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Project Onyx

by John O'Riley

Chapter 1

As often as the recurring nightmares afflicted him, Brian would have thought he'd become accustomed to them. Instead, he found himself just as disturbed as always when he abruptly awakened in his dark bedroom. Fear clawed at his gut as a black mist in the shape of a man floated over him for several seconds before dissipating. Brian took a deep, cleansing breath and turned to gaze at the readout on his digital alarm clock which told him it was only a little after three in the morning. He closed his eyes and willed himself to relax and go back to sleep. He reminded himself that the black mist had been only an illusion spurred on by the nightmare. Finally, he drifted off to sleep but his alarm blared soon after. He reached out with his hand and slammed the snooze bar.

The tinkling of mini wind chimes drifted to his ears, indicating his older sister was already awake. Brian lay back in bed as exhaustion drew him back to sleep but the alarm went off again. He turned off the alarm and reluctantly got out of bed as it was after six and he needed all the time to prepare for the day. Brian turned on the light and sat down on the office chair at his desk. He set the oven timer for forty minutes and assessed the condition of his mental shields. As a level ten empath, his psychic strength was off the charts and it was imperative that he maintain a constant mental barricade to prevent his ability from overwhelming him. He was dismayed but not surprised to find his protection almost completely eroded. He always had the nightmares when he struggled with maintaining a strong enough mental barricade to keep his empathy under control. All the high level talents on his mother's side of the family suffered from

the same recurring bad dreams and theorized that they were a warning of possible psychic burnout which for a level ten talent would lead to death.

Brian would often suffer from this recurring problem for just one or two days before recovering but this time, it had dragged on for over a week. He forced his fear aside and immediately set to work on strengthening his shielding. Unfortunately, he could tell it wasn't helping much. When the timer went off, he was still exhausted and the mental barricades were still extremely weak. He dreaded going to school today and suffering the deluge of emotional energy imbalances that his peers and teachers suffered. When he finished showering and dressing, his older sister was already almost finished with her breakfast and coffee. Amy smiled amiably at him as she took another sip of her coffee. Her hazel eyes conveyed a cheerful mood and her slightly dampened, long blond hair flowed freely over her shoulders. Her bowl of oatmeal shuffled restlessly from side to side and the three empty chairs at the table fidgeted as though alive and afflicted with ADHD. Amy was a level ten telekinetic so it was a rare experience to find her surroundings quiet and still. Her psychic energy sent constant twinges of pain in his forehead, chest, and gut. When his psionic shield was this weak, everyone caused him pain except for other level ten empaths.

“Good morning.” Amy offered a pleasant smile.

“Hey sis,” Brian said as he fought off another yawn.

Amy took another assessing look at her younger brother.

“You look exhausted.” Amy's brows furrowed with concern.

Brian ignored the comment as he crossed the room and poured himself a bowl of cereal. Even though he and his sister possessed off the charts psychic ability, their telepathic strength

was well below average so they couldn't sense the condition of other people's mental barricades. Their father, Paul, unexpectedly emerged in the kitchen and overheard his sister's remark.

"You've been having problems for about a week. I'm getting concerned," Paul said.

He was medium set, and clean-shaven with short, wavy brown hair and hazel eyes, and wore a blue polo shirt and black pants. His level six telepathic ability was average with level five empathy that made him a perfect fit for his job. His proximity intensified the twinges of pain that stirred in Brian. Brian felt his father gently probe his mental shielding.

"Dad, stop it." Brian's lips curved in an irritable frown.

"Did you spend forty minutes on strengthening your shielding?" Paul asked with concern.

"Yes." Brian disliked his vulnerabilities being so exposed. He wished he shared just the average telepathic ability like everyone else even if he had to give up his empathy. Brian could clearly sense his father's and sister's anxiety over his current condition.

"We're going to need to take you to a shielding specialist."

