. I'm just not sure... is that going to throw everything into chaos for your people when you leave?"

"I won't be leaving. You need to get with Joseph. He's the leader of the blues and beyond that, he's had the most contact with all the other leaders." Zarah said simply.

"Oh, from the way you automatically took charge, I thought that you were running everything."

"I usually am. I take charge when Joseph's off dealing with other situations... like he is now."

"Do you know where he is?" Sergeant Douglas asked as he looked around.

"I've heard that he made it here, but I haven't seen him yet. Try backtracking the way we came and you'll probably run into him." Zarah said thoughtfully.

"I'm probably going to have to leave with the first plane as soon as we can get everyone loaded. So, just in case I don't see you again, stay safe."

"You too."

Chapter 3

As Sergeant Douglas followed the road away from the east parking lot, he spotted a large gathering of teenagers not too far away. They had set up something of a makeshift rest area, or at least a stopping place, with army cots placed in a neat row, each containing an unconscious teenager.

It took him a moment searching through so many people milling around, but he was finally able to spot the sandy blond haired boy amongst them.

"Joseph, I need to talk to you." Sergeant Douglas said firmly, interrupting the conversation that was already in progress.

"Privately?" Joseph asked, not seeming to be bothered at all by the interruption.

"No. You're all going to find out soon anyway. There's no reason to try and keep secrets at this stage of things." Sergeant Douglas assured him.

"What did you need, Lee?" Joseph asked conversationally.

Sergeant Douglas was taken aback for a moment at being called by his first name. He realized that being a 'blue' meant that Joseph had the same ability as Zarah and that Joseph probably already knew every detail of his entire life story.

"I've been ordered to gather your leaders and get you loaded on the plane we arrived on as soon as possible so that we can take off." Sergeant Douglas said professionally.

"Well, most of the leaders are here already, so that shouldn't be a problem." Joseph said simply.

"Good. We've also been instructed to evacuate your injured on the first flight. The doctor will be going with us, so she can have a look at them while we're en route."

"Only time will help what's wrong with our injured." Joseph muttered absently as he looked around at his companions.

"Do you need for me to stay behind and watch over things?" The boy in orange, Kenyon, asked Joseph carefully.

"No. I'm just trying to figure out how to do this so our people won't be left floundering without leadership." Joseph said slowly.

"Zarah seems to have a good grasp of things, over at the parking lot." Sergeant Douglas offered carefully.

"Yeah. She'll take good care of the blues." Joseph said confidently, then turned to his companions and asked, "Who should go with us to represent the greens?"

"Tammy, maybe?" A boy in yellow asked the group uncertainly.

"Or Wade." A girl in yellow suggested, then added, "The Greens never really had a leader, they just seem to automatically fall in with whoever was running things in the meeting rooms they were in."

Joseph looked around, then called, "Cory, would you go get Wade and ask him to come here? We need to talk to him."

A younger looking boy in yellow nodded, then took off running.

"What about Tammy?" An older looking boy in yellow asked cautiously. Sergeant Douglas scanned the boy just enough to get the name 'Stone'.

Joseph pointed toward a group of people not far away. Everyone watched as a girl in green looked back at them in response.

Joseph motioned for the girl to join them, then asked the group, "Who wants to represent 'Eden'?"

"One of us needs to stay here." The girl in yellow said simply.

"I'll stay." Stone said easily.

"What about 'The Amazon'?" Joseph asked his companions.

"I'll go ask Valerie. She'll either go herself or send someone to represent them." The girl in yellow said before hurrying away.

"Thanks Alyssa." Joseph called after her.

"What did you need?" Tammy, the girl in green, asked as she drew near.

Joseph looked down the road and saw Wade and Cory approaching.

"Let's wait for Wade." Joseph said simply, then looked to a boy in red and asked, "Are you in?"

"Yeah. Randa can handle things here." The boy said confidently, but his expression fell a little as he hesitantly continued, "But can we bring someone with us if we don't want to take the chance of leaving them behind?"

Rather than answer, Joseph looked to Sergeant Douglas inquiringly.

"Considering the carrying capacity of the C-130 and the number of people we're committed to taking with us, I'm guessing that it shouldn't be a problem."

The boy in red, Korbin, looked around to be sure who was listening, and more importantly at that moment, who wasn't. Once he was sure, he quietly said "Good. Then I'd like for Kyle to go with us."

"You and Kyle?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"No. It's not like that... I mean... Maybe it will be someday. I don't know. Okay? But right now I just *need* to know that he's safe."

Joseph raised a hand to stop the nervous chatter, then once Korbin had quieted, Joseph carefully said, "I understand. It's cool. Kyle can come with us."

Korbin glanced at the boy in yellow who was oblivious to the entire conversation and smiled with relief..

"What are we talking about?" Wade asked as he approached.

"Scan me, then tell me what you think." Joseph said simply.

Wade looked at Joseph for a long moment, then looked to Tammy and said, "You should go. Mary Nicole is going to be one of the leaders, so you should represent the greens."

Tammy shook her head and said, "I haven't spent any time with the greens. It wouldn't be fair to them..."

"You and Wade are both coming with us. Leah can stay and watch after the greens here. She'll be happiest working alongside Zarah anyway." Joseph interrupted, then continued, "Jude, are you in?"

"Are you sure?" Another boy in red asked cautiously.

"Yeah. One hundred percent."

"Can Tanner come with me?" Jude asked as he glanced across the 'rest area' at a younger looking boy dressed in black coveralls.

"Absolutely."

"Do you want me to ask Lisa?" A boy in black asked the group cautiously.

"Yeah, Ryan. Tell her that she's been drafted." Joseph said with a grin.

"Who do you think will cover 'Area 51' if Lisa's not there?" Kenyon asked cautiously from Joseph's side.

"If no one objects, Ryan can watch out for the blacks and Kenna can take care of the purples." Joseph said, mostly to Ryan and Kenna themselves.

Receiving identical nods of agreement from them, Joseph then looked to the tallest member of their group and asked, "What about you, Jayce? You're going to be representing the purples and grays, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I can leave Autumn in charge of things here." Jason said simply, then thought to ask, "You're going with us, aren't you Kenyon?"

"I'm not a leader..." Kenyon began to explain.

"You're going." Joseph said as a simple statement of fact.

"Who are we missing?" Tammy asked slowly.

"Mary Nicole." Wade said immediately.

"Tammy, will you let her know what's going on? We're going to need to leave right away." Joseph asked hopefully.

With a single nod, Tammy broke away from the group. At her departure, Ryan and Kenna also left, ostensibly to inform Lisa that she had been drafted.

"Who else?" Wade asked cautiously.

"Teddy." Jason said seriously.

"Theodore." The boy in white coveralls immediately corrected.

"Are you okay with being thought of as being the leader of the Whites?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I'm fine with that, but I really think it might be best if you include all the whites. There's not that many of us and the guys can be kinda brilliant sometimes." Theodore carefully explained.

"Okay, but if things come down to a vote, no matter how many people you have at the table, the whites get one vote, just like every other color." Joseph said firmly.

Theodore slowly nodded his agreement as Luke quietly asked, "Does that mean that I get a vote too?"

Everyone looked to Joseph to decide.

"Yes. In fact not only can you represent the Browns, but also the interests of all non-psychic people in our decision making." Joseph said as he looked around for any objection.

"So is everything settled? Can we go now?" Sergeant Douglas asked hopefully.

"I'd like it if we could bring one or two healing teams with us, just to be safe." Joseph said thoughtfully.

"I can see to that." Kenyon immediately volunteered.

"Then I guess that we can leave as soon as Valerie, Lisa and Mary Nicole join us. Until then, Theodore needs to gather the whites and we still need to get our unconscious people on the plane."

"I need to talk to Autumn, I'll be back in a minute." Jason told Joseph quietly.

Joseph nodded, then watched as Jason and Theodore hurried away.

Sergeant Douglas couldn't help but smile at the smitten gaze that Joseph wore as he watched Jason go.

"Joseph! Good, you haven't left yet!" A boy in yellow called as he approached.

"What's up, Denn?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"Food. We need food." Dennis said quickly.

"Yeah. We're all hungry..." Joseph began to say.

Dennis shook his head and said, "When you leave, it will still be a while before the other planes get here. Once we board the other planes, it will be *hours* before we land. Do you realize how long it's been since any of us has eaten?"

"About a day." Joseph said cautiously.

"Right. And we weren't getting a lot of calories or nutrition to begin with. It's been a really stressful day followed by a long hike, which could also be described as 'fleeing for our lives'. We're all running on empty. Pretty soon people are going to start getting sick and passing out." Dennis said firmly.

"So, what is it that you want me to do?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"Leave us some food! There's plenty of MRE's loaded on your plane, but if I didn't stop you in time, you'd leave and take them all with you." Dennis said frankly.

"Lee, do you think that you can talk your commanding officer into leaving some rations behind for us?" Joseph asked with a smile.

"That shouldn't be a problem. If he had known that you were hungry, I'm sure that he would have broken them out before now." Sergeant Douglas said seriously.

"Denn, why don't you get a couple of people together to help offload the food when we get to the plane?" Joseph asked with a smile.

"Yeah. I'll be right back." Dennis said before dashing away.

"I'm beginning to see the usefulness of having a precog around." Joseph said to Sergeant Douglas with a grin.

"So, is everything settled for now?" Sergeant Douglas asked cautiously.

"For the moment..." Joseph began to say, then started looking around.

"What is it?" Sergeant Douglas asked cautiously.

"Aaron. Can you do me a favor?" Joseph asked as he stepped away from the group.

"Sure, what?" Aaron asked cautiously.

"I have a feeling that once we're on the plane I'm going to be kept busy. Is there any way you could come along with us and watch over our unconscious people to make sure that they're alright?" Joseph asked hopefully.

"Shouldn't you have an orange or a gray for that?"

"We'll have some with us, but they tend to get lost in what they're doing in the moment."

"So you just want me to watch them?"

"Yes. I just don't want for our people to be forgotten in the shuffle. Everyone else will probably have their own things going on but this will be the one and only thing that I'll be asking of you. If they get jostled around while we're in the air or if one of them wakes up, I'd like for you to be there to see that they get whatever help they need."

"Yeah. If you're sure..."

"Aaron, given your nature, I think that you're uniquely suited to this task. There's no one who I would trust more with a job like this." Joseph assured him.

"Thanks Joseph." Aaron said with a brief, honest smile.

* * * * *

"I think I figured it out." A girl dressed in purple coveralls said as she approached the group.

"What's that?" Joseph asked curiously.

"The purple ability. I think I've got it!" The girl said happily.

"We don't have time for this. We need to get moving." Sergeant Douglas said urgently.

"We need to wait for Valerie..." Joseph started to say.

"There she is!" Cory said quickly.

Sergeant Douglas followed Cory's gaze and saw that not only Valerie, but also everyone else that they had been waiting on were approaching in a group.

"What about the unconscious..." Joseph began to say when Korbin interrupted, "Grab a cot and start hauling or get out of the way."

"Aren't you coming with us?" Kenyon asked playfully as he automatically moved to Joseph's side.

"Is this everyone?" Sergeant Douglas asked cautiously.

After a moment to look over all the people in attendance, Joseph quietly said, "I think so."

"Then you'd better get moving. You can't lead from behind." Sergeant Douglas said, getting into the spirit of things.

"I'm not a telepath. You need to lead the way." Joseph said snippishly.

"Well, come on then!" Sergeant Douglas said as he started leading the group toward the plane.

"Tanner, we need to go. We're being evacuated." Jude called to him.

"Kyle, grab the other end. We've got a job to do." Korbin said firmly as he walked to the nearest cot.

* * * * *

As the group set off, on foot, on the long hike into their unknown future, Sergeant Douglas allowed himself a moment to do a very general scan of the group, trying to get a sense of the relationship dynamics at work.

It seemed as though every single one of the people had brought their best attributes forward. The 'leaders' each had strengths that were worthy of admiration. Whether it be Mary Nicole's subtle, strangely soothing logical presence or Korbin's more volatile, frenetic enthusiasm, all of them were natural leaders, who inspired their people's loyalty and respect.

"Joseph." The girl dressed in purple coveralls said, catching Sergeant Douglas' attention.

"Oh, right. What have you come up with, Lisa?" Joseph asked as he maintained his pace, walking at Sergeant Douglas' side.

"I think the purples have an ability like the oranges, except that ours is mental." Lisa said enthusiastically.

"*All* our abilities are mental. That's the psy in psychic." Joseph said slowly.

The sour look on Lisa's face made Sergeant Douglas have to fight to contain his smile.

"I *mean* that we can heal the mind the same way that the oranges can heal the body." Lisa carefully explained.

"Oh?" Joseph reacted with surprise, then cautiously asked, "How did you figure that out?"

"Observation." Lisa answered simply.

"So you comforted people who were frightened and they felt better because of it?" Joseph guessed.

"Yeah. But it's not that simple. I've watched people who were freaking out and going half out of their minds with fear and depression suddenly become alright. Like I said, it's been observation. The sudden shift in their moods is beyond all reason. *No one* recovers from being abducted, held captive and sexually violated as easily as I've seen in the past day. We were essentially raped in our sleep. You don't just *get over* that."

Sergeant Douglas once again cast his mind out to do a very general scan. He wanted to verify for himself that what Lisa was saying was true.

Since he was looking for it, he found ample evidence of all of them being sexually violated in their sleep, both males and females. Likewise, he detected the stress and anger associated with being abducted and being held against their will. But every single mind that he encountered seemed to be accepting the past for what it was while looking with anticipation toward the future.

"Sergeant Douglas? What do you think? Is it a thing? Is there even a psychic ability like that?" Joseph asked cautiously, breaking Lee out of his contemplation.

"Yeah. It's called Mentatis or mind healing. But I can't really tell you much about it." Sergeant Douglas responded.

"But do you think the purples really have it?" Joseph asked curiously.

"I'd probably have to be looking for it while it's being used to be sure, but looking at your group as a whole, I'd say that it's possible. Given your situation, I'd expect everyone to be in a lot worse shape than they are. Some of that can be credited to inspirational leadership, but it wouldn't surprise me to find out that there's a psychic component at play." Sergeant Douglas said thoughtfully.

"Who does that leave?" Lisa asked Joseph curiously.

"The Blacks. I think we have everyone else figured out." Joseph said honestly.

"Do you have any clue what abilities they might have?" Lisa asked slowly.

"No. Ryan's the only black that I've said more than a few words to." Joseph said honestly, then added, "He's a great guy, but I haven't noticed him being anything but normal."

"I might be able to help you out with this one." Sergeant Douglas said as he glanced behind them to be sure that everyone was keeping up.

"Do you know what it is?" Joseph asked with surprise.

"I have an idea. Actually, *you* have an idea, but your logical mind won't let you consider it. Anyway, it doesn't matter. Just get what's his name... Tanner, and that guy Luke up here and I'll be able to tell you for sure." Sergeant Douglas said confidently.

"Okay, sure." Joseph said, then called behind them and asked, "Would you ask Luke and Tanner to come up here to talk with me? Pass it back."

"I wonder what the message is actually going to say by the time it reaches them." Lisa said with a chuckle.

* * * * *

They walked for a few more minutes before Luke hesitantly made his way to the front to join them.

"How are you doing, Luke?" Joseph asked pleasantly.

"I'm scared. Where are we going?" Luke asked anxiously.

"Wait for Tanner to get here before you answer that." Sergeant Douglas quickly told Joseph.

"Why?" Joseph asked curiously.

"Just wait." Sergeant Douglas said seriously, then added, "Lisa, would you mind hanging back for a minute. If I'm right, you could accidentally interfere with what I'm trying to prove here."

"Sure." Lisa said uncertainly.

As Lisa dropped back, Tanner hurried up from behind and asked, "Did you need me for something?"

"Yes. Tanner, have you met Luke?" Sergeant Douglas asked in what seemed to be a pleasant and casual voice.

"Not really." Tanner said cautiously, then looked at Luke and began to say, "It's nice..."

"Go on." Sergeant Douglas said slowly.

"I can't." Tanner said as he slowed his pace to put more distance between Luke and himself.

"What's wrong?" Joseph asked in confusion at the reaction.

"Tanner, aren't you going to shake Luke's hand?" Sergeant Douglas encouraged.

"No." Tanner said immediately.

"Why not?" Sergeant Douglas asked in a leading tone.

"No. I can't." Tanner said shakily, then asked, "Did you need me up here for something?"

"Yes. I want to team you and Luke up to do a project while we're travelling." Sergeant Douglas said with a smile.

"I don't mind helping, but I can't work with him. Don't ask me to." Tanner said defensively.

"Oh? Okay. Never mind." Sergeant Douglas said easily.

"Is that all?" Tanner asked cautiously.

"Yes. Sorry to bother you." Sergeant Douglas said simply.

Tanner turned and hurried to go back, presumably to rejoin Jude.

"What was that all about?" Joseph asked confusedly.

"Just a minute." Sergeant Douglas said, then called behind them, "Lisa. We're ready for you."

"What did you need for me to do?" Lisa asked as she walked forward.

"Would you talk to Luke for a minute and let him know what's going on? I need to explain something to Joseph."

"Sure." Lisa said uncertainly, then turned her attention to Luke and asked, "You know about the self-destruct, don't you?"

"Yes."

"The people in charge are afraid that the same people who tried to kill us with that self-destruct might come back and try to hurt us again. So they're going to get us out of here and take us to someplace safe. Right now we're walking to get to the plane to take us to that safe place." Lisa said calmly.

"We're going to get to ride on a plane!?! I always wanted to do that." Luke said happily.

"Yes. We should be there in just a few minutes." Lisa said assuringly.

"Okay." Luke said with a smile, then quickly explained, "I need to get back. I'm good at carrying things and some of the little kids are having to carry one of the beds while I'm here."

"Go on." Sergeant Douglas said, then added, "Thank you for helping, Luke. We appreciate it."

* * * * *

"Okay. What just happened?" Joseph asked firmly.

"Luke told you himself, he was scared and uncertain. The thing is that Luke doesn't have the complicated mental mechanisms in place to hide his emotions from himself or others. Everything he feels is laid bare for everyone to see." Sergeant Douglas said simply.

"Okay. I guess I can see that." Joseph cautiously accepted.

"When Tanner came in close proximity to Luke, he was bombarded by Luke's raw emotions and couldn't deal with them hitting him all at once." Sergeant Douglas carefully explained.

"Are you saying that Tanner is an empath?" Lisa slowly asked.

"Yes. In the classical sense. When he's close to someone, he feels their emotions." Sergeant Douglas confirmed.

"I always thought that empaths would be... nicer." Joseph hesitantly admitted.

Sergeant Douglas laughed at the admission, then said, "Once they're aware of their abilities and learn some basic shielding, they usually are. But in Tanner's case, when he

encounters raw emotions, he either reacts with fear, like we just saw, or he gets drawn into them, not being able to distinguish other people's emotions from his own."

"So, do you think that all the blacks are empathic?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"Potentially, yes." Sergeant Douglas said thoughtfully, then added, "But empathy is one of the more difficult psionic abilities to identify. A low-level empath might go through their entire life without ever realizing that they had any unique ability at all."

"So, in theory, could we use the blacks to work with the purples in the same way that we use the grays to spot for the oranges?" Joseph slowly asked.

"Once they've received proper training, that would probably work. But until then, the blacks are probably going to either isolate themselves or choose to remain close to the one or two people that they feel comfortable with." Sergeant Douglas confirmed.

"So Tanner's feelings for Jude might just be his natural self-preservation instinct compelling him to seek out a person who will emotionally shield him?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"Theoretically, yes. In practice, who knows? I wouldn't automatically jump to the conclusion that Tanner is *using* Jude, however unknowingly, as an emotional tampon. There might be a true friendship there. There might even be love. We'll just have to wait and see how things play out."

"When you asked me to talk to Luke, you were testing to see if I really have that Mentatis thing, right?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"Yes. I couldn't say for sure until I saw it in action."

"Well? Do I have it?" Lisa asked hopefully.

"Without a doubt. You took Luke from despondent to joyful in a matter of seconds. Your words were enough to ease his logical mind while your psychic energy calmed his inner turmoil. If you're this effective without any training at all, I can't wait to see what you'll be able to accomplish once you have conscious control of your gift." Sergeant Douglas said with a smile at her.

"We've got a lot of traumatized people. You could be a big help to them." Joseph said frankly.

"There's lots of traumatized people everywhere right now. And we need all the help we can get." Sergeant Douglas said frankly.

"We've been locked away for... I don't know how long. What's the date? I can't believe that I didn't even think about asking before now."

"Today is Friday, December 14th." Sergeant Douglas said slowly.

"Okay. It's about a week later than I estimated, but I wasn't too far off." Joseph said thoughtfully, then asked, "What's happened in the last month and a half? We've been completely cut off from outside events since we arrived."

"That's kind of a lot to explain and we're here." Sergeant Douglas said as he motioned ahead of them to where the plane was waiting with the ramp extended.

"What do you need for us to do?" Joseph asked as they continued to walk.

"Just get everyone on the plane and settled in. If I need you to do something, I'll let you know." Sergeant Douglas said seriously.

"Don't forget that Cory and Denn came with us to get the MRE's."

"Actually, I *did* forget. But while everyone's getting strapped in, I'll see to it that they have enough food and water for everyone and a cart to haul it back."

* * * * *

"Major Stanley, I've arrived at the plane and we're just starting to load the leaders and their wounded aboard."

"Acknowledged. We're en route to your location. ETA five minutes." Major Stanley promptly responded.

"On the walk here I was notified that none of the captives have eaten since yesterday. I would like permission to provide MRE's for those who will be staying behind, to get them by until they arrive at Fairchild."

"Granted. However, we won't be able to delay our departure for the time it will take to deliver those supplies."

"Yes sir. They brought personnel with them to carry the supplies back to the parking area."

"*Good work. Offload the supplies and get them on their way. Be prepared to take off as soon as we've arrived.*"

"Yes sir." Sergeant Douglas said smartly.

"*Stanley out.*"

* * * * *

"Can a few of you guys help me offload these crates? We're going to take off as soon as Major Stanley gets here." Sergeant Douglas called into the plane.

"We're on it. Wade told us that you got permission and the loadmaster is telling us which boxes to take." Joseph said as he was helping to unload boxes from a pallet.

Although Sergeant Douglas had been expecting to help, he found that they had an efficient production line already established and anything that he could do would just impede their progress.

"Can you help us figure out how to secure the wounded? It looks like we're going to have to move them off their cots and we're not sure about how's the best way to transport them." One of the girls dressed in white asked hopefully from deeper in the plane.

"To do this the right way, we'll need the loadmaster. I'll get him and be right there." Sergeant Douglas answered immediately, happy to know that there was actually *something* he could help with.

* * * * *

After working for a few minutes, getting the unconscious teenagers secured for flight, Sergeant Douglas heard some new voices approaching.

"Good. It looks like you've thought this through." Captain Stewart said as she spotted the open area that had been left for her 'brown' patients.

"I left room for six. I hope that's enough." Sergeant Douglas said cautiously.

"We'll only need five. One didn't survive the hike." Captain Stewart said gravely.

"I think we're just about done here. Let us know what you need and we'll help you get your patients secured." Sergeant Douglas offered respectfully.

"We recruited a few of the children to help and the loadmaster has said that he'll be right up to help us secure them properly. I believe that we have matters well in hand." Captain Stewart assured him.

"Yes ma'am." Sergeant Douglas said simply before moving away toward the back of the plane.

* * * * *

As Sergeant Douglas stepped off the ramp, he was just able to catch sight of a group of teenagers walking away, pushing the dollies that had been reconfigured to function as carts.

"Are all your people aboard?" Major Stanley asked as he stepped onto the ramp.

"Yes sir. And all our casualties have been secured." Sergeant Douglas assured him.

"Colonel Hayes has asked that we interview the children while in flight and provide a synopsis of their story for him upon arrival. Since you seem to speak their language, I thought that I'd leave that task to you." Major Stanley said diplomatically.

"Yes sir." Sergeant Douglas automatically agreed, then thought to add, "But if you're able to attend, I think your presence might help to keep the interview on track. Being the same age as them doesn't necessarily work to my advantage in all situations."

"I need to go forward and make arrangements for a cleanup detail to be dispatched to deal with all those bodies. Once we're in the air, I'll join you."

"Yes sir." Sergeant Douglas said just as he heard the engines starting up.

* * * * *

"What's wrong?" Sergeant Douglas asked as he walked into the main cabin and found Luke sobbing into Lisa's shoulder.

"He saw the browns being loaded in." Joseph said regretfully, then added, "I should have thought to prepare him for that."

"Between you and Zarah, you've spared him a lot of pain. I know that you're sorry that you can't spare him all of it, but things just work out that way sometimes no matter how hard you try."

"He asked about his brother..." Joseph said as a tear slid down his cheek.

"Did you tell him?" Sergeant Douglas asked quietly.

"Yeah." Joseph choked out.

"Joseph. You do your best and sometimes shit happens. You didn't cause this. It's not your fault." Sergeant Douglas urged him to understand.

"Then whose fault is it?" Joseph asked as he looked Sergeant Douglas in the eyes.

"I've scanned the minds of all the surviving Browns and I haven't found those answers." Sergeant Douglas said simply, then carefully said, "Maybe if you told me about what you've been able to figure out for yourselves, I could turn that over to my superiors and they could put the pieces together."

"Lee, don't pretend like you haven't already read my mind and found all of that out for yourself." Joseph said bitterly.

"I've only looked at the surface of your mind, more as a way of understanding your motivation, than gathering any real information about you." Sergeant Douglas said frankly, then thought to add, "But Zarah gave her permission for me to do a deep scan of her, so I do know pretty much anything that you've told her."

All conversation stopped as the engines throttled up and they all felt the sensation of movement.

Chapter 4

Once they had lifted into the air, Sergeant Douglas looked toward Lisa and quietly asked, "How's he doing?"

"Better, for the moment." Lisa said quietly, then added, "The takeoff distracted him."

Although Sergeant Douglas knew that Luke still had the entire grieving process to go through, it pleased him to see that it had been interrupted before Luke had been too severely impacted.

"Have we started?" Major Stanley asked as he entered the large main cabin.

"Actually, we were just about to." Sergeant Douglas said simply, then took out his comm device and started it recording.

"Do you want to go over things and help me try to make sense of all of this?" Sergeant Douglas asked Joseph carefully.

"Before you do that, you might want to talk to some of us who've been around for a while." Theodore said simply.

