

MINDBENDER

by Roxanne Smolen

CHAPTER ONE

Taralyn Stone leaned against the wall in the darkened hallway. As with a hovering camera, her sixth sense saw the layout of the clinic, saw the elderly guard asleep at his desk. It had been easy to scan his mind, easy to extract the location of the shipment. Now she needed to get the drugs and get out before someone discovered her.

She swept ahead telepathically, scanning the shadows as she walked. A left turn. Another to the right. She was taking too long. Voices echoed in the corridor. Taralyn froze. Opening a door, she hurried into a room.

Footsteps passed. She waited, scarcely breathing. When no one entered, she relaxed her shoulders and glanced about. A cabinet stood against the wall. It held a standard keypad lock. Taralyn sighed in relief. She had imagined retinal scanners or voice-code recognition. Keypads were easy to bypass.

Closing her eyes, she peered into the mechanism. She saw which keys had been pressed often, which had been ignored. Delving deeper, she felt the combination surface—like playing guess the cards when she was young. After a moment, she punched in the seven-digit code, and the lock opened.

Taralyn moistened her lips. “Be there. Please be there.”

If her information was wrong, she didn’t know what she’d do. Desperation goaded her down this path, but luck led her to the clinic. She’d heard about the hijacked shipment of Mask via a storefront newscast. Through a series of psychic scans, she traced it here.

Switching on a small light inside the cabinet, Taralyn searched the vials and bottles. Her haste left the neat rows in disarray. On a lower shelf, she found what she needed. She pulled out the tray.

The room lit, startling her.

A man said, “If you’re looking for Parazine, we don’t keep it in stock.”

Taralyn stood, tray in hand, thoughts whirling faster than her body. She saw the man point a gun. For a moment, she considered planting a false image in his mind, making him think he saw a nurse or a cat. But the tray tipped, spilling the vials over its edge.

The medicine for Gloriana.

“No,” Taralyn cried as she juggled the tray. She dropped to her knees and chased the scattering bottles.

The man said, “Don’t move. I’m calling the police.”

“But you can’t. They’ll find me.”

He frowned. Taralyn sat on the floor and covered her face. Her hands trembled, betraying her panic, and she balled them into her eyes. They would find her. They would take her away.

Gloriana would be alone.

Stooping, he picked up one of the vials. “Mask? Why would you want—” He looked at Taralyn. “You’re a telepath?”

Without intending to, Taralyn scanned him. Images and emotions burst over her. He was a doctor, he was afraid—and he knew how to handle a linac gun.

Their eyes met. Taralyn sensed that she should trust him. But she didn't want to take that chance. She'd already risked too much.

"Please," she said, "I need the Mask. I need to keep them from tracking me."

"Who?"

She swallowed. "Enforcers."

He looked at her hard as if expecting her to recant. As if she should apologize for evoking the name of the dreaded psychic police force. He put the gun away. "Come with me."

Taralyn blinked, confused. The doctor held the door open. With her head bowed, she got to her feet. As she did so, she picked up a handful of Mask vials and slipped them into her pocket. They walked down an adjoining corridor. A cluttered counter lined the wall, and file cabinets interspersed the examination rooms. Ahead, a yellow light fell from an open door. He motioned her toward it.

Taralyn felt an upsurge of doubt. She backed away. "I'm not a thief."

"You're a thief, all right. Just not a good one." He motioned again.

She entered a cramped, windowless office lit by a flickering desk lamp. Cracks decorated the walls, and the ceiling showed water stains.

"Have a seat," he said.

Choosing one of the mismatched chairs, she perched on its edge.

He tapped the desk with the vial. "Why would you steal telepathic suppressants? You know, of course, that the Association considers them a controlled substance."

"It's as illegal for you to steal them as it is for me."

"If that's your game, you have more to lose. Mask is illegal because the public doesn't want people like you to hide their true nature. Now, answer my question. Or would you rather speak to an enforcer?"