"No!" Brian said forcefully. He hated the invasive feeling of a level ten telepath working on his mind and knew that while the individual worked, they could sense a lot more of Brian's thoughts than he cared to share. It wasn't that he had any dark secrets but the intrusion on his privacy and allowing a stranger access to all his innermost thoughts disturbed and embarrassed him.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," Paul said. "And you could die if this leads to psychic burnout."

A moment later, an unnatural sense of calm stole over Brian as his father's empathy washed over him. Brian angrily pushed away the psychic energy that his father flowed to him even as his body instinctively welcomed the reprieve.

“Stop it!” Brian said heatedly. “I’m not your patient!”

“I’m just trying to help you.” Paul regarded his son with concern.

Brian noticed that the chairs were fidgeting harder now and some of the cupboard doors were flapping wildly as Amy watched her brother with anxiety. Guilt slammed into him as he sensed her sympathy for him as well as her anxiety over his condition. Paul’s similar emotions blared at Brian like a foghorn. He swallowed as more guilt rose in him. He allowed the mental healing energy of his father to flow over him.

“I’m sorry.” Brian threw him an apologetic look. “I don’t mean to take it out on you.”

“We know.” Amy stood up and patted him affectionately on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about it.”

She left the room and a quiet stillness immediately settled over them.

“Maybe you should stay home,” Paul suggested.

“I’ll be all right, Dad,” Brian said. “I feel like I’m struggling already and I’ve got a couple of B minuses. You know what happens if I get a C or lower in anything.”

Paul nodded gravely but Brian could sense a burst of quick mental laughter. “Your mother made it very clear she would revoke your car privileges if that should ever happen.”

Teresa had purchased a car for both her children on the condition that they maintained at least a B in all their classes. She made it very clear that she would immediately take it back if they failed to meet their end of the bargain. Once they graduated from high school, they received permanent ownership of their cars. Until then, the title was still in her name. Teresa was a consultant for the military with top-secret clearance. Her work often took her away from home for extended periods of time. All level ten psychics were required to work for the government as their numbers were limited and their strength made them dangerous. Shortly after the

Catastrophe of 2018 which had eventually resulted in an entire world of telepaths as well as a myriad of other psychic abilities, chaos had threatened to tear apart society. Governments had quickly mandated regulations to control powerful talents in order to maintain order. The average telepath was a level five and the maximum capacity that current technology could detect and measure was a level ten. Most people exhibited a secondary ability while there were rare individuals called multipaths who had more than one. For some reason, multipaths always demonstrated level ten strength in all their abilities.

Almost everyone chose to link telepathically to the worldwide psychic network, called the Global Net, which greatly augmented their strength. Only a handful of individuals, mostly religious fanatics, chose to remain telepathically isolated from society and to form their own smaller networks. Even though only about twelve percent of the population possessed the gift and curse of a level ten ability, it tended to run in families. Teresa's family had more than their share of powerful psychics. Brian envied his mother and his sister. From what he'd observed, their abilities never turned against them although it was always a possibility with their strength.

Brian hastily finished his breakfast and prepared for school. By the time he slipped behind the wheel of his blue sedan he was already running late. He managed to arrive to his first class literally seconds before the bell rang. His first class was the most boring and monotonous but the least stressful as well as the easiest to pass. Brian didn't have to study much because if you took notes well, it was almost a guaranteed A if you just read them over once. He squirmed in his chair as the emotions of his peers screamed at him. Adrenaline pumped through his veins and his breathing spiked and his body's survival instincts kicked in. Because he was a level ten empath, he could vividly feel the emotional state as well as the energy of the emotional imbalances of anyone around him. The weaker his mental barricade, the stronger the stimuli. The

psychic input that bombarded virtually all level ten psychics awakened the survival instincts and created a visceral reaction that was practically impossible to ignore which necessitated powerful shielding to prevent this from happening in the first place.

Sometimes, the abilities of level ten psychics became too much for the human body to handle which the medical community referred to as psychic burnout. Brian fervently hoped this wasn't the case because there was no way to combat it other than with the aid of shielding specialists which were psychologists with level ten telepathy. Even this approach wasn't a surefire way to prevent psychic burnout. As the day progressed, Brian found it increasingly difficult to concentrate as everyone's anger, irritation, giddiness, happiness, boredom, passion, love, and depression relentlessly prodded at his mind. His third class for the day was algebra and he sat near the back of the room next to his best friend, Derek.

"How's it going?" Derek said.

Brian hesitated because his friend's turmoil twisted his gut.

"You and Amy have been talking about me." Brian forced himself to adopt a neutral expression on his face.

Normally, he would have kept this discovery to himself but he didn't concern himself about such niceties when everyone's emotions were constantly beating at his senses and exhaustion had seeped into his body. Brian still harbored mixed feelings about his best friend and his sister dating. They had believed they were hiding it from him for over two weeks but he'd known all along. Because Derek shared the same ability as Brian, he should have known better than to think he could keep it a secret. The energy that sizzled and exploded between him and Amy was impossible to ignore. Brian had pretended not to notice for over two weeks as they had

snuck around nervously behind his back. One day, he'd finally told them they made a great couple and the tension had released like a damn bursting.

"She's worried about you," Derek said.

"So am I," Brian said. "There's no reason why I should be having this problem. My shields keep getting weaker and weaker. I'm exhausted. I don't know how much longer I can take it."

"You should see a shielding specialist," Derek said.

"I will," Brian said.

Derek flinched in surprise because he knew how passionately Brian despised these brands of psychiatrists.

"I'm surprised your dad didn't insist on one sooner," Derek said. "You've been looking more and more sickly every day. You're gambling with your life, you know."

"He's probably expecting me to make a full recovery at any moment now. I usually snap out of it after a couple of days. This is the first time it's lasted this long. I guess I'm one of the unlucky ones who can't handle my psychic strength," Brian said sardonically.

"I don't think so," Derek said.

"What makes you so sure?" Brian asked.

Before Derek could respond, class started and their algebra instructor was the football coach who didn't tolerate any idle chitchat whatsoever. It didn't matter anyway. Brian knew his best friend was just offering his support which equated to hollow words of comfort. The longer his condition dragged on, the more certain Brian became that he was afflicted with psychic burnout. His body just couldn't handle the demands of his empathic ability. Brian was exhausted by the end of the day when his final class, psychic control and development, rolled around. This

particular course was designed for level ten talents like himself. He, Derek, and Amy shared the same class. The instructor, Mr. Scott Hagen, was medium set with thinning brown hair and cold blue eyes. He possessed a disturbing and formidable air about him which wasn't too surprising given the fact that he was a level ten telepath.

When the bell rang to signal the beginning of class, he immediately informed them in precise, measured tones that this session would be devoted exclusively to practicing their assigned tasks. He'd given individual assignments to everyone at the beginning of last week with goals. Today, they would warm up with gently but firmly pressing against the mental shield of their assigned partner. Mr. Hagen assigned everyone their seats and exercise partners which he would change once every other week. Currently, Brian had the misfortune of working with Zack who possessed level ten telepathy with no secondary ability. The two of them shifted their desks so they faced each other. Zack's flaming red hair was a tangled mass that contrasted sharply with his pale face. He had a small, unflattering nose and a multitude of zits that covered his face and also sprinkled down his hair arms.

"Are you ready?" Zack twisted his lips in a faint sneer.

"Yes." Brian regarded him with reluctance.

The tight pressure against Brian's shield made him wince and pain exploded in his head. This was not the light pressure of a warm up exercise. In fact, they were never instructed to strike out against someone's mental barricades in earnest as Zack liked to do. Brian felt cracks spread over his weakening defenses. Instantly, everyone's emotions intensified and beat at him relentlessly. Blackness crept along the edge of his vision and he found himself leaning forward with his face pressed firmly against the cold wood of his desk. Brian cautiously raised his head

and realized everyone's emotions were muffled and held at bay. Everyone was staring at him. Zack's face was red and his brown eyes conveyed a mixture of anger and embarrassment.