Sergeant Douglas looked at him curiously for a moment, then said, "You're blocking me. I can't read you at all."

"Yeah. You probably don't want to get into my head. You might not be able to get out." Theodore said frankly.

"How do you mean?" Sergeant Douglas asked cautiously.

"That's something I'd rather not discuss with the group. If you're really interested, I can tell you about it later." Theodore offered amiably.

"Okay. What information have you gotten that we don't already have?" Sergeant Douglas asked carefully.

"I'm not a telepath, so I actually don't know how much you've already discovered. But I've been locked in that place since I was nine years old. A couple of the others..." Theodore

looked down the row of people to the other whites, "...well, they think that I might have gone a little bit crazy because of it."

"More than a little." The other male white said playfully in response.

"Anyway, in all that time I've been drugged and probed and I've actually forgotten what real food tastes like... speaking of which..." Theodore trailed off, looking at Sergeant Douglas expectantly.

"Oh, that's right. They told me that none of you had eaten since yesterday. It won't hurt to stop for a few minutes so that you can eat." Sergeant Douglas said quickly.

"Go ahead and have your talk. I know where the MRE's are. I'll be right back." Joseph said as he stood.

"We can wait..." Sergeant Douglas offered.

"I'd rather you didn't. You can fill me in if I miss anything." Joseph said easily, then asked, "Kenyon? Jayce? Do you want to help me for a few minutes?"

Sergeant Douglas looked at the three, then suddenly realized what Joseph was *actually* doing and turned his attention back to Theodore. "The food is soon to be on the way. Now you were saying..."

"Right. Um, okay. The first thing is, my ability manifested when I was about six or maybe I had just turned seven. Because of the way it works, I thought I was going crazy... I'm not talking about emotional outbursts or anything like that, but real, full-on crazy. I was hearing voices and seeing things that weren't there."

"What is your ability?" Sergeant Douglas asked cautiously.

"I'm clairvoyant." Theodore said simply, then added, "Well, at least I am when I'm not drugged half out of my mind."

"So people thought you were crazy. What happened?"

"Okay. This is going to sound kind of sick to some of you, but stay with me, I'm pretty sure I figured it out." Theodore said in prelude.

Cautious looks went around the cabin at the warning.

"My parents were never that great to begin with. I mean, they obviously didn't give a rat's ass about me, but as long as I wasn't bothering them for toys or food or... affection, they pretty much just ignored me. Those were the good times. Later, toward the end, my dad just kinda disappeared. I don't know if he left my mom or got killed or was recalled by the project. Nothing was ever explained to me. One day he just wasn't there anymore. After that, my mom started getting really abusive toward me. At first she'd just smack me around a little, but then she started getting her jollies out of hurting me, so she'd kick me until I'd cry or she'd burn me with cigarettes.

"The cops were called, mom was put in jail, and I was put into this group home, blah blah blah, you know the story. Anyway, by this time, I was really fucked up. The neglect, abuse and me thinking I was crazy made me think about killing myself. Then this other kid was put in the group home with me and he'd just lost his parents in a car accident. He was really nice and cool and he seemed to like me and... well, he was my first real friend." Theodore finished with a smile.

"Is this story going somewhere or can we just move on?" Sergeant Douglas asked cautiously.

"The 'friend' I met is Jason K, he's the big good-looking guy in gray who just walked out of here... probably got his pants around his ankles right now from the way Joseph was looking at him." Theodore said with a grin.

"Go on... I mean with your story. Not with what Jason and... you know what I mean." Sergeant Douglas stammered.

"I know." Theodore said with a grin, then continued, "That's the first time that I ever paid attention to the visions that I was having. It's the first time I ever thought that they might be something more than my imagination."

"Were they visions of the future?" Sergeant Douglas asked cautiously.

"Futures." Theodore corrected, then continued, "The only thing is, all the futures that I could see into looked pretty much the same. They all had me in my little white jail cell, wearing my little white jumpsuit and eating whale boogers, or whatever that was, for every meal."

"Is that it?"

"No. In one of the futures, I saw myself with Jason K, dressed in gray, like he is right now. I put it off for as long as I could, but eventually I had to break ties with him. I was really careful to do everything that I had to do to make *that* future come true. Some of it wasn't too nice and some of it hurt Jason K, but I did what I had to do. In a sense, I *chose* to be here right now." Theodore said seriously.

"Are you saying that by using your clairvoyant ability, you condemned your best and only friend to suffer the same fate that you were destined for?" Major Stanley asked cautiously.

"Well, it sounds like kind of a dick move, when you put it that way, but I was just a kid. All I knew is that I had one chance not to be alone for the rest of my life, so I took it." Theodore said regretfully.

"Have you had any visions of the future since then?" Sergeant Douglas asked carefully.

"Just flashes. They've been really good about keeping me drugged up so I couldn't find a way to escape. When I've skipped a meal to try and let the drugs flush out of my system, they'd just call a 'blackout' and I'd wake up completely mind blind again."

"So, what is it that you think you've figured out?" Sergeant Douglas asked cautiously.

"The abuse, it wasn't a random thing. They 'tortured' me to get my ability to manifest. My dad, my mom, the house parents at the foster home, I think they were all part of it. The pieces just fit together too smoothly for it to have been random chance. They got my ability up and running, then stuck me in that place so that they could milk me for my 'genetic material' for the rest of my life, however long they allowed that to be." Theodore said gravely.

"It's the same for all the whites." The other 'White' boy said seriously. "I mean, not exactly, but they engineered events to put us under stress and make us 'break out', then they locked us away so that they could milk us."

"So it would seem that since your abilities manifested earlier than the others, that you were somehow more valuable to the project?" Sergeant Douglas asked speculatively.

"We didn't know about the others. As far as any of us knew, we were the only ones." Theodore said frankly, then added, "But things changed about a month ago... or, at least I'm guessing it was a month. All of a sudden, the routine that we'd lived with for years

was broken. Stuff was being done differently. It was mostly little things, but we knew that something was going on."

"Sorry that took so long. We didn't have a box knife." Joseph said as he carried an open box of MRE's into the cabin.

"Riiiiight." Theodore said with a grin at Joseph.

Although Joseph blushed, he didn't respond. He simply went from person to person handing out packaged meals.

"It took us a while to find the water, but you'll need this." Kenyon said as he followed along, handing out bottles of water.

"I'll start handing out the water over here. Don't drink it yet, you're going to need it for your meals." Jason said as he started on the other side of the aisle.

Theodore smiled at Jason as he approached.

"You like ravioli, don't you?" Jason asked as he handed Theodore a bottle of water.

"I used to love it, but I don't think I've had it since the last time I ate it with you at the group home." Theodore said honestly.

"Well, I got this for you. I hope you enjoy it." Jason said as he handed the MRE to Theodore.

"Are you going to have one too?" Theodore asked hopefully.

"Yeah. If you can get these guys to scoot over, we can have ravioli together, just like we used to." Jason said with a smile.

"Okay. I'll wait for you." Theodore said with astonishment.

"I don't hate you, Teddy. I don't understand exactly what happened back then, but when you say that you had your reasons, I believe you."

"I go by Theodore now."

"Too bad. You'll always be Teddy to me." Jason said before handing out bottles of water down the row.

Theodore looked at the ravioli MRE in his hand, then quietly asked the girl in yellow next to him, "Would you mind scooting down?"

"I'll just take his seat. He obviously won't be needing it." Alyssa said before crossing the aisle and taking Jason's vacated seat.

* * * * *

It took a few trips to the back of the plane and a few minutes for everyone to have a meal in hand, but Jason eventually returned and took his seat next to Theodore. The two of them worked as a team to figure out the water activated food warmer and had a great time doing so.

Sergeant Douglas watched their interactions with interest. To him, it seemed that there were a few brief moments when all the years that the two boys had been apart were absent and they were two seven-year-old best friends, just enjoying doing things together.

Once all the activity seemed to have settled down, Sergeant Douglas decided to continue, "So it sounds to me like once your abilities manifested you were drugged and used as livestock for your genetic material."

"Yeah. That's true." Theodore verified, then added, "If you're interested, I actually came up with a theory about that."

"Okay. I think we need to stay focused on the facts right now, but I'd be interested to hear your theory." Sergeant Douglas said cautiously.

"Once they had enough evidence to *prove* that our abilities had manifested and they had us completely under their control, then what if they were collecting our genetic material so that they could auction it off? What if we really *were* being treated as livestock?" Theodore asked seriously as he began squeezing jalapeno cheese spread onto a cracker.

"So rather than harvesting your genetic material to create the next generation in their breeding program, you think that they were collecting your genetics to sell to the highest bidder?" Sergeant Douglas slowly asked.

"I don't see any reason why they couldn't do both." Theodore said simply, then took a big bite of the cracker.

"We can't work under the assumption that that's what they were doing, but I think the possibility is worth considering. I'll be sure to submit it as part of my report." Sergeant Douglas stated thoughtfully.

"Can I ask a question?" Joseph quietly interjected.

"Go ahead." Sergeant Douglas said as he turned his attention away from Theodore.

