



The
Merkabah
Deception

L.Z. Marie

Chapter 1

Quito, Ecuador

Sixteen was too young to lose her mind, but Pilar couldn't stop The Darkness. Shadows seeped into her head. Slithered in slowly. Infiltrated her thoughts. A quiet invasion over which she had no control.

It—the void, the nothingness—seemed harmless at first. A momentary zoning out. Attention disengaged. Pilar blamed her condition on the flu—already two schoolmates were infected. Easy to catch in a boarding school. Headache, nausea, vomiting; the normal symptoms. No big deal.

She lifted her t-shirt and scratched, the angry red stripes crisscrossing her stomach a testament to increasingly irritated skin. A persistent itch.

Her leg jerked.

Not again!

Pilar stared at the five classmates huddled around a geometry book. Gossip about the super-sexy gardener had taken precedence over memorizing math formulas.

Chatting with friends about boys and clothes and celebrities one minute; gone the next. Almost. A tiny part remained. To observe. To wait.

Like now.

Her arm twitched. The Darkness was invading: It silenced her voice. The other limb trembled and an odd sensation forced its way past her lips and emitted a terrible noise. A gurgling, raspy mew.

Pilar watched as her friends laughed, tried imitating the sound. They couldn't. Except for one girl. Maria.

Quiet, studious, pious Maria regarded Pilar with dark eyes and repeated the unholy growl. Or rather, Maria answered. And Pilar understood.

Let us out.

That's all it took. Pilar tumbled on top of her. Arms grabbing at each other. Pilar clawed at the buttons on Maria's shirt.

"Stop it!" Shouts from far away reverberated down Pilar's spine.

Pilar felt someone tug on her arm. Observed her own hand smash into a horrified face. Blood exploded from a nose, poured over quivering lips, and dripped off a trembling chin.

Pilar wondered at the force exerted by her fist; astonished to have hit her best friend.

The others fled the dorm, their screams echoing down the hall.

Sisters Grace and Monica raced to the room. They stopped short, stunned at the sight before them. Sister Grace's hand flew to the Crucifix she wore over her vestments. Bile choked her rebuke.

The evil was spreading!

Arms locked together, legs coiled around hips; Pilar and Maria twitched and writhed. Both were naked, clothes strewn about.

Sister Monica grabbed an ankle. Sister Grace clutched an arm.

Yanking and pulling their snarling charges apart until an eerie silence descended upon the room.

"Call the archdiocese!" Sister Monica gasped as she dragged Maria's now limp body through the doorway.

Pilar spoke to Maria. Not with words. Not with growls. With thoughts.

Let us out!

Chapter 2

Saturday: One week later

“Dios mío! My God. We are doomed!”

Not quite the warm reception I had in mind.

This dire prophesy was issued by a wizened old man who swept his eyes up and down my body. I gnawed on my lip, yet met his gaze. I was nervous but not intimidated. Repeat: Not. Intimidated.

I stood in the midst of the crowded airport in Quito, Ecuador where vacationers and business people—passports clutched in their hands—jostled past on the way to baggage claim.

The wiry old codger scratched a mane of black hair and frowned.

Wrinkles etched into his face and a horseshoe mustache gave him the appearance of a Mexican bandit from a bygone era. Only his immaculately starched white shirt conveyed a different occupation.

No one would have guessed his true identity. This man was an experienced Merkabah Medium, an expert at a skill I barely had begun learning.

I disliked him on sight.

A polite throat clearing drew my attention to the handsome hunk beside me. My Guide. “Daphne Sites, this is Caesar.”

Caesar guffawed—loudly. It was not a laugh of merriment, but of derision. “This woman is practically a child; too young to be the new Recruit.”

Arrogant old coot! I pressed my lips together—I'm 28—hardly a child; however, most Recruits were in their fifties. I stuck my hand out. “Nice to meet you. I *am* the new Recruit.” A false display of confidence. I'm good at that.

Caesar did not take the proffered hand. Instead, his chest puffed out and he glared a long moment before exploding in a torrent of Spanish obscenities.

I didn't understand the language, but there was no mistaking the insulting tone.

Red-faced, arms gesturing wildly in anger, the volume of his voice increased with each syllable. Passersby turned to stare at the spectacle. I understood only one word of his vitriolic censure. *Putá*. Whore. Uh-oh.

Strong hands descended on Caesar's shoulders.

Dwarfing the grizzly geezer at a muscular six foot five, my Guide's words were quietly measured and forceful. A compelling blend of authority suffused both tone and manner.

Serik Jalani—S.J. for short—is my Merkabah Guide, chiseled mentor, one-night fling, and all around enigmatic angel-demon half breed. I've known him for exactly two weeks.

His job requires protecting me from the dangerous life forms I must extract.

A range of emotions flashed across Caesar's face as S.J. spoke to him. Anger. Righteousness. Disbelief. Skepticism. Resignation.

Finally, Caesar buried his face in his hands and moaned.

“Speak English!” My pleas went unanswered as I followed both men through the terminal.

Caesar glanced over his shoulder periodically, only to shake his head at me in scorn.

Can't say I blamed him. Caesar's assessment proved correct: I *was* too young for the job—three decades to be exact. My seven energy fields were not developed, and I had little control over my abilities to either intuit otherworldly life or operate the Merkabah—the cosmic transport which sucks nasty creatures back to their own space-time dimension. I am—as my sisters might say—a hot mess.

S.J. had not explained the reason for the premature recruitment. Not yet. There's a lot of information—no, secrets—my Guide keeps from me. Too many secrets.

A remarkable skyline greeted me outside the terminal. A dense valley metropolis, fingers of suburbia climbing the foothills, and snow-capped Andes surrounding it all.

Caesar ran his thumb and forefinger along the length of his mustache. “Don’t expect an apology, Girlie. You’re too young to be effective. Too young to be any help at all.” His eyes squeezed shut, lips tight. “There’s something...an energy...a sexual tension between you and your Guide.”

My mouth twitched. Caesar was crazy-intuitive, somehow instantly sensing a single forbidden indiscretion between Guide and protégé. I bit my lip, the flashback making me blush. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.” Something about this elderly Medium bugged me. He was conceited, hostile, and greedy—but greedy for what I had yet to determine.

Caesar bristled, drew his jacket about him. “I think you do.” “You don’t like me.” I fussed with my sweater, avoiding eye contact. Caesar’s gaze fixed on my breasts—maybe he was looking for them. “We don’t have to like each other. We just need to work together.” His thumbs hooked from his pants pockets, cowboy style. “What are we waiting for?”

Taxi after taxi drove by.

“Our ride.” S.J.’s smile revealed no emotion.

Ironically, for an empath, I found it nearly impossible to interpret my Guide’s feelings. Only the change in his eye color offered any indication of his mental state. Brown for neutral; green for anger or lust; and gold for...umm...bliss.

Caesar rocked back on boot heels before pulling a crushed pack of cigarettes from a shirt pocket. “Nephilim Guides are a secretive bunch, Girlie.” The match flared and he inhaled, sucