



PREFACE

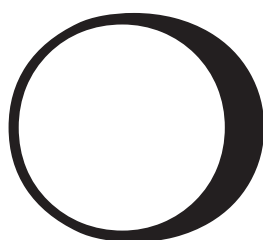
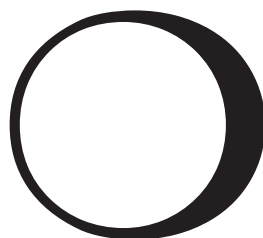
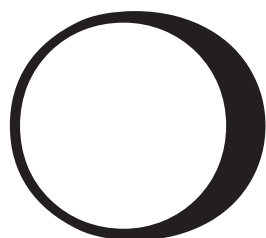


THE YEAR IS 2212. Humanity is once again on the brink of interstellar travel, but the greatest concern lies on earth. Forty-three years ago, a program called Dawning sought to advance human potential past anyone's wildest dreams. And they succeeded. Their genetic virus turned five ordinary humans into what they termed Metas. With this incredible arsenal, Dawning's army took over the world. For a decade they spread terror and violence across the earth as their test subjects turned weapons defeated the world's greatest forces.

After ten years of captivity, the Dawning Five broke free, destroying Dawning's headquarters in the process. Not a single member of the horrid Dawning establishment got out alive, but the damage was already done. The world lost a generation of soldiers and suffered a new dark age. One hundred years of technology was lost to the general public, surviving only in fragments within the deepest heart of the military. The world quieted as power shifted back to the four world governments, and the earth picked up the pieces of their fallen civilization. Nothing more was to be heard of the Five, but there are rumors even to this day.

For a year the world rested. Then, people with no possible connection to the base suddenly gained amazing abilities, though not as complex as the Five. With the Five's escape, the Dawning virus was released. It infected in a chaotic pattern, spreading quickly across the entire planet, attacking the young and old, the sick and the healthy. Scientists worked furiously to find a cure while thousands of people came down with a disease that's only effect was power beyond the scope of mortal man. Now thirty years after the war, humanity calls out a single question. Who can restore the world's shattered balance?





Part 1

The Perfect Weapon



CHAPTER 1



IT IS PITCH BLACK. A young girl laughs. "Come here Amanda." A hazy scene begins to brighten. A little girl, about five years old, runs happily across a small medical room. At the other side of the room crouches a man clad in a military uniform and a quiet smile, his thick black hair cropped about his head in a military cut.

The girl squeals and jumps into his arms, her short black hair falling across her face from the impact. Drake lifts her up and sets her on a table. He attaches two electrodes to her forehead as she looks into his sparkling grey eyes. "Do you remember the game we were playing?" he asks her. She nods, eyes wide with excitement.

"Okay," he says, placing a small Vid-screen on the table. When he taps it, the screen sends a multitude of green lines into the air. They slowly begin to bend up and down. "Make them dance."

The little girl gives an excited smile and reaches her hand out to a microscope. It jumps away and skids across the table. In the air next to her, the lines that record her brain waves jump as well, and Amanda watches them in awe, her copper eyes lit with excitement.

Once the lines settle, Amanda reaches out her hand again. The microscope slides back across the table and flies off the end, crashing into a wall five feet away.

The lines jump accordingly, and the little girl's giggles resume. This time, when the pattern steadies, she reaches straight up and shouts. Every loose object in the room rises and bolts away from her. They hit the walls and pierce straight through. She watches the lines spike and bleed together. Finally, they give one last jolt before the hologram recedes.

"Good job," Drake praises. Just then, the door opens, and a man in a General's uniform comes in. He looks just over fifty years old. "What is it Heiss?" Drake asks. Matthew Heiss glances at Amanda who sits calmly on the table, her copper eyes upturned to him.

“Alpha, can I see you for a moment?” Matthew asks.

Obediently, Drake removes the electrodes from the little girl’s head and picks up the broken screen. He moves past the shorter man and out into a large practice room.

Amanda gets down to the floor and starts picking up the broken microscope as a guard slips into the room and stands rigid before the closed door. Matthew Heiss and Drake Cline walk half way across the larger room and stop, talking in muffled voices. Amanda glances at the door then listens carefully. She hears Drake’s voice as she begins to fix the broken instrument.

“What’s wrong, Matthew?” Drake asks.

Matthew gives a frustrated laugh. “What’s wrong? What do you think you’re doing, Alpha? Giving her a name? Turning her tests into games? I leave for a week, and you destroy five months of training.”

“She’s just a child,” Drake counters. “Look. I thought I could handle it. I can’t. She’s a human being. I mean, look at her. She understands everything we do here. When I look in her eyes, I see knowledge past anything I or you or anyone else could ever comprehend.”

“Which is exactly why she is not human,” Matthew snaps.

“Look, I just can’t keep treating her like a weapon.”

“Well you’d better,” Matthew says, “or you’re putting yourself in a lot of trouble.”

“What are you talking about?” Drake asks, his voice like ice.

“Pull your act together, or I may be forced to transfer you to the Gamma Base and put Jonathan in charge of the Program.”

“Jonathan’s a half-wit with a chip on his shoulder,” Drake snaps.

“Maybe,” Matthew replies, “but at the moment, he looks more qualified than you to continue with her training.”

As she listens, a sour look begins to darken Amanda’s face. It quickly turns to anger, and the table breaks from its securing bolts. It speeds across the room and crashes into the door as the guard dives out of the way.

Amanda bolts awake out of her dream. Aged now to sixteen years, her copper eyes stare wildly into empty space. Slowly she focuses on the dim room before her. After a moment, she sighs and settles back down to sleep once again.



THE WHITE FAMILY RANCH, PENNSYLVANIA

The sun shines coolly, sending light sparkling off the fresh snow. A high gate opens to admit a sleek silver skimmer onto a vast estate. The skimmer glides down a long driveway which branches off, heading in all directions. The vehicle pulls up to the front door of the main building. Inside the complex, Rebecca White and her senior staff gather before the entranceway. Drake enters, leading a thin, frightened girl. His hair has grown out of its military cut and he wears a worn jacket and jeans, but other than that he looks exactly as he did with Amanda. The teen beside him looks with astonishment at the grand entranceway, the students running past, and the resident doctor, Sidney Guile.

Rebecca White smiles. “Welcome Tamara,” she says. “I hope you had a good trip.” The thin teen turns from staring at Sidney’s teal skin to nod, dumbfounded. “Well, why don’t you come along with Mrs. Dahl and get settled in? We’re serving lunch soon.” The teen smiles wildly and follows Janna Dahl away from the entrance hall.

Rebecca smiles as she watches her stumble down the corridor. Then she turns back to the man waiting before her. “I must commend your work, but you really didn’t need to give Tamara’s attacker a concussion, Drake.”

“That bully will think twice the next time he’s picking on a Meta,” he replies humorously.

“Or, he could take out his anger on the next kid that looks sideways at him,” Adam Dahl shoots back. The man next to him, Robert Kant, nods in agreement.

“What do you think would have happened if I didn’t?” Drake asks.

“That’s enough,” Rebecca snaps. She pulls at a lock of her red hair in irritation. “Drake, I understand your feelings, but you continue to act the part of the vigilante despite constant reminders.”

“If you didn’t want my kind of help,” he says, “you shouldn’t have asked me to join up.”

“I asked you to work for me to help you ease back into society,” she replies. “When we found you two years ago, you were burning your way out of a bar. You didn’t know your own name, you barely spoke, and the only ‘work’

you could do was enter fighting matches. I've been patient, and I admit that your help on the ranch and uncanny understanding of Meta powers is invaluable, but your refusal to control your anger as well as your habit of taking the law into your own hands is—"

"Then what the hell are you doing?" he cuts in. "You go out and recruit people when they're infected with the virus and then train them to—"

"To control their powers so they can live," Rebecca snaps. "We are not peacekeepers, Drake. You above all else should know that Meta powers cannot always be controlled by the person who receives them. I am simply helping people make the transition and giving them a place to start their new lives."