"There's no way a program like this could have gone on for as long as it has without someone in the government being aware of it, if not actually controlling it themselves. Is the report you're writing going to be submitted to those same people?" Joseph asked carefully.

"No. In the time that you've been away, quite a bit has happened. President Ashwood attempted to kill President Bryce and in the weeks that followed, the country divided into two camps. The war has been fought on several different fronts."

Sergeant Douglas looked around the cabin to find everyone waiting for him to reveal just how bad 'bad' was.

"That's only the tip of the iceberg. I could spend the entire rest of the trip telling you about what else has happened, but we have things to do right now. Suffice it to say that the people we are working for *aren't* the same ones who established the program that captured you." Sergeant Douglas finished determinedly.

Joseph reluctantly nodded his acceptance.

"We're currently in the western territory, controlled by the forces loyal to President Bryce. Pretty much everything east of the Mississippi is controlled by the forces loyal to President Ashwood. There's a large, ever changing, swath of territory in between that's claimed by both but controlled by neither." Sergeant Douglas said gravely.

"So, we're essentially at war right now."

"Yes."

"And where are you taking us?"

"To Fairchild Air Force Base in Washington state. It's deep in Bryce territory and relatively safe. I don't know where you're going to be going from there."

"So you don't know what's going to happen to us?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"No. But I think that when I give my report, it might influence the decisions being made on your behalf. If you know what you'd *like* to happen next, I could pass it on so the people making decisions could take your wishes into account." Sergeant Douglas said carefully.

"They're going to keep us together." Theodore said past a mouthful of food.

Everyone turned their attention to him, waiting for him to explain.

Once he had swallowed, Theodore said, "I haven't got my clairvoyance back, if that's what you're thinking. But they've got two hundred untrained psionic kids that they have to do something with. There's no way they can just turn us loose. And considering that some of our genetics might fetch a pretty good price on the black market, any of us would be at risk of being abducted again if we were on our own. If they split us into smaller groups, then they have to worry about security that many times over. The whole thing becomes a huge burden on them with no payoff and seemingly no end in sight."

"So what do you see as an answer?" Sergeant Douglas asked cautiously.

"The only outcome I can see that makes any sense at all is if we're kept together, trained to use our abilities to their best advantage, then put to work when we're ready." Theodore said simply before taking another bite of food.

"You wouldn't know anyone who could make something like that work, would you?" Joseph asked Sergeant Douglas with a knowing grin.

"Like I said before, I'm just going to write the report and turn it over to my superiors. I'll be sure to include what you've just said." Sergeant Douglas said more formally.

"Be sure to tell them that wherever they send us, to make sure that they have plenty of this MRE ravioli. This is fantastic!" Theodore said with a wide grin.

Jason smiled at the comment, then went back to eating his own meal.

* * * * *

"Let me spell out what I've learned so far. That way if I've missed anything or misunderstood any of the facts, you can let me know before I issue my report." Sergeant Douglas said calmly.

There seemed to be an air of agreement, so he continued, "The whites were abducted four or five years ago..."

"That was just me. I was the first. The rest arrived at different times since." Theodore quickly interjected.

"Okay. So over the past five years, the whites arrived one by one." Sergeant Douglas corrected, then waited to see if anyone had an objection. When no one did, he continued, "Then about a month and a half ago, everyone else arrived, all at once."

Again, he waited, but no one had anything to add.

"Somehow they arranged for all of you to be 'excused' from school in advance of the abduction, so no questions would be asked." Sergeant Douglas said carefully.

"That doesn't apply to the whites." Theodore informed him.

"What did they do to you?" Sergeant Douglas asked cautiously.

"Well, in my case, they 'tricked' me into eating drugged food. I knew what they were doing and ate it willingly because I knew that if I didn't, things would go that much worse for me. I ate the food that the house parents 'made especially for me' and the next thing I knew, I was in my little white prison." Theodore said simply.

"All I can figure is that they must have been feeding me the drugs to kill my telepathy for a while before they finally gave me the knockout drugs, because I never saw it coming." The other boy in white said simply.

"What's your name?" Sergeant Douglas asked cautiously.

"Gary. Well, Garrett, really. But nobody calls me that."

"And you're a telepath?"

"Yeah. But I was stupid and let people know about it. Not everyone, but the people close to me. The people I trusted... big mistake."

"What about now? Can you read me?" Sergeant Douglas asked curiously.

"Nope. I'm so doped up that I can barely sit upright. They've had me on the heavy duty drugs for so long that it's probably going to take a while before it's all out of my system." Gary said frankly.

"Let me save you some time here." Theodore interrupted. "Jesse is a clairvoyant, but hers is different from mine. She can't see into the past or the future. She just sees right now."

"Isn't that what everyone sees?" Sergeant Douglas asked slowly.

"She can see what someone is doing 'right now', two hundred miles from here." Theodore said frankly.

"Okay, I could see that being useful." Sergeant Douglas admitted.

"Debbie can bend light. Before you ask, she can't turn invisible, but with enough practice she might be able to manage it someday."

"So it seems that the white abilities are more advanced than the others. I wonder if that has to do with your abilities being drawn out earlier or if they chose to draw your abilities out earlier because you had greater potential." Sergeant Douglas said speculatively.

"I think that if they could have achieved the same results with everyone, they would have done it." Theodore said frankly, then continued, "The last two are Katrina and Cassandra. Kat is a firebug and Cass is a healer... or the opposite, depending on her mood."

"What do you mean?" Sergeant Douglas asked cautiously.

"Before they 'got' me, I figured out that I could make sick people get well. I could also make well people get sick... just by wanting it." Cassandra said tonelessly.

"I'll be sure not to piss you off." Sergeant Douglas said carefully, then continued, "So now that we've covered the whites, what I've learned about the rest of the colors is that they were abducted, did their best to deal with being held captive, were subjected to blackouts,

drugged food and sexual violation when they were unconscious, and then they realized that they had psionic abilities."

"Yep." Joseph said easily.

"Then, for some reason that we don't fully understand, the people holding you against your will suddenly decided to collect the harvested DNA and destroy all of you." Sergeant Douglas said slowly.

"Well, if we're at war and the base we were in was located in 'enemy territory', I can see the cost benefit analysis suggesting that it would be better to kill us all than to try and relocate more than two hundred people hundreds of miles across enemy territory or face the ever increasing risk of us being discovered and falling into enemy hands." The boy in orange, Kenyon, said thoughtfully.

"You're letting it show." Joseph stage whispered to him.

"I mean, they're the bad guys, right? What'd you expect them to do?" Kenyon quickly added.

"Excuse me, but I have a question that I'd like answered, simply for my own gratification." Major Stanley interrupted.

"Of course sir. What would you like to know?" Sergeant Douglas asked immediately.

"Back at the parking lot, you told me that the greens were telepaths and mentioned some of the other colors. Could you tell me what abilities each color has? I think it would be a good thing to know when I'm talking to them."

"Yes sir. As you said, the greens are telepaths, the yellows are precognitives, the oranges are physical healers, the reds are telekinetics, the blacks are empaths, the purples are emotional healers, the grays are physiol empaths and the blues are retrocognitives."

"Send me a copy of your report, if you would, and I'll look up which of those I don't already know." Major Stanley said uneasily.

"Yes sir." Sergeant Douglas immediately agreed.

"So, is that it? Is that all you needed to know from us?" Joseph asked curiously.

"Unless any of you have anything more that you feel like sharing, I think that covers the basics." Sergeant Douglas told the group seriously, then added, "I'm sure that each and every one of you is going to be interviewed, at length, about your experiences. The point of this was to give them an overview of what you experienced as a group."

"Lee." Joseph said, gaining his attention. "One more thing that you might want to tell them is that I don't think that there's a single one of us who would want to go back to our old lives, if that were even possible. We've become closer to each other than we ever were to anyone in the 'normal' world. We want to live and grow and be challenged... and be appreciated... together."

"I've just received word that our fighter escort has caught up to us, so don't be concerned if you notice them." Major Stanley announced to the group, then continued, "Also, for those of you concerned for your friends that we left behind, their plane is expected to land within minutes. Lieutenant Miller is organizing the next group for departure as we speak, so you should be reunited before very long."

"Joseph, I need your help." Aaron said as he walked into the cabin.

"What's wrong?" Joseph asked as he stood.

"One of the browns just woke up. She asked me to kill her." Aaron said gravely.

"Sergeant Douglas, would you help me? We might need a telepath for this job." Joseph asked hopefully.

"I don't know how much good it will do, but I'll go with you anyway." Sergeant Douglas said as he got up to join Joseph.

* * * * *

"Ruth, my name is Joseph. Aaron asked me to talk with you. Will you talk with me?" Joseph asked carefully.

"I was supposed to die. You should have let me die." Ruth rasped in an anguished whisper.

"You don't have to die. You can get better and lead a normal life."

"I've had my life. My work is done. I need to die now."