Taralyn blanched. She thought of telling him about Gloriana. Ten-year-old Gloriana was Taralyn's adopted daughter. Not legally, but the love was just as strong. The girl was empathic. Empathy was a rare form of telepathy that made Gloriana's usual good mood infectious.

That good mood was gone. Now, Gloriana lay on a newspaper mattress alternately thrashing and unresponsive. Taralyn couldn't take her to a doctor because doctors were the ones who did it to her. They broke her mind trying to understand what made her different.

She didn't want to tell him that, so instead, Taralyn said, "I only want to use the drug until I can get to safety."

"I see. Then you won't mind if I give you your first dose?"

Taralyn fought to keep from shying away. She'd planned to give the suppressants to Gloriana, hoping to calm her telepathic abilities. Never had she expected to take the drug herself. The man's eyes were bright. Testing me, she thought. Leaning across the desk, she offered her forearm.

He pounced as if to trap her. Breaking the tip of the vial, he injected the Mask. "You won't feel the full effect for thirty minutes."

Rubbing the sting away, she glared at the doctor.

"So, where are you from?" he asked.

"You expect to have a conversation now?"

"Are you married, single?" He spread his hands. "Do you have family here in LA?"

The question brought a jab of pain. She thought of her estranged parents and of Mirabeth, her

older sister abducted by the Association. She had no idea where any of them were.

He moved to the door. "I trust you won't be offended if I step outside a moment."

"Suit yourself."

"Don't try to leave." He walked out.

Taralyn hid her face in her hands. Foreboding trickled down her neck like ghostly fingers. She'd thought it would be easy—she'd grab the drug and get out. She hadn't considered someone might catch her.

A flurry of angry whispers escalated outside. The door had closed but not latched. Taralyn moved nearer and peered out. Hushed voices came from the hall.

"What are you doing?" someone said. "You don't know her."

"We have no choice," said the doctor. "The others will be here soon. We have to get her out."

"She could be a spy, Ken. One of those psychic implants. She could expose us."

"What do you want me to do, kill her?" A pause, then, "Look, if it will make you feel better, you can run a DNA scan on the needle. That will at least get her civic card number. But you'd better hurry because I'm placing the call."

He moved away, speaking rapidly. Taralyn could not hear his words. She tried to reach with her mind but found it difficult to focus. An odd sensation. All her life, she'd relied upon her extrasensory talent and her wits. Soon her innate senses would be gone.

She still had her wits.

Placing her hand in her pocket so the stolen vials would not clink, she turned back to the room. Diplomas and awards staggered across the back wall, all of them in the name of Dr. Avon Emory. On the desk, she found a picture of a man standing with two boys—a fishing trip. They looked Middle Eastern.

Taralyn thought of the doctor detaining her. Green eyes. Freckled skin. Not Middle Eastern. He must hope to protect his identity by placing her in someone else's office. She wished she'd gotten more information before the Mask kicked in.

She explored the burst of images she'd received when she first scanned him—flashes of carnage. He'd served as a doctor in the Three Moons War. Why had he been thinking of that?

She delved deeper into the instant of thought, peeling away layers to reveal a vague face. A friend he had made in the Service. Someone he was trying to protect. Xander Landsman.

Sighing, Taralyn sank onto the chair. Why had she allowed herself to be shot with Mask? She didn't know anything about Ken the doctor other than he was involved in something illegal. Yet, her first inclination had been to trust.

He planned to run a DNA scan through Central for her name, hoping to find a police record. He would be disappointed. The last entry in her file would be three years ago as a runaway at age fifteen—if her mother had bothered to report it.

"Comfortable?" the doctor asked as he entered the room.

Taralyn stared at the ceiling. "It hasn't been thirty minutes yet."

"I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Of course. Settle something for me. Why would a small clinic in a ghetto keep a supply of a controlled substance?"

"Mask wasn't always used to suppress telepathic abilities. It was originally an effective anti-depressant."

"But you don't use it to treat depression." She looked at him, daring his denial.

He sat on the edge of the desk. "I hope you understand why it was necessary to inject you."