"Sometimes things aren't as simple as you try to make them," he whispers.

The woman closes her eyes. Finally she looks back. "I started this community using my full family resources," she whispers. "A miniature society where all people are welcome to be exactly what they are. It was only started sixteen years ago and look where it is now." She spreads her arms, encompassing the ranch house turned school they stand in and the individual houses beyond. "Things are never as simple as we'd like them to be. That doesn't mean we should stop trying."

"Until they find the cure." The room is silent. Everyone stares at Drake.

"You," Sidney whispers, "of all people, want the cure?"

Drake glares at him. "I don't," he snaps. "I see this like you do and you know it, but there's no denying the fact that all this started with a virus, and it's the only thing that makes us different."

"We're not a disease," Adam whispers. He turns and stalks away.

Rebecca watches him for a long moment then tucks the lock she was pulling on behind her ear and turns to the other teachers. "In any case," she whispers, "they've been working at it since the Five broke out, and they haven't gotten anywhere." She looks to the side. "There is no cure." After a second, she looks up, her face clear of stress. "Now, if you two will excuse us, I believe Drake has something he wants to tell me."

As Robert and Sidney leave, Drake glances around. "Where's Mar?"

"Marilyn is right here," a young woman with bemused blue eyes says as she comes down the hall. Drake's eyes light as he turns to her, but she stops at Rebecca's side. "I heard you got in a bit of trouble."

Drake gives her a dashing smile. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

Marilyn Napoli crosses her arms. “You weren’t supposed to handle anything.”

The argument halts as a group of students comes down the hall.

“Drake, you’re back,” Milles calls. He slows slightly, causing the group to slow as well.

“Hey, Milles,” Drake calls.

“You got in trouble again, didn’t you?” the teen asks, twisting slightly to keep an eye on him. Drake smirks when the rest glance back as well. Yen quickly turns when he catches the man’s eye while Helen and Michel give weak smiles before following suit.

“Ask your new classmate,” Drake says. “Her name’s Tamara.”

“See you around,” Milles calls and turns forward again.

Drake shakes his head once the teens are out of sight. “I swear, he’s like a mother,” he mutters.

“It’s your own fault for getting nearly killed in front of him,” Marilyn replies. “Look, just watch yourself next time, okay?”

“There’s a next time?” he asks as she walks away. He turns his smile on Rebecca, but she merely frowns.

“Like you said,” she tells him. “Things aren’t simple. As it stands, you’re our best way of helping the newly infected.”

“If only one of them could help me,” he mutters.

“What you wanted to talk to me about,” Rebecca supplies. She motions to the side. “We should talk in private.”



THE WILDERNESS OF MONTANA

In a small conference room, a group of businessmen and women gather. Among them is a representative from each of the four world nations. The center of the table supports a large hologram display, currently a simple pale yellow column, sending reflected light off the waiting representatives’ faces. The room lights dim.

Two men walk through the door. When they reach the front of the group, one begins to speak. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” Markus says, “allow me

to introduce Jonathan A. Heiss, the head of our organization.” The man he acknowledges seems to be in his late thirties. He is trim, and his dark brown hair is slicked back, both traits inherited from his father, Matthew Heiss. He wears a high ranked uniform, though from no particular nation. A confident smile gives his face a bittersweet look, the only thing offsetting his appearance from Matthew’s.

Jonathan nods to Markus then turns to the men and women gathered in front of him. “Thank you all for coming. As you know, it’s been twenty years since this project was started. As my father said then, I will say now. This is a project worth waiting for. Our program’s sole purpose has been to create a single soldier capable of being the only defense needed against the Meta threat to any and all nations, to protect the entirety of the human race.