"Joseph, she's not speaking from depression. She's convinced that her work in the world is done and only wants to ascend to be with her god now." Sergeant Douglas said distantly as he examined the inner workings of her mind.

"Did they give her some 'self-destruct' hypnotic suggestion?" Joseph asked curiously.

"If only..." Sergeant Douglas said slowly, then eventually added, "If it were a simple hypnotic suggestion implanted in her psyche, I could deal with it, but this... they've systematically destroyed her self-identity and left nothing but this automaton, programmed to perform a specific function. Once that function is complete, the automaton has no purpose."

"Are you saying that she's not a person anymore?" Joseph asked uncertainly.

"It depends on how you define 'person'. Psychologically, there's not much left of whatever person she might have been. She's been beaten down both figuratively and literally over the course of her life. Now that her given purpose has ended, all that's left is this empty thing that wants to die."

"Should we ask Lisa to talk to her? Maybe she can help." Joseph carefully suggested.

"In order to heal, there has to be something to start with. I suppose that if Lisa had some training and a few years of experience, that there might be *something* that she could do. I don't know... But there's nothing we can do in the here and now." Sergeant Douglas finished quietly before stepping away.

* * * * *

"Captain Stewart, thank you for allowing us to talk to your patient." Sergeant Douglas said respectfully.

"Thank you for being brief." Captain Stewart said sincerely, then added, "At first I didn't believe your claims about psychic healing, but now that I've witnessed it for myself, I'm in awe of their abilities."

"The natural talent that they have isn't a substitute for your years of medical training and experience. In a situation like this, their life-saving techniques can be of great benefit. But

once those lives are saved, a *doctor* is needed to see that the patients are properly treated so that they can fully recover. Basically, what *we* have is first-aid, what *you* have is medicine."

"Even so, they were able to treat injuries in the field that I would have had difficulty with in a hospital with a full staff. Their abilities are nothing short of miraculous." Captain Stewart said honestly.

"From the look of it, they've done as much as they can do at this point, the rest is up to you." Sergeant Douglas said frankly, then added, "By the way, your conscious patient seems to be getting agitated, in case there's something you wanted to do for her."

"Major Stanley wanted her interviewed before I administered any sedation, but we seem to have left the security force officers behind who were supposed to conduct the interview." Captain Stewart said seriously.

"When you ask Major Stanley what he wants done next, you might mention that I've already interviewed her. That might be enough to satisfy him." Sergeant Douglas said uncertainly.

"I'll be sure to tell him. But I get the feeling that he doesn't trust in your method of interviewing." Captain Stewart said honestly.

"I get that feeling, too."

* * * * *

As Sergeant Douglas walked into the main cabin, the 'brown', Luke, was lying in wait.

"Were you talking to Grandma Ruth? How is she? Is she going to die?"

Despite his usual reluctance to do so, Sergeant Douglas looked into Luke's mind to see if he could find some indication of what 'Grandma Ruth' meant to him. Sergeant Douglas was surprised to realize that 'Grandma Ruth' wasn't actually Luke's biological grandmother, but rather one of Grandpa Edward's eight wives. Grandma Ruth was one of the older wives, with the youngest being under the age of eighteen.

"Your Grandma Ruth has been hurt, but it looks like she's going to recover." Sergeant Douglas said carefully.

"She's a mean bitch, but that doesn't mean that I want her to be dead." Luke said honestly.

"It's okay, Luke. This isn't your fault. Even when you do everything that you're supposed to and you do everything right, sometimes things still go wrong." Sergeant Douglas gently assured him.

"Sergeant Douglas." Major Stanley said from a few feet away.

"Yes sir." Sergeant Douglas said as he turned away from Luke.

"Since we appear to have the time, I would like for you to also include a list of rescuees with your report." Major Stanley said firmly.

"Yes sir." Sergeant Douglas immediately responded.

* * * * *

Once Sergeant Douglas was sure that there were no further orders forthcoming, he took out his comm device and created a new document for a list of names to attach to his report.

He thought that rather than go awkwardly from person to person, asking their names, he could telepathically gather the information far more quickly.

Plans sometimes have a way of not working out.

The 'whites' were blank to him. Whether it be the psychic inhibiting drugs or their own natural shielding, Sergeant Douglas couldn't even detect their presences.

In contrast, the 'greens', Wade and Tammy, were broadcasting their every thought as though they were using loudspeakers. It was a natural reaction for new telepaths and Sergeant Douglas couldn't fault them for it, but be that as it may, it made their blaring psychic chatter no less distracting.

Most of the others, like Joseph, were easily readable, but all of their minds were not only complex, but also 'non-standard'. Whereas, he could typically scan any random person and be able to find the information he wanted effortlessly, with Joseph and his contemporaries, Sergeant Douglas actually had to search for it.

The remaining few were still under the effect of the psychic inhibitors and basically came across as muffled whispers.

That left the unconscious colors, the surviving browns, his team and the flight crew on the plane.

"Do you have a headache?" Luke asked Sergeant Douglas with concern, snapping him out of his psychic inventory. He hadn't realized it, but he had been sitting with his face buried in his hands.

"No, Luke. I'm just working on making a list of everyone on the plane, so that I can turn it in with my report." Sergeant Douglas said to Luke with a weary smile.

"Do you just need to know their names?" Luke asked curiously.

"Names, ages, where they're from... standard stuff. The people in charge just want to know who's coming so that they can make a decent place for them to stay." Sergeant Douglas said with a smile at the young man.

"My name is Luke Olson, I'm 22 years old and I'm from Rock Crossing, Arizona. Is that all that you needed to know?"

"Yes. For now it is, but I may ask you a few questions about your family later, if we can find the time."

"What about my family?" Luke asked anxiously.

"I'd just like to understand the relationship dynamics. Most families have a family tree, yours is more of a wreath. I'm interested to understand how that works."

"Oh, okay..." Luke said slowly, obviously not understanding what he was talking about.

"I'd better get to work." Sergeant Douglas said as he made sure to input the information that Luke had so generously provided about himself in the first slot on his list.

* * * * *

"Joseph, would you mind helping me with something for a minute?" Sergeant Douglas asked hopefully.

"Sure. What did you need?" Joseph answered easily.

"Major Stanley wants a list of everyone that we evacuated on this flight..."

"This sounds like a job for a retrocog."

"At first I thought that it would be easy for me to do it telepathically, but with so many people at so many different telepathic levels, it's nearly impossible to sort through the background chatter to focus on one person. It looks like we'll have to do this the old fashioned way and since you already know everyone..." Sergeant Douglas tried to explain.

"I'm not a telepath." Joseph interrupted.

"I know that..."

"Do you? Because I can read every single person on this plane without even trying."

"Can you read the whites?" Sergeant Douglas asked curiously. Although he could look into Joseph's mind for himself, with as complicated as it was and the strange way it was organized, it was simply easier for him to ask.

"Yes. I can read them as clearly as I can read you."

"What about the unconscious patients from your compound?"

"Yes."

"The surviving browns?"

"Everyone." Joseph said frankly, then continued by asking, "Do you need an example?"

Before Sergeant Douglas could answer, Joseph continued, "The pilot's name is Jim, he's forty-five years old. He's originally from Lansing, Michigan. He wet his bed until he was eight years old and he's allergic to shellfish."

"Well, if that's the case and you wouldn't mind..."

"Who do you want to start with?"

* * * * *

As Sergeant Douglas and Joseph were working on compiling their list, Joseph thought to ask, "What's going to happen to this list?"

"I'm going to attach it to my report."

"And then it's going to get locked away in a file cabinet somewhere?" Joseph asked slowly, as more of a prompt for more information than actually believing it to be true.

"If you're worried about who's going to see it, everyone has been fairly well checked out."

"This thing is going to be like a take-out menu for every creep who wants our DNA. One slip and it's over for us."

"I'll be sure to emphasize the importance of keeping this information classified."

"Remember, it isn't paranoia if they really *are* out to get you." Joseph said in his defense.

Chapter 5

After excusing himself, Sergeant Douglas went to the forward compartment to borrow a computer for a few minutes to compose his report.

He had most of the facts already organized within his mind, so all that was left was to express them in a written form. Sergeant Douglas purposely left out details in favor of general, all-encompassing facts.

In the end, his report was succinct and to-the-point regarding the events leading up to and including the captivity in the hidden base.

As Sergeant Douglas returned to the main cabin, he was surprised to find a group of people gathered around Major Stanley, who was still sitting where Sergeant Douglas had last seen him.

"What's going on?" Sergeant Douglas asked as he approached.

"He's in pain and they're trying to get Major Stanley to let them heal him." Joseph said simply.

"If the major doesn't want your help, you can't force him." Sergeant Douglas said loudly to the group.

"Actually, we can." A smaller, younger looking girl dressed in orange said firmly. It took a moment for Sergeant Douglas to remember that her name was Denise.

"Yeah. We were just being nice by asking him before doing it anyway." An older looking girl in gray named Simone, said from Denise's side.

"Major Stanley, would you like for me to get them to leave you alone?" Sergeant Douglas asked seriously.