There are places, people at risk.”

“And I can’t be trusted.”

“Your integrity is not the issue.”

“No. It’s how I’m perceived.”

He appeared relieved, pleased that she understood. But she didn’t. She never did.

“I have friends, acquaintances,” he said. “Some of them telepaths like you. We would like to help. If you’ll let us.”

Taralyn swallowed a laugh. No one had ever wanted to help her. She looked at him, at his bright green eyes and short wavy hair. “This isn’t your office.”

He shook his head.

“But you’re a doctor here.”

“I think it best we don’t get to know each other.”

She did laugh then, knowing that his search for police records came up empty. “If I wanted your life story, I’d only have to scan you, Ken.”

He hesitated just long enough to be noticeable. “That would be impolite.”

Of course, she thought. The refrain of the normal. Be like us or be cast out.

“I’ve arranged to have you smuggled from Earth,” he said. “It won’t be an easy journey. You’ll go to a place of sanctuary where you’ll be given a new civicard and the chance for a better life.”

Taralyn bolted upright. Hope. Why did he offer her hope? Had he looked into her dreams? Had he read the torment in her face? Don’t believe him, a tiny voice warned. He’s manipulating you. He’s afraid of you. Yet, Gloriana deserved more than a crate in a warehouse. They both deserved more. “What do you want in return?”

“Your silence.”

His answer surprised her. With more bravado than she felt, she said, “Tell me. Why would a doctor carry a gun in his own clinic?”

He gnawed his lip, probably wondering if she would know if he lied. “I’m afraid. Mostly at night. I volunteer my time, but I don’t live here. I’ve never gotten used to how unstructured the ghetto feels. No boundaries.”

“You have your police.”

“I call them three times a week. They never come.”

The truth. Taralyn nodded. “You have my silence. What’s your plan?”

He stood. “You’ll have to hurry. Go to the city spaceport. Shipping Bay 9.”

“Who should I ask for?”

“No names. Someone will contact you.”

He ushered her out the office and down the hall. Taralyn felt rushed and uneasy. She looked in vain for the owner of the other voice, the one who had warned against her. They were involved in a covert operation. An Underground Railroad, Taralyn realized, transporting truant telepaths off Earth. An image rose through her muddled senses. A place of sanctuary. Outpost Io.

“Why do you do this?” she asked. She’d meant it as a general question—why would any of you, the normal population, want to help a group of people that you persecute and fear—but the doctor took the question personally.

“There was this kid in my neighborhood. I didn’t know him well. One day the Association came to his door. The kid was terrified, his parents anguished. They didn’t want him to go. He went, erased as if he’d never been. I remember thinking no one should have that much power.”

They reached the delivery entrance. An overhead light came on as the doctor unlocked the

door and peered outside. Then he looked at her, and for an incredible moment, Taralyn thought he was about to offer her his hand. Imagine, a normal person touching a telepath. But he caught himself. His eyes hardened.

In that instant, Taralyn knew he told the truth about his distrust of the Association. He did want to rid Earth of its suppression. But even stronger was his distrust of her and her kind. He wanted nothing less than to ship every telepath off his world.

Old memories came rushing back—the fear in her mother’s eyes, her father’s disgust. Hot shame rose to her cheeks. She turned to leave.

“One more thing,” the doctor said. “There’s a story on the streets. A rumor actually. About two weeks ago, a ten-year-old girl escaped from an internment center. Have you heard anything?”

Taralyn froze. Gloriana. How did they know of her? What did they want? “No one escapes the Association.”

“Well, this one did. We’ve been looking for her since.”

“Why?” She faced him. “To interrogate her? If there is such a girl, don’t you think she’s been through enough?”

He raised his hands. “Our sources say the enforcers kept her in a secured wing. We’d just like to find out what the Association wanted with her.”

“What they’ve always wanted. To protect the population from us filthy mindbenders.”

“It may have started that way, but there’s something more now.”

“Like what?”

The doctor paused. “That’s what we’re trying to find out.”