"I didn't do it on purpose. I can't help it if his shields were practically nonexistent," Zack said.

"You should never have used so much force. This was a warm up exercise." Mr. Hagen pinned him with a cool, reproofing look. He swept a stern gaze over the rest of the class.

"Continue with your assignments." He waited until he made sure they had complied before focusing his attention back to Brian. By now, Brian had figured out that his instructor had encompassed his mind in a shield. "You will spend the rest of the class strengthening your shield so that when I remove mine, you won't black out again."

"All right," Brian said.

He was relieved when the bell rang to dismiss class. Unfortunately, Mr. Hagen wasn't ready to let him off the hook so easily.

"I need to have a word with you, Brian," he said as Brian prepared to follow his classmates out of the room.

"Yes, sir," Brian murmured.

He approached the front and his instructor gestured for him to take a seat at the desk closest to him. Brian reluctantly sank into the chair.

"Your work on defensive preparation has been spotty over the semester and the last two sessions have been unsatisfactory," Mr. Hagen said in cold, precise tones. "You will need to prepare harder or your grades are going to drop. Furthermore, you greatly increase the chance of psychic burnout if your shields remain this depleted."

“I’ve been working on it forty minutes every morning and one hour after school,” Brian said.

Mr. Hagen stared wordlessly at him for an uncomfortable moment. “That concerns me a great deal. With that kind of preparation, your defensive mental barriers should be substantially stronger. Do you have any theories on why this is happening?”

“Yes.” Brian didn’t volunteer any theories as he was reluctant to discuss his personal issues.

“I sense that this problem has been going on for quite some time – possibly years,” Mr. Hagen said.

“That’s right.” Brian regarded his instructor with surprise and wariness.

“You’re correct. I’m reading your thoughts. It’s almost impossible not to do when I’m currently shielding you. Your mental protection is still too weak for me to withdraw from your mind safely.”

“I spent the entire time working on my shields.” Brian crossed his arms in a defensive posture.

“I know,” Mr. Hagen said. “Unfortunately, I don’t have the training to build up your shield for you. You’re just going to have to work on it for a bit longer until you’re well enough to leave. If it takes too long, I’ll call your parents and they can decide how to proceed. In any case, I will be informing them of what has occurred today.”

“All right.” Brian heaved a weary sigh.

Chapter 2

A disturbing sense of unease flared across Brian's empathic senses as he pulled his blue sedan into the street in front of his house. Paul's black SUV and Amy's silver sedan were parked side by side in the driveway. The darkness of night was almost complete with a nearby street light partially illuminating the front yard. Brian's stomach clenched as he finally realized that the porch light was out. It was set on an automatic timer so it should be on by now. In fact, all the lights in the house were turned out. Brian's pace slowed as he took in all these details and halted several feet from the front door with the keys gripped tight in his right hand.

It wasn't that late so his dad and sister should still be awake. Adrenaline coursed through his veins and he slowly backed away from the house. He'd only taken a couple of steps when the front door burst open and a thin man dressed entirely in black emerged. An unnatural blackness covered his face as though the darkness had coalesced to obscure it. The long, serrated kitchen knife held in the man's right hand glinted in the streetlight. Brian turned and ran toward his car. He pushed the remote to unlock the door but the attacker knocked the keys from his hand and they flew out into the nearby bushes. Brian knew he didn't have the time to look for them as his assailant was directly behind him. He ran past his car and pumped his legs as fast as possible. He kept running for all he was worth as the assailant's heavy breathing reached his ears from directly behind him.

If Brian slowed down for just a second, he would be dead. He concentrated all his energy on running even as his legs threatened to give out on him.

(End of Book Excerpt for Project Onyx)