“Until now, you have all been kept in the dark about our exact operations, but allow me to show you our progress. Our project started with my dearly departed father and a healing Meta known as Drake Cline, code-named Alpha for the Program. Their objective was to create a Meta with a healing power ten times greater than that of Alpha’s as well as increased levels of his ability to create thermal energy in his hands. The agent would also have an intellect great enough to rival the entirety of the world’s computing capacity and the ability to alter their own genetic code. This would potentially allow our agent to cure any genetic weaknesses caused by their artificial creation.”

Jonathan pauses for a moment as the representatives shift. On the table, an image of Matthew Heiss followed by one of Drake forms in the hologram.

“The obvious problem, however,” Jonathan continues, “is that such an agent would only be good for hand to hand fighting without the aid of real weapons. Also, the agent would be completely useless against telekinetics, who can suspend another being in the air for extended periods of time. The solution was as obvious as the problem to my father: give the Meta telekinetic power.

“The agent would need stronger telekinesis than any other Meta, enough to be able to hold the other at bay while still performing normal tasks. The

agent would also have the training of a navy seal, multiple black belt martial artists, and as many other styles of combat as could be obtained.

“Obviously all of this made for a very big challenge. The first step was to acquire extra help. My father started with a genetic scientist, a young Amelia Fletcher. Jay Lafold was brought in for help with...modifications...needed after the soldier was born. As one of the trainers, my father enlisted another healing Meta, Lucas Grain.”

“Lucas Grain is dead,” the United Nation representative says. “He fought with my father in the war.”

“Lucas Grain is very much alive,” Jonathan replies. “He was infected during his final assault on the Dawning HQ.”

“Do you have any proof he is who he says he is?” the representative asks.

Jonathan merely smirks. “Do you have any proof that he’s not?” he asks.

Another man speaks up. “Didn’t your father think it unwise to employ so many Metas for an anti-Meta project?” he asks.

“Metas can serve their purpose,” Jonathan answers, “so long as one knows their limitations and motives. As your esteemed colleague has already pointed out, Lucas is a very old Meta. He and Drake were two of the first to be infected. Their healing abilities keep them at the age they were when exposed indefinitely. They both fought against the Five and have seen a lot more carnage than any of us could ever dream of. Given their joint history, both believed that if we could create a fool proof way to control the dangerous Metas, the relentless experimentations to find a cure would be over.”

Another woman speaks up. “How did you plan on controlling such a powerful being?” she asks.

“Beta,” Jonathan replies simply.

“But he was killed at Riverton,” a man says. “What will you do now?”

“He wasn’t killed,” Jonathan answers, “but, please, we’re getting behind schedule. Now, with a little manipulation on Fletcher’s part, we used DNA from four different Metas to create our soldier. Drake Cline was used for his regenerative capabilities and thermal ability. The genetic code from a certain Samuel Masters collected during one of his debates was added for his

amazing telekinetic power. A Meta woman known as Atasha Yang whose intellect already beat any processor we could find was harnessed for this trait. From Kathryn Valens we took the unique ability to alter her genetic structure to adapt to new environments as well as her heightened strength. With select parts of each donor, we created the genetic code for our soldier.”

On the hologram display, images of the four Metas shrink to make room for a mapped genome. The sections donated by each highlight. In secession, the genome changes, showing each attempted combination.

“After a few failed experiments, we were forced to use more of Drake’s DNA than any of the others to stabilize the code. With the DNA sequence in place, we finally created a being with exactly what we were looking for: able to heal a bullet wound through the brain with no long term affects, send a paperclip through ten feet of solid brick without blinking, resist control by even strong psychics, master a language in less than a week, and crush a man’s skull with a single blow, and that was at one year into her project.”

“One year!” the Orient General exclaims, “I knew the Dawning virus affected humans at every age, but I was under the impression that that was rarely before ten.”

“In normal cases you’re right,” Jonathan says. “Even second generation Metas do not receive their powers at birth, but, in 27, her healing ability was present almost immediately, and her other powers were all present within three years.”

“27?” a woman inquires.

“A technicality,” Jonathan replies. “Though the agent we created was not given a name to insure no personnel would become emotionally attached, confusion when addressing her has caused us to develop something of a codename. The twenty-seventh subject gets the twenty-seventh call sign.”

“What about the other twenty six?” a woman asks.

“All degenerated within their first week of incubation,” he says. “27 is the only living subject, and trust me when I say that that is for the best.”

“What about this Drake?” a man asks. “Wouldn’t he become attached being technically her father?”

“It was a concern,” Jonathan replies, “and, in the end, it did happen, but we only needed him for our first experiment.”

“First experiment?” the American Federation General asks.

“Yes,” Jonathan replies. “Drake’s age has allowed him to gain knowledge of many different fighting styles. Couple that with his strong Meta powers and you get an excellent challenge.” When the group remains silent he continues. “We wanted to see how long it would take 27 to grow, even though Drake had taught her everything she knew, to a point at which she could easily beat him.”

Jonathan pauses, recollecting his original train of thought. “Now, for unknown reasons, 27 gained her healing ability immediately after she was taken from her artificial womb. She grew roughly one year of normal human development for each proceeding month she was alive. To this affect, in sixteen months, her body was physically sixteen years old. She was close to mental maturity by the time she was two, and by then it was obvious the affect Drake had on her.

“Given his deteriorating obedience, we had no choice but to remove him from the Program. His memory was wiped, and a mental block was placed in his mind capable of keeping any psychic from retrieving memories of the Program. Though Lucas was dismissed from the Program as well, we had no issues on his part and treated him as any other trainer.

“Now, since Lucas’ departure, I have been the girl’s sole contact. Though other experts have been brought in, as a rule they have never stayed longer than half a year to keep her from becoming attached as she did Drake. Of course, no trainer needed to stay even that long to teach her everything they knew. This rule was also to insure that the trainers would never discover the true nature of the Program. No one else in the Program has been allowed to talk to her more than once a year.”

Jonathan pauses, clearing his throat as a few representatives shift. “As you have been informed, today is the girl’s sixteenth birthday, and it has been decided that she is ready for the final test that will complete our perfect soldier. Once complete, all of you will be expected to make the final payments for our funding. Once she is ready for action....”

The door to the conference room opens, and an aging woman comes in hurriedly, small wisps of graying brown hair escaping her tight bun. She whispers in Jonathan’s ear, and he nods. He clears his throat as she leaves. “Excuse me, but there is a matter I must attend to.” He hurries out of the room. The door closes behind him with a mechanical hiss.



At the White Family Ranch, Drake and Rebecca sit in her lecture room, the psychic settled in her accustomed chair, Drake in the chair before her desk. She waits as he studies the floor, trying to organize his thoughts.

"I'm not really sure what's bothering me the most," he begins finally, "but I've been having these dreams lately."

"Dreams?" Rebecca asks.

Drake nods. "I'm not sure if they're real or not, but I think I've actually lived them. They're meetings I've had. We're planning something called 27."

"What is 27?" Rebecca asks.

"Not what, who," he corrects her. "27 is a girl, but I can't remember why I know her. I can't even remember her face. Rebecca, I know she's important."

"You think she's in danger."

Drake rubs his neck. "Yeah. I think something's going to happen, but I don't know what." Suddenly he slams his fist into the desk and sits back, staring at the wall. Finally, he looks up. "Do you think you could..." he begins.

Rebecca's eyes widen. "You want me to probe your mind?" she asks. "You've refused to let me go anywhere farther than finding your name before, even when I thought it could help you recover your memory."

Drake sits back and closes his eyes. "I don't like it," he says. "I've always had a thing about psychics looking in my head. It's probably just that I don't want them to see my memories before I do." He opens his eyes. "But I need to find her."

Rebecca studies him for a moment. "All right." She settles down in her seat. "Close your eyes and relax," she tells him and puts a slim hand to her temple. They sit in silence for a moment. Then Drake jerks. Rebecca frowns and resettles. The next jerk is hers. Her jaw sets, and there is another pause before both jerk. Suddenly she cries out and slides to the floor.

"Rebecca," Drake calls. He bolts from his chair. She breathes heavily as he helps her to her feet.

She puts a hand to her head. "I saw a little," she whispers, "back a few years before you came here." She rubs her head. "But then something...stopped me. There is a block that I cannot get around." She looks up. "Something is stopping you from remembering, Drake. And it's stopping me as well."

The door busts open, and Helen and Milles rush in. “Ms. White, you’ve gotta see this,” the girl exclaims, grabbing her teacher’s hand and pulling her out of the room.

In the sitting room, many students and the teachers stand around the room’s Vid-screen as a reporter speaks: “A horrible event occurred in sleepy Condon, Montana when an industrial accident caused the Shry Industry’s factory to completely collapse. Though the fully automated factory holds less than fifty workers, today was the first day visitors were allowed an inside tour of its workings. The entire Condon Elementary School body, as well as many families, is trapped inside. There is no death count yet, but many workers are injured and rescuers say it will be a long time before this disaster is over.”

Drake stares at the scene. “That’s it,” he mutters.

Janna turns to him. “What’s it?”

“27.” He turns to look back at Rebecca. “She’s in Condon.”



FIFTY MILES OUTSIDE CONDON, MONTANA

In the conference room, the representatives turn as Jonathan Heiss reenters. “I hope I didn’t take too long for you. Now, if you would please follow me, we will continue our conference in the observatory,” he says.

“Wait just a minute,” one woman says. “I want an explanation, now. That Meta, Beta, or whatever his letter is, how is he alive? I was under the impression that Matthew had control of him.” There are murmurs of agreement around the room.

“Of course,” Jonathan says kindly. “Ladies and Gentlemen, you will soon gather that I am a more cunning and ruthless operator than my father ever was. Some time ago, I enlisted Beta’s help to alter my father’s perception, making him believe that Beta was always with him. The idea not only kept my father vulnerable, but also allowed Beta’s part in our program to go unnoticed.

“Since that time, a group of low level psychics preformed the tasks my father gave to his imagined Beta, keeping the man happy until the proper time.”

“But why betray your father?” a man asks.

“Simple. My father never meant to use our agent to control the Meta population but to control the world. He was a Mel Patrick in the making. He believed Metas could be destroyed in a single blow using 27’s full strength, and she would then be available to do his bidding, but my father never really understood the extent of the virus. He believed it was a simple disease, one that required a one shot cure. I know that the Dawning virus is only speeding its rate of infection. To fix this problem, we need 27 to completely focus on the virus for years, combating it until we find the cure. That’s why I had the psychics fail to alarm my father when his base was attacked.”

There is a stunned silence.

“Are you trying to tell us the Riverton incident was done on purpose?” the United Nation representative whispers. “You killed your own father?”

“Not in so many words, but that was the general idea. With my father and the rest of his base destroyed, his nonsense of changing the world order was gone.”

By this time, Jonathan has led the group out of the room and down the hall to reach a marked door. “Now, if I’ve answered your question, we will go on to the main attraction.” The door hisses and opens with a mechanical whirling.

Inside is an observatory overlooking a large, bare practice room through a one way panel. Three monitors over the control board display different angles of the adjoining room. Chairs have been set up for the guests. All eyes are drawn immediately to the room below where a fight is taking place. Jonathan smiles.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, meet our 27.”

Below, a young woman of about sixteen fights off a large group of surly looking men. Her raven black hair has grown longer since her childhood, her copper eyes more intense. Weapons of every kind lie scattered around the room, some broken beyond recognition. The fight is fierce, but it is completely one sided. As a man swings an ax at Amanda from one side, she flips out of the way like a gymnast. As she lands, she falls into another man, knocking the wind out of him. She grabs his knife and throws it back at the first man, cutting the tendons in his arm. His ax falls to the ground with a crack.

“As you can see,” Jonathan says to the stunned and silent group, “after our agent’s unexplained growth spurt, she hasn’t aged at all. We predict that she will remain this way until she dies. That is, if she dies.”

Below, Amanda stands and kicks a man attacking her from behind, dodges and then grabs a knife flung at her from the side, and sends it spinning back the way it came without missing a beat.

“She looks like she isn’t even watching them,” a woman says.

“She is in her own way,” Jonathan says. “With Masters’ ability, she can see everything 360 degrees around her perfectly. Actually, she already knows you’re here.”

“Who are these men?” the Orient General asks as a sword is sent flying through one man’s shoulder to stop at the hilt.

“Prisoners,” Jonathan answers, “from lockdown at Anrock. None of them have family relations and have been deemed unable to reenter society, sentenced to life without parole, so we made them an offer. If any single one or group of them manages to kill her, they can all go free.”

“Isn’t that a little risky?” one man asks.

“Does it look risky?” Jonathan returns as three prisoners crumble to the floor from a round kick that sent all of them flying into the wall.

“I was not informed that American citizens were being killed for your experiments,” the American Federation General hisses.

“But you’ll most certainly agree with me that this is a suitable use of their destroyed lives,” Jonathan counters. Another man falls to the ground, the tendons in his knees cut.

“You can’t kill prisoners,” the United Nation representative snaps. “It’s international law, and you know that full well.”

“You pay me to do what polite society cannot,” Jonathan tells her. “Without this practice, our soldier would be completely useless.”

The group watches in horror as a small door opens, revealing a gun. A prisoner grabs it while Amanda blocks four men brandishing stunners.

“Here we go,” Jonathan whispers and backs the group away from the panel.

As Amanda turns from the unconscious men, the prisoner with the gun fires six quick shots. Amanda jerks back a step, but the bullets stop feet from her head.

The training room quiets as Amanda exhales, looks at the rotating bullets, and then back at the man with the smoking gun. She glares at him, and one of the bullets quickly turns around and shoots straight through the center of the man's forehead. He flies back and hits the wall with a sickening crunch.

The room comes to life. Knives, hatchets, pipes, and the five bullets still floating in the air fly around the room, each one striking one of the still standing prisoners. They all fall heavily to the ground. Pressure builds in the room as the weapons do their work. Finally, the panel separating the observatory from the floor shatters. The magnetized air rushes howling into the room.

When the last man falls, the air drops into a dead calm. Amanda stretches her neck with an audible snap and looks around at the now motionless group of men as Jonathan begins to speak. "She prefers working with her hands," he explains, "but throw a gun into the mix, and there's no going back."



In the library of Rebecca White's ranch, Drake watches intently as a holographic image of the world slowly rotates at the center of the room. A sensor rests on his temple, its light blinking slowly. Suddenly the sensor beeps, and the map magnifies to an image of Montana.

"There," he says, pointing to a blank area of the enlarged view. "That's where she is."

Rebecca closes her eyes, tilting her head slightly to the side. After a moment she shakes her head. "Drake," she says tiredly, "There's nothing there, not even a presence. How could an entire base be there?"

"There's technology that can keep you from using your powers, right? They must have found a way to completely shield an area from every psychic."

Rebecca sighs, out of arguments. The display shuts down, and Drake removes the monitor from his temple. She rubs her forehead. "If you feel you must go, I suppose you could use the new skimmer Kenya's been working on. You understand it's not perfect yet, but it should get there fast enough for you," she says.

Drake nods, immersed in his own thoughts.

Rebecca gives a smirk. "I could send Marilyn with you to watch your back."

A smile pulls at the corner of his mouth.



In Kenya's prototype, Drake settles in the passenger seat as Marilyn Napoli flicks on the engine. "So what do you think we'll find there?" she asks.

He sighs. "I don't know, but we'll see soon enough."

Marilyn gives him a last look as the engines start up. Then she turns back to the controls. The skimmer lifts off the ground and flies out of its garage. It disappears into the darkening sky over the ranch.