"Before you do that, since you're invested in all this 'psychic' crap, maybe you could tell me. Is what they're talking about doing 'tricking' my mind into ignoring my injuries, or are they capable of actually physically *healing* me?" Major Stanley asked cautiously.

"Theoretically, it's possible to do both. Since I'm not sure what they're proposing, I can only say that either way they are fully capable of improving your quality of life." Sergeant Douglas said carefully.

"What we're talking about is *healing* one section of his spine. We can't take away all his pain, we can't replace what's missing but we can reconstruct what's been damaged." Denise said firmly.

"I could feel it from across the plane, not that he was in pain, but that he was in *unnecessary* pain. It's something that we can fix." Simone helpfully added.

"Can you make the repairs without touching Major Stanley?" Sergeant Douglas asked carefully.

"Yeah. As soon as Simone tells me where to focus, I'm just going to direct my energy to reconstruct the discs and... vertebrae... I don't know the technical terms for everything, but I can put his spine back to how it was before it was damaged." Denise struggled to say.

"Sir, it's possible that they'll be able to help you. I understand your reluctance to engage in what might be seen as 'hokum' or 'new age' treatments, but if they treat you without touching you, what harm could it do? Either they'll do what they claim, or at worst, nothing will happen." Sergeant Douglas said carefully.

"I've seen enough of you at work to at least consider that you might have legitimate telepathic abilities. Knowing that such a thing might exist, how can I know that they won't just turn off the pain receptors and tell me that I'm feeling better?" Major Stanley asked cautiously.

"Sir, if you will trust me to do so, I can safeguard your mind. I can install the same telepathic shielding that I use for myself so that no one can look into or in any way manipulate your thoughts." Sergeant Douglas said seriously.

After a moment to consider, Major Stanley finally said, "You are trusted by the president and Colonel Hayes, so if you say that you'll see that my mind isn't invaded, I think that I can trust you that much."

"So we can fix you?" Denise asked hopefully.

"How long will this take?" Major Stanley asked cautiously.

"It will take less time to fix you than it did to convince you." Denise said simply.

"Do it." Major Stanley reluctantly ground out.

"Can you stand up? We need for your spine to be in line to do this right." Denise asked cautiously.

Major Stanley did his best to hide the effort that it took for him to achieve a standing position, but it was by far the most difficult consequence of his injury. He felt especially vulnerable with so many people watching him, but with determination, he was able to persevere.

As the Major was achieving a standing position, Sergeant Douglas did just as he had said and constructed complex telepathic shielding to shelter Major Stanley's mind.

As Sergeant Douglas watched, the grays, Simone and Mary Alice, focused their psychol empathic abilities on Major Stanley's lower back. A few whispers between them was their way of dividing the labor.

As soon as the grays were done, they directed the oranges, Denise and Heather, where to start their healing.

To an outsider, it was a rather ridiculous sight. Basically it looked like four teenage girls were standing silently, staring, completely focused on a forty year old man's butt.

Sergeant Douglas was able to comprehend the forces at work and watched with wonder as the healers caused discs and vertebrae to contort and reconstruct themselves into a better, more workable configuration.

"I feel something. What are they doing?" Major Stanley asked cautiously.

"Restoring your lower back to how it was before your injury." Sergeant Douglas said absently as he watched for any sign that the inexperienced healers might be in over their heads.

"Look at it now." Heather said as she took a step back.

Simone stepped forward and took her place, carefully examining the work that she had done.

After a moment to explain what she had seen, Heather returned to do some detail work.

"They're almost done." Sergeant Douglas said slowly.

"Are they fixing it?" Major Stanley asked dubiously.

"Yes sir. I can't really say how it's going to *feel* to you. The muscles and nerves in the area might need some time to adjust, but the physical injury is nearly healed. They should be done in less than a minute."

"Major, would you mind if we fix your arm too, while we're at it?" Mary Alice asked timidly.

"It's just a dull ache. It isn't worth worrying about." Major Stanley informed her.

"Maybe not, but from the way it looks to me, you've had a broken bone that didn't heal right. If it gets hit the wrong way, it'll break really easily. It'll only take us a minute to seal the fracture and make it as strong as it was before." Mary Alice said hopefully.

Major Stanley's gruff facade broke at the girl's honest concern for him and he finally said, "You can go ahead if you want, as long as it's not too much trouble."

Mary Alice smiled at him, then directed Denise to focus where the healing was needed.

Sergeant Douglas watched for a minute longer, then announced, "That's it. They're done."

"I felt *something* happen, but I don't feel any different." Major Stanley said honestly.

"They didn't do anything dramatic. Some things were slipped out of place and they put everything back where it's supposed to go." Sergeant Douglas said honestly.

Major Stanley looked at the four girls and quietly said, "Thank you."

"Just let us know if you need us again. This is what we do." Denise said for all of them.

Major Stanley put a hand to his earpiece, and appeared to be listening.

Everyone watched and waited.

"We need to prepare for landing." Major Stanley finally announced.

"Jayce, Kenyon, Teddy, help me get all the bottles and wrappers picked up." Joseph said as he stepped away.

"Theodore." The boy in white corrected as he got up to do as he had been asked.

"Oh my god!" Major Stanley gasped as he sat down.

"Is something wrong sir?" Sergeant Douglas asked with immediate concern.

"No. My back just cracked... oh sweet Jesus! That felt wonderful!" Major Stanley said past heavy breaths.

Sergeant Douglas smiled at the Major's blissful expression.

* * * * *

"Sergeant Douglas, did you finish your report?" Major Stanley asked once everyone was strapped into place.

"Yes sir. But I didn't want to take the chance of it being intercepted, so I'm keeping it with me until I have access to a secure network location." Sergeant Douglas said seriously.

"If anyone intercepted it, they'd probably think it was just a bunch of sci-fi nonsense." Major Stanley said with a smile.

"Yes sir. We actually kind of count on that." Sergeant Douglas admitted.

"Who is 'we'?" Major Stanley asked cautiously.

"'We' includes you now; the people who know that psionics exist and are covertly working for the military." Sergeant Douglas said seriously.

"Can I assume that all of us, the entire team and everyone else on this plane are going to be brought into your secret and forced to keep quiet about it?" Major Stanley asked cautiously.

"That's not for me to decide, but I would assume so. I expect that when we land, we aren't going to be allowed to deplane. They're going to keep us together until they have an isolated location to house all of us. We're all going to be extensively interviewed to find out what we know and what we don't, then we'll all be sworn to secrecy." Sergeant Douglas said speculatively.

"I can see what you're saying, but they'll probably pull the team once we get there and clear them early-on in the process." Major Stanley said thoughtfully.

"That's possible." Sergeant Douglas conceded, then continued, "But it's also possible that they'll keep you in place to serve as a command structure for the entire group. Rather than introduce new people and get them to establish authority, they could have you, the saviors of the entire group, remain with them to oversee their community and provide structure... as well as being there to enforce military dictates."

"You talk as though you're outside of all of this." Major Stanley said suspiciously.

"Yes sir." Sergeant Douglas confirmed, then explained, "As I told you before, I'm part of an established organization. I have a responsibility to my team. Once I've been debriefed, I expect to be sent back to them. What I've witnessed on this mission isn't sensitive enough to warrant isolating me. I'm no more of a security risk now than I was before."

"But you think that the rest of us will be confined with the children to serve as a command structure... or as babysitters?" Major Stanley asked to confirm.

"In the short term, yes. As time passes, I'm sure that people will be reassigned, rotate out or retire, just like with any other company. But I can't see any way that they would send you back to your previous postings, knowing what you know." Sergeant Douglas said frankly.

"Well, I'm still not one hundred percent sold on the whole psychic thing..." Major Stanley began to say, but was interrupted.

"What more do we have to do to prove it? Do we have to bring up details about Melanie and Bogart to prove it to you? Or would that even be enough? What would it take?" Theodore asked irritably.

"Don't talk about Melanie and Bogart." Major Stanley commanded coldly.

"Okay. Sorry. I won't go there." Theodore said repentantly.

"Teddy, is your clairvoyance coming back?" Jason asked from beside him.

"Yeah. Just flashes." Theodore confirmed, then added, "And call me Theodore."

"Guys, I know what it's like to have your entire view of the universe change in one day. Even when you have the proof right in front of you, acceptance takes time. Give the major a break, he's actually dealing pretty well." Sergeant Douglas told his companions frankly.

"As I was saying..." Major Stanley said loudly to hijack the conversation, "After what I've learned on this mission, I don't know how happy I would be returning to my previous duties anyway. I was so blissfully ignorant of the things really going on behind the scenes. Now that I know this... it changes everything that I think I know about how things work and what the reports that I'm reading *actually* mean."

"We need competent, experienced leadership at all levels who are aware of just what we can do. Now that you're aware, it's possible that you'll be brought in on operations that you wouldn't have been eligible for previously." Sergeant Douglas said carefully.

"What about the others? Lieutenant Miller? Chief Carol? What do you think will happen to them?" Major Stanley asked curiously.

