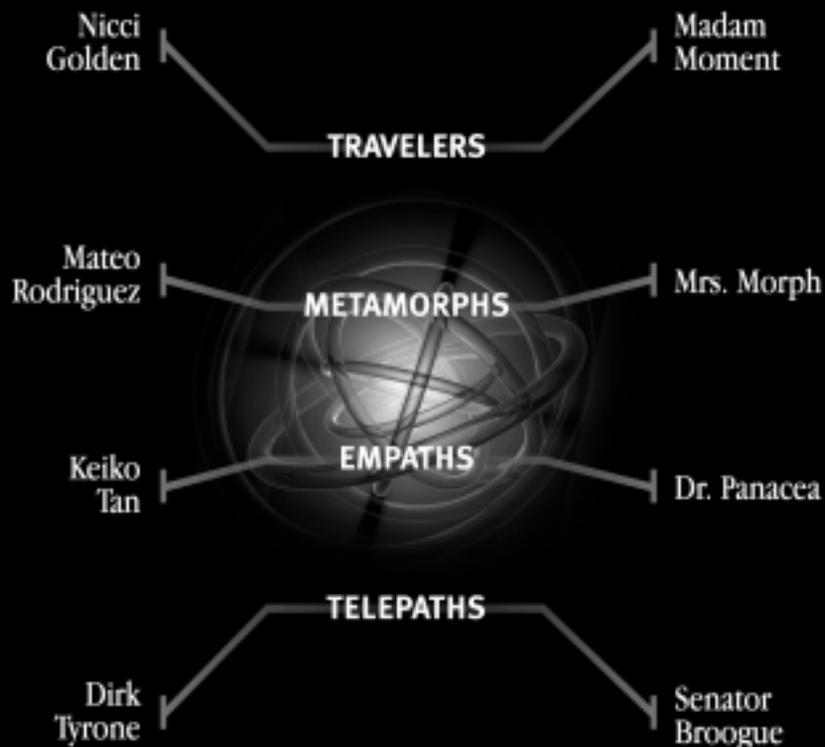


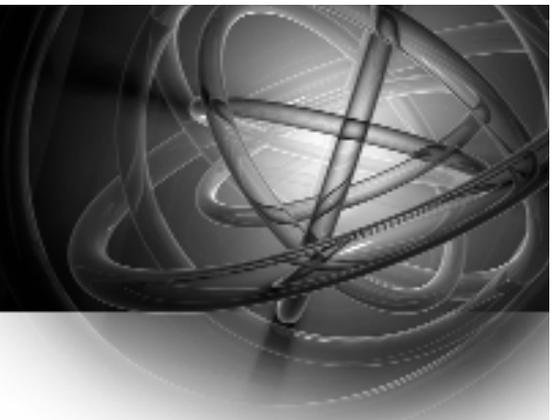
# MERGERS

## MAIN CHARACTERS



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## CHAPTER 1



**D**irk Tyrone shifted uneasily. He was groggy. His mind, usually so alert and powerful, seemed incapable of clear thought. He moved to raise his hands to his temples, a habit that typically brought his extraordinary mental powers into focus, but was unsuccessful. His arms were pinned to the wall on either side of him by what felt like some type of metal braces. His legs were secured in a similar fashion, and there seemed to be a shield over the top half of his face. Dirk opened his eyes to the blackness of the shield and felt a pulsating energy running through it. His muddled thoughts continued. Why was it so difficult to concentrate? Then, he felt the shield vibrate; a surge of power erupted from within it when he tried to focus his thoughts. Whoever had captured him clearly knew how to keep him from using his powers, or so they thought.

Without warning, a scream of agony echoed from all around him. The source was female. If he had Keiko's abilities, he could remove the woman's pain almost instantaneously—drawing it into himself and then dispelling it from his body at a slow but steady pace—but that was Keiko's power, not his. No, the way he could best help this woman would be to enter her mind and let her know that she was not alone. Either that or mentally attack whoever was hurting her. Another cry—and this one shook the very wall to which Dirk was shackled. It spoke of a physical pain so intense that he could not imagine it would be possible for the woman to survive much longer. Instinctively, Dirk's incredible mind attempted to leave his body and move in the direction of hers, but the shield immediately began to hum

with energy in an effort to block his power. Dirk tensed. Something that felt like an enormous needle was slowly advancing toward the center of his mind.

*“This is not really happening,”* he told himself. *“This thing . . . this shield is just trying to distract me because it knows . . . Aaaahhh!”* The needle lanced through some soft spongy matter in his brain, and he fought down a growing sense of panic. *“That didn’t really happen. I’m supposed to think it happened, but it didn’t.”* Someone was playing mental games with him, but whoever it was didn’t understand Dirk’s sense of self-preservation. He gritted his teeth, created an image in his mind of the shield blasting into a million pieces, and then played it over and over again like a tune that just wouldn’t go away. As if in response, the hum of the shield became a strong buzz, and the needle retaliated as if it were a living being under attack—jabbing out viciously at Dirk’s brain in every direction. Sweat streamed down the sides of his face sending salty streams to his lips as the image he was creating in his mind intensified. Now, the energy around the shield was crackling ferociously, and water was collecting inside Dirk’s eyes. *“Somebody’s . . . uh-hh . . . gonna win this . . . fight . . . and it’s not . . . uh-hh . . . gonna be YOU!”*

Sparks sprayed the air, and the device exploded, filling the dimly lit chamber with bright light for a brief moment. Dirk had won! Now that the shield was gone, he could take in his surroundings visually and use his powers without difficulty. Still, he was anchored to the wall, and he could see that the bonds holding him were sturdy.

A high-pitched scream was followed by another cry of anguish. This one, though, was weaker. In his battle against the shield, Dirk had nearly forgotten about the woman. She was clearly dying and although he could not physically break free and go to her, his mind was capable of movement outside of his body. Mentally, he raced through the halls of

the complex. This place was unfamiliar to him. He took a wrong turn that led him to a dead end. He backtracked and headed off down another hallway still trying to shake off the aftereffect of the shield and clear his mind.

He never ceased to be somewhat in awe of his powers. His physical body was back there, bound to a wall, incapable of movement, and yet mentally he was here, in these hallways, searching desperately for someone he did not even know. He rounded a corner and halted. She was just ahead. He approached cautiously, knowing that if he entered her mind too rapidly he might frighten her. Still, he could not afford to be as gentle as he would have liked; her psyche was crumbling. If he did not act now, it would be too late.

As gingerly as he could, Dirk entered her mind. *"I'm here."* He spoke softly. *"You are not alone. I'm not going to hurt you."* His way was blocked. A wall had appeared—typical—the mind's involuntary first defense against psychic intrusion. The woman could remove it easily if she chose, but she was frightened and in intense pain. Dirk's formidable psychic ability could easily break it down, but in her fragile state it might further harm her. It would be safer if he could talk her into removing it. *"I'm a friend who's come to help you. My name is Dirk . . ."*

"Dirk!" The woman seemed to recognize his name, and as she gasped it aloud the tone in her voice was startlingly familiar. Instantly, the wall faded away, and their minds merged. The result was a cry of desperation from both Dirk's mental and physical selves, for as he sought to comfort this woman in what was likely the hour of her death, he recognized her.

Dr. Lisa Tyrone—once a celebrated geneticist of the Legion for World Alliance—had been labeled a dangerous criminal only days after Dirk's birth. Her disappearance from a hospital with four newborns had led to the largest manhunt in world history. The general population had no

idea why this woman was being sought—only that the reward for information leading to her capture was tremendous. The average housewives and businessmen, school teachers and firemen did not know that one of the babies she had taken was her own nephew, Dirk Tyrone, and that the parents of all four infants had been murdered within moments of the children's births. The police and government investigators did not know that Dr. Tyrone and these babies held a secret that could bring the world's leaders to their knees. They would stop at nothing to silence her. She had managed to evade capture for many years as she raised Dirk and the other infants in hiding, but their luck had finally run out two days ago when their shelter was stormed by Alliance guards.

*"Aunt Lisa!"* Dirk's mind was now joined with his aunt's, and her nearness to death filled him with dread. *"Save your strength, Aunt Lisa. Don't speak—just answer in your mind. Do you know if the others have been captured?"*

Lisa Tyrone's mind formed a response in a slow and halting manner. *"Matty . . . escaped . . . they wa . . . want . . . wanted me . . . to . . . to tell them . . . where he . . . uhhhh!"* Her mind moved to an unconscious state without warning, and Dirk was left, mentally, alone. Uncertainty began to gnaw at his insides. Despite all of Dirk's mental abilities, it had been Lisa Tyrone's mind that had always been confident and decisive. Her decisions had kept them safe all these years. She had told Dirk many times that he was a born leader, but he had never felt like one. And at this precise moment, he was reminded of how inept a leader he would make. His aunt was dying, and if he thought about that—truly accepted it—he knew he would give up. Let the Alliance do what they wanted with him. Wouldn't it be easier? Anything would be easier than having to make a decision right now. What should he do? He felt the need to take action, but he did not know what action he should take. *"They'd drum me out of the leadership brigade real quick,"* he chided himself.

His thoughts turned to his three friends—none of whom he had seen since he had been taken prisoner. “*So Matty’s on the loose—score one for our side,*” he thought. Mateo Rodriguez, affectionately known as Matty to his friends, would prove difficult for the Alliance to catch because of his incredible transformational ability. Mateo could literally alter his form to become any living creature—real or imagined. Although the Alliance guards didn’t know about Mateo’s ability, Dirk figured his friend would reveal his power to them if it would keep him from captivity.

When the guards raided their shelter, Dirk had quickly lost track of everyone. He remembered, though, that Matty had not been inside when they appeared. The Alliance had clearly been torturing Lisa Tyrone—most likely trying to force her to give them some piece of useful information that would help them find the boy. Of course, his aunt had not said a word to endanger Matty. They were fools to think she would. She had raised Dirk, Mateo, and the girls from birth to their fifteenth year. Having no parents, and with the need to keep their very existence a secret, she was the only mother any of them had ever known. What kind of mother would betray one of her children?

Keiko Tan tried to calm herself as she paced the floor of the small room in which she had been imprisoned. She had not eaten in several hours, but far worse than the lack of nourishment was the lack of social interaction. Keiko *needed* people. She needed them in a way that set her apart from others. She surveyed herself in the reflection of the shiny black surface of the walls. Her dark almond-shaped eyes were beginning to cloud over, and the warm olive skin tone that typified her Asian heritage was growing pallid—the result of captivity.

*Where was Dirk? And why had he not contacted her?* The two of them shared a unique psychic link that Dirk had put

in place one afternoon when he confessed that he wanted them to be “more than friends.” That had been nearly a year ago, and since that time, a sense of his mental presence had always been with her . . . until now. The idea that Dirk might be in pain—the thought of any of her friends being physically harmed—served only to further weaken her, but she could not seem to discipline her mind away from such thoughts. She longed for Dirk’s mental gifts right now—for her own were doing her no good. She was an *empath*, a healer. Physical contact with other living creatures both strengthened her and provided her the opportunity to use her power to cure the slightest physical ailment or to soothe a troubled spirit. Keiko Tan’s captors were shrewd, she’d give them that. By isolating her, they were not only preventing her from using her remarkable empathic powers to help the other prisoners, but they were also achieving their primary goal—her death. For just as Keiko infused energy and healing into others in their time of need, it was their life force, the living energy of other beings, which somehow seemed to provide for her own continued existence. Here, in this tiny black room, it seemed that her worst fear had been given a life of its own. She was going to suffocate from loneliness and die, separated from any other sign of life.

Mateo Rodriguez had assumed the appearance of an Alliance guard with ease—but maintaining it was proving difficult. Twice, he had felt the shape of his physical body beginning to return to its true form when guards appeared unexpectedly in the halls of the complex. He had stabilized his transformation quickly, but if anyone had been looking directly *into* his eyes, they would have seen a tiny image in his pupils—a picture, in essence, of the guard whose shape he had assumed. While he’d had plenty of chances to practice his power of transformation in the shelter where he and his friends had been raised by Lisa Tyrone, there had rarely

been a need to *maintain* a shape in a dangerous situation like this. When Mateo got nervous, he tended to return to his true form—that of a Hispanic teenage boy—the *only* Hispanic teenage boy in the world as far as he knew. And right now, every guard in the Alliance was looking for him. If he did not gain control over his appearance, he would endanger himself and the friends he was here to rescue.

The metal cell door opened quickly as he slid his key into the slot outside. The body of his friend Nicci Golden lay on a solid slab of granite. Her chest did not appear to rise or fall as he crossed the cell. He assumed she had been drugged, but perhaps they had killed her. After all, that was what they were going to do eventually—right? That’s what they were going to do to all of them—destroy them because they were different—because they didn’t *look* like the other people walking the streets of cities all over their world. The Legion for World Alliance made no exceptions, and if there was anything Lisa Tyrone had instilled in the teens, it was that they were, indeed, exceptions. What she couldn’t explain . . . or *wouldn’t* explain . . . was why it mattered so much.

In quiet moments, Lisa Tyrone had often told herself that the four young people she had raised and protected since birth belonged in an earlier time—a time when words like *ancestry* and *heritage* were terms that held meaning to people. Now, those days were gone and, sadly, most of the people walking the planet today had no knowledge that such terms had ever existed. In the engineered society developed by the Alliance, her nephew and his friends could never successfully integrate. So they had been hunted like animals, and she had kept them safe. To the leaders of the Alliance, Mateo, Dirk, Keiko, and Nicci were nothing more than remnants of a time when the Earth had more than one race—a time before the Merger.





## CHAPTER 2

**M**ateo took Nicci's limp wrist in his hand and felt for a pulse. Yes! She was alive. As he looked at her lying there, her lovely dark skin as black as midnight, he was reminded of a tale he'd once heard of a sleeping princess who was awakened by a kiss. He grinned—tempted to try it—but then thought better of it. He'd tried to kiss Nicci once before—when they'd been out walking on a moonlit night. She'd been talking about the constellations as they gazed up at the stars, and her warm, deep voice had seemed almost hypnotic. Mateo remembered the scent of honeysuckle in the air and the soft breeze that had seemed to envelop him. He'd reached out to draw her near, and just as their lips were about to meet . . . her right fist made contact with his jaw.

He heard a slight groan now, and she stirred. This definitely ruled out the kiss. The last thing he needed was to explain another dislocated jaw to Dirk. Mateo watched as she blinked several times. Her eyes, a deep chestnut, widened as they fixed upon him, and her grogginess caused her to shrink back clumsily in fear. "Nicci, it's me," he said softly. "I came to get you out of here." She regarded the young man who appeared to be a security officer with suspicion, but suddenly the pupils of his eyes began to dilate and in them she saw the image of Mateo Rodriguez grinning out at her. Then, just as his eyes had foreshadowed, the physical being of the officer morphed into the brazen young man who had come to her rescue; Mateo was now standing before her.

"Matty! Are you ever a sight for sore eyes!" She stood and threw her arms around him in an embrace that lasted

longer than she intended, for as she started to release him, her knees gave way. He caught her.

“Whoa there, Nicci! Not so fast. Whatever kinda juice they’ve been pumping into you, I don’t think it’s intended to build stamina.” He helped her take a seat on the slab again. “Just give yourself a minute to come out of the fog, and then we’ll get out of this joint.”

“I’m not alone, Matty,” she said gravely. “They have Dirk and Keiko, too . . . and Lisa.” The horror in his eyes registered immediately. Once upon a time, Dr. Lisa Tyrone had been an incredibly powerful individual in the Alliance. In fact, she was one of a very select group who possessed any knowledge of world history prior to the Alliance’s formation. She was also the one who had saved Mateo and his friends from destruction soon after their births. Though she had kept most of the details hidden from them, the teens all knew she had been their savior from the very beginning.

As one of the Alliance’s leading geneticists, Dr. Tyrone had used her influence, which had been considerable at the time, to lobby for the chance to successfully “correct” the only four babies in the history of the Alliance who were not born with all racial characteristics blended or *merged*. Although their parents had been destroyed immediately to prevent any chance of future “problematic” births, the babies were given a reprieve at Dr. Tyrone’s request. They were placed in an isolated wing of the hospital under her personal care. She had been given no nurses or attendants to assist her for fear that the fragile truth protected from all but the highest-ranking leaders of the Alliance would be revealed. She was given three days, though she begged for more, to merge the infants, and so she had begun work immediately.

There had been no sleep, no meals, no showers or conversations. There had been nothing but one woman, striving with all of the knowledge and physical stamina she possessed, to save four innocent newborns—who no longer had

parents waiting to bring them home. She could not even take the time to grieve—for one of the infants belonged to her brother and sister-in-law. The best she could do to remember them was to keep their little boy, her nephew Dirk, alive. For three long days and nights, a remote ward of the hospital had echoed with no sound but the cries of four tiny infants and a lone voice asking questions whose answers proved evasive. And while Dr. Lisa Tyrone used every tool and God-given gift at her disposal to preserve life, the Alliance moved stealthily into her home and murdered her husband.

“Nicci!” Mateo pulled her quickly to her feet. “Do you know what they’ll *do* to her?” The panic in his voice sent shivers down her spine. He grabbed her arms with a ferocious intensity, and it was clear that all concern for her fatigued state was set aside. “Nichelle, we have to go to her, now!”

She blinked at his use of her full name, and though Lisa Tyrone had told her that the name *Nichelle* was chosen quite purposefully, the shortened *Nicci* had become habit—except when she was in trouble. “I don’t know if I can, Mateo!” He knew what he was asking, but he had no idea what it would take from within her to accomplish the task—especially in her weakened condition. One look at his intense gaze told her that he probably didn’t care.

“Nicci, you have to try. We may already be too late.”

“I can’t take us both, Mateo, I’m too weak.”

He stared at her and made no reply.

“I *won’t* take you with me. You’ll have to find your own way.” Her voice was filled with reluctance as usual. Nicci’s ability to travel through time was nothing more than a curse in her eyes, and she was less practiced in the use of her power because she avoided any situation that invited her to demonstrate it. The others joked, but with an undercurrent of seriousness, that Nicci had so many *conditions*—

conditions that had to be met before she would use her ability—that *time* quite literally marched on without her. For example, she always moved into the future and never into the past—not because she *couldn't* but because she *wouldn't*. “It’s much more complicated to go backward,” she insisted although she had never, to anyone’s knowledge, tried moving into the past before. Also, she *very* rarely moved another person with her through time. “It takes too much out of me,” she told the others. “You wouldn’t understand, but trust me when I tell you, it’s painful traveling with a passenger.”

She knew Matty expected her to give in at the last minute and take him with her, but he was in for a surprise. Whatever they had done to her in this facility had not only knocked her out but had also drained her of energy. She was, for the first time in her life, truly afraid she might not be able to control her own journey through time. To try to bring Mateo with her would have been the end for both of them.

Mateo’s hands gestured with impatience. “Okay, you win. I’ll find my own way. So go! GO!”

Nicci Golden took a deep breath and closed her eyes—concentrating on Lisa Tyrone—her teacher, surrogate mother, and friend. Mateo stood back, marveling as he always did, as a golden aura surrounded his friend. In an instant, she was gone—moving only the smallest fraction of a second into the future—to a moment in time that held the woman who had fought to save Nicci’s life from the moment of her birth.

Moments later, as Mateo resumed the appearance of the Alliance security officer, an alarm sounded. Almost at once, and entirely against his will, Mateo reverted to the young Hispanic body that was truly his own. While Mateo could take the form of living creatures for indefinite periods of time, he could only assume the form of another human being for a short while. In addition, maintaining a human form other than his own took a great deal of concentration, and when Mateo became anxious his stability frequently faltered,

causing him to revert to his true appearance. The tread of booted feet made its way quickly in his direction. Almost involuntarily the image of a wasp filled Mateo's pupils; he was airborne just as the guards came rushing into the hall.

As Nicci materialized a few feet from her target, she was bombarded by her own senses. Her nostrils flared at the smell of the burnt flesh that assaulted the air all around her. Her eyes moistened as she reached Lisa Tyrone's body, but the sound of a shrill alarm cut into the air, distracting her momentarily and slicing into her eardrums with a vengeance. "Matty," she thought. "They know I've escaped, or they know he's here—or both." She ignored the alarm as best she could and began looking for signs of life from Lisa. The woman was bolted to a rectangular table made from some type of metal that Nicci could not identify. The table itself was positioned on a raised platform in the center of a windowless room. Nicci shuddered at the sight before her.

Lisa Tyrone's mulatto skin, identical in color and texture to the skin of every other member of society—with the exception of Nicci and her friends—was now charred and blackened. "They torched you." Nicci said the words aloud and wished with every fiber of being they were untrue.

*Torching* was the name given to the Alliance's best-known method of punishment or information extraction—depending upon the circumstances. Prisoners were bolted to a surface that was charged from beneath its base with infrared heat. It was not unlike lying inside a massive frying pan with a healthy flame beneath it. And the Alliance had become most adept at using the device—a fact that received a great deal of press as it served to significantly curb illegal activity throughout the world. In fact, it had proven so successful that it was nearly always under study for improvements and modifications. The latest model allowed the surface to be heated in separate sections and in varying

degrees as opposed to all at once, thereby slowing the torching process and providing multiple opportunities for prisoners to experience punishment or, as in the case of Dr. Tyrone, reveal information the Alliance was seeking. It was unnecessary to have guards around a prisoner during torching. The design of the device precluded any possibility of escape, and the offensive odor produced by the process was an annoyance to the Alliance Security Force.

Nicci saw Lisa's eyes flicker for a moment and then close again rapidly. She appeared to be taking very shallow breaths, but they were somewhat regular. No noise was coming from the machine itself, so Nicci assumed the torching was over. The *real* question—was it finished for the moment or for good? Carefully, she reached out to touch Lisa's hand, afraid of harming her skin which, if it had any nerve endings left, must feel as though it was on fire. The alarm continued to pulsate throughout the complex, yet interestingly no one had approached this area. As Nicci gingerly brushed Lisa's hand, another mind came hurtling into hers like a derailed locomotive. It was Dirk.

*"Nicci! Nicci, she's dying!"*

*"Dirk? Where are you?"* She knew that there was no need to verbalize anything. He could read her thoughts before she could form the words on her lips.

*"I don't know. They have me chained up somewhere. They put a shield over my face to block my power, but I broke through. Nicci, Keiko's got to be here somewhere! We have to find her—you have to bring her to Aunt Lisa—before it's too late. I'm barely able to hold her conscious mind together. I can't do it much longer."*

She avoided his request. *"Dirk, the alarms—they probably know that I'm free. Matty's here—they're after him, too. There isn't time to . . ."*

*"You WILL do this, Nicci."* He seized her mind—a psychic attack of the most violent nature. He took it from her with

no concern for her privacy or for her will. It was something he'd never imagined doing to a friend, but his aunt, their "mother," was dying, and now he had an idea at least of how to save her. The fact that he suddenly, miraculously, had a plan meant that it had to be followed—right? Why should he waste time having a heart-to-heart discussion with Nicci when he had the power to simply make things happen? Keiko Tan was the only one who might be able to save his aunt, and since *he* couldn't bring Keiko to his aunt, *Nicci* was going to do it for him. His powerful mind forced her to call forth her ability, and he simultaneously reached out for Keiko—making use of the psychic link he had formed between them. With the shield gone, it was child's play to find her, but controlling Nicci's will at the same time was proving difficult.

*"Keiko . . . are you . . ."*

*"I'm here, Dirk! Here!"* Her response was so sudden that it surprised him. So she had been waiting for him to contact her! That was a *very* pleasant thought. Amazingly, his plan was working, too. Within an instant Nicci's body appeared in Keiko's tiny black prison, and Keiko felt the first surge of energy and adrenaline she had experienced in days. The sight of another person, let alone a good friend, was like food to a starving beggar. Meanwhile, Dirk sensed Keiko's weakness, and he poured his mental energies into her with reckless abandon. All at once, she seemed to be standing in an auditorium and everywhere around her there were people. They were smiling and cheering, and their hearts were full of gratitude and love for all the blessings of life.

Though the scene was a telepathic projection from Dirk's mind to hers, its effect was tremendous. Keiko radiated; she glowed in the presence of the crowd! None of it was real, but she experienced it as though it were, and the sickly pallor that had overtaken her was driven away from her body. Her lovely eyes became clear again. Dirk had given her nearly

everything he had to give. She now would have the power, he hoped, to save his aunt, but he did *not* have the energy left to force Nicci to travel the distance back or to take a passenger with her. As his aura began to fade from Keiko's mind, he imparted the details of the past few moments into her consciousness. And then, he was gone. Keiko felt the pang of emptiness that always accompanied Dirk's leaving, but there was no time to dwell on their relationship right now. Lisa Tyrone's needs were immediate.

Nicci watched, knowingly, as Keiko's strength returned. She was angry at Dirk for pushing his will upon her, but she also understood. She knew that if he had not done so, she might not have been able to make the decision quickly enough. Keiko was eyeing her now, expecting even more than Dirk. She knew that Keiko needed her to take them both back to Lisa, but Nicci didn't think she could do it. Whenever she moved through time, she felt as if a small part of her that could never be recovered was left elsewhere. And for her to move through time repeatedly, without proper rest in between, was extremely painful. It was something she had never been able to explain to the others. At times, in the heat of an argument, she had been called selfish by Dirk, and Mateo had once accused her of "lacking heart." The sting of Mateo's comment resurrected itself for a moment, and she found herself lost in the memory of the circumstances that had led him to speak so harshly to her.

They had been enjoying one of their few days outside of the protected underground shelter where they lived in constant fear of being discovered by the Alliance. Every few weeks, Lisa allowed them a few hours outside in a heavily forested area nearby. It became known as "the picnic spot." It was during one of these outings that the four of them had found a puppy that appeared to have been shot and left for dead. It was not unusual for the Alliance Security Force to use animals, even domestic ones, for target practice. The

nearest clinic was several miles away, and Keiko, much to her dismay, had never successfully healed a member of the animal kingdom. So it had fallen on Nicci to decide whether the puppy lived or died. Of course she had saved it. But she had hesitated for a moment before deciding to transport the dog to the doorstep of a clinic in town, and her hesitation was judged harshly by her male friends—particularly Matty, who was the group’s resident animal lover. Keiko, though, had remained silent as Nicci weighed her decision to help the pup. Never judging, never questioning—that was Keiko, and somehow it was Keiko that Nicci did not want to disappoint now.

“Keiko, listen to me.” Nicci tried to keep her voice from trembling. “I’m going to send you to Lisa without me. Come here.”

The lithe Asian girl smiled warmly at her friend. She seemed always to know the truth even when it was not spoken. “Nicci, you’re frightened. I understand your fear, but to remain here alone will not be any safer for you than traveling with me.”

“But I can’t travel with a companion. I just can’t do it, Keiko. I’ve already transported twice today, and we’re not out of here yet. Besides, they filled my arteries with some kind of drug, and I’m not sure the effect has totally worn off.” Nicci’s eyes pleaded for her friend’s forgiveness as did the tone of her words.

“Nicci, we need to move fast. I don’t want to argue, but I think we *must* stay together.” Keiko had heard the alarm sound, and as it continued to resonate, her fears were mounting. “I will help you to do this. I *know* that it may hurt you. You will share your pain with me, and we will do it together.” She grasped her friend’s hands for a moment and, at her touch, Nicci’s fears began to dissolve. For a brief moment, Keiko gasped as the true fullness of Nicci’s fear was transferred into her empathic body. She experienced it,

felt fear—Nicci’s fear—just the way that Nicci had felt it. It alarmed her, but it did not overwhelm her. And after a few seconds had passed, Keiko was at peace again; her remarkable body had dispelled the fear in a way none of her friends could ever quite comprehend. Nicci was about to speak, but Keiko put a finger to her friend’s lips.

“It is what friends do,” Keiko whispered softly. “Now, Nicci, you must take us where we need to go.” Moments later, the two of them were surveying the body of Lisa Tyrone, and, for the first time in her life, Keiko Tan wasn’t sure she wanted to heal someone.