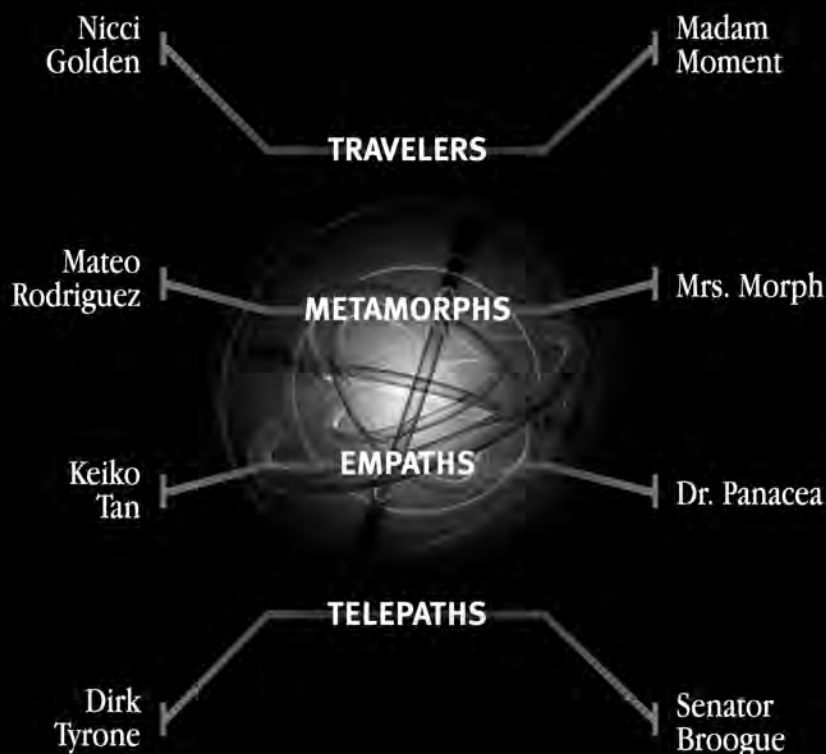


MERGERS

MAIN CHARACTERS



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CHAPTER 1

Dirk 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 . . . uhhh . . . gonna win this . . . fight . . . and it’s not . . . uhhh . . . 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.