"Teddy?" Sergeant Douglas asked as he glanced at him.

"Theodore." The boy responded firmly, then added with a shake of his head, "I got nothin."

Sergeant Douglas nodded, then said, "Lieutenant Miller will probably face the same decisions that you will. To take a vow of silence and return to his mundane existence or to fully become a part of 'those in the know' and participate in what's going on, behind what most people see."

"And the rest?" Major Stanley asked cautiously.

"I imagine that they'll probably be stationed to work with the rescuees until their unique skills are needed in a scenario which also includes psionics." Sergeant Douglas said thoughtfully.

"So they'll essentially be sequestered away from the world and lose any chance at progressing in their military careers." Major Stanley said thoughtfully.

"Think about the people stationed in Greenland or Antarctica. They're isolated and don't have many career opportunities. It's another duty assignment. It comes with the job." Sergeant Douglas said frankly.

"I suppose, and there's always the possibility that other situations might arise in which 'people in the know' are needed, that could provide avenues for advancement that might not be open to others." Major Stanley said thoughtfully.

"That's true. I'm not going to lie to you and say that this is the best thing that could have happened to you. But it *has* happened. Now you deal with it." Sergeant Douglas said frankly.

"Please take your seats and prepare for landing. The local time is 2:14pm. The temperature is currently thirty degrees fahrenheit. Welcome to Washington." The pilot, Jim, called over the intercom.

"Did anyone think about requisitioning two hundred winter coats?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"Not that I know of. Once we've landed, Sergeant Douglas can check into that for you." Major Stanley said seriously.

"Yes sir." Sergeant Douglas automatically responded.

"Wait. If it's two in the afternoon and thirty degrees, that means that it's about as hot as it's going to get for the day. Do you guys have someplace *warm* for us to stay?" The purple leader, Lisa, asked anxiously.

"We'll all find out together." Sergeant Douglas said simply.

"What's going to happen to us?" Jude asked quietly.

"How do you mean?" Sergeant Douglas asked curiously.

"What kinds of lives are we going to be able to have? Are we going to be able to be around regular people? Are we going to be able to have our own families? Are we going

to have to live on a military base for the rest of our lives?" Jude asked in an almost pleading voice.

"I honestly don't know." Sergeant Douglas admitted.

Before the conversation could continue, the plane's nose tilted downward in preparation for landing.

Everyone fell silent as they waited for the plane to touch down.

* * * * *

Once the plane had come to a complete stop, Major Stanley said, "Douglas, see if you can get an ETA on the accommodations for our guests... and winter clothing."

"Yes sir." Sergeant Douglas said smartly then hurried forward.

Major Stanley keyed his mic, then said, "Sergeant Barnes, I need a status report on our other teams and a projected ETA."

"*Yes sir.*" Sergeant Barnes responded.

* * * * *

"What are we supposed to do now?" Joseph asked into the silence that followed.

"Wait." Major Stanley said simply.

"For what?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"I'm assuming that someone, somewhere has a plan. I don't know who that someone is, but it isn't me. I've done what I was told to do. I brought you here. Now it's time for someone else to take over." Major Stanley said seriously.

"*Major Stanley, Colonel Hayes would like to speak with you... privately.*"

"I'll be right there." Major Stanley said as he pushed himself to standing.

The movement was so automatic and with such ease that Major Stanley very nearly missed the wonder of it. An unwilling smile crossed his face just for the fact of being able to achieve a standing position without pain or effort.

* * * * *

Major Stanley passed Sergeant Douglas and Sergeant Barnes as they left the forward communications cabin.

"*Welcome back, Major Stanley.*" Alvin said somewhat formally.

"Thank you sir." Major Stanley said respectfully.

"*I have good news and bad news for you.*" Alvin said flatly, not exhibiting any of the playfulness that might usually accompany those words. Before Major Stanley could ask, Alvin continued, "*The good news is that we've been able to arrange accommodations for your entire contingent.*"

"And the bad news?" Major Stanley prompted.

"*It may take as long as twenty-four hours before your accommodations are ready.*" Alvin said gravely.

"What do you have planned for the interim?"

"*I've been assured that the Air Force base can accommodate you for the short term. Within the hour, you should be able to deplane and you'll have access to barracks, the chow hall and other necessary facilities. Major Setton will be overseeing that operation and I've instructed him to coordinate with you. Arrangements are being made to keep all members of your party separate from the Air Force personnel, but be sure to impress on your people the importance of not discussing who they are or where they're from with anyone.*"

"Yes sir."

"*It's also been suggested that it might be beneficial for our 'guests' to be included in the decision making for their new community.*"

"Excuse me sir. But are you saying that the children aren't going to be housed on the Air Force base?" Major Stanley asked slowly.

"No. That's not logistically feasible." Alvin confirmed, then continued, "Due to the refugee effort in Kettle Falls and Colville, new home construction has been going on almost continuously since all this started. It just so happens that a new housing development was being built in a somewhat remote area south of Kettle Falls, approaching Monumental Mountain. The basic infrastructure is in place and the foundations are all laid. With supplies and manpower being provided by the Air Force, it is believed that if they work through the night, they will be able to complete construction by this time tomorrow."

"So we'll have a series of empty buildings?" Major Stanley said thoughtfully.

"Don't worry about that. I was told by the people overseeing the refugee effort that they have all the necessary appliances and furnishings to outfit that many homes. They've been doing this long enough to know what they're talking about."

"So we're going to have an isolated community of teenagers in the mountains... isn't that a recipe for disaster?"

"It could be, but they won't be left without guidance or supervision." Alvin said simply.

Major Stanley waited, but Alvin didn't elaborate.

Finally, Major Stanley said, "You want me to oversee them, don't you?"

"Yes, Major. That is, if you're willing to do so." Alvin said seriously, then continued, "We have resources to help them learn and develop their abilities. And if you're not up to the challenge, we can find someone else. You're the ideal choice, but not the only one. You're familiar to them. They already see you as something of a savior... and probably a father figure."

"I've tried being a father. It didn't work out." Major Stanley said regretfully.

"Well, now you get to try again. And you've got two hundred chances to get it right." Alvin said with a smile.

"Do I have to answer right away?" Major Stanley asked cautiously.

"You're in charge. Until you ask to be removed from your position, you will continue to be in charge. So no, you don't have to answer right away. In fact, I'd prefer it if you didn't answer at all." Alvin finished with a smile.

"You're putting an awful lot of faith in someone you don't know." Major Stanley said frankly.

"Yeah. I do that." Alvin said with a grin, then added more seriously, "You'll sink or swim. If you sink, I'll replace you. But I'd rather not if I don't have to. Those kids need some stability in their lives. I'd like for it to be you."

Major Stanley slowly nodded, then thought to ask, "What were you saying about the kids being included in the decision making?"

"We're organizing a new community, so it seemed like a good idea to take the leaders of the old community and give them a stake in what's being decided; give them a chance to put their brand on it and make it theirs."

"How will you do that?" Major Stanley asked curiously.

"I've learned that there are times when it just doesn't pay to overthink certain decisions. The plan is to take the leaders of your people and put them in contact with the leaders of my people and see what they come up with on their own. While it's possible that they may come up with some things that we'll have to refuse, it's more likely that they'll develop solutions for problems that we haven't even considered."

"That *does* sound like a good way of handling things. It will make the kids feel like the place they're living is actually *theirs*." Major Stanley said thoughtfully, then noticed a text message appear on his screen.

"Excuse me Colonel, but it seems that there's a new development with the kids that might be of some concern." Major Stanley said slowly.

"*What's that?*" Colonel Hayes asked seriously.

"Apparently, all the girls were stimulated to ovulate at basically the same time. As a result, it appears that now *all* of them, approximately one hundred fifty girls, are in need of... supplies, to deal with the aftermath." Major Stanley said uneasily.

"That's not as big of a problem as you might think." Alvin said with relief.

"How's that?" Major Stanley asked cautiously.

"Due to some panic buying about a month ago, Kettle Falls ended up with the largest stockpile of feminine hygiene products in the United States. I'll make a call and you should receive a truck in the next hour or two."

"Thank you sir."

"I think it's best that we get your people and my people together so that they can make some decisions before too much more time passes."

"Yes sir."

"Keep this line open. While you're getting your chosen representative, I'm going to fill Bug in on what we're doing. I'll meet you back here."

"Yes sir."

* * * * *

As Major Stanley walked into the main cabin, he once again marveled at the sensation of walking without pain.

"Sergeant Douglas." Major Stanley said to draw his attention.

"Yes sir." Sergeant Douglas responded as he stood to attention.

"Colonel Hayes asked that someone be chosen to represent the children in the decision making. It appears that they're going to create a community exclusively for them, built to their specifications." Major Stanley said slowly.

"I'll ask Joseph. He'll probably want to be the one to do it." Sergeant Douglas said thoughtfully.

"Whoever they decide to make their representative needs to go forward right away. They're on the line and ready to get started."

"Yes sir. Someone will be right there."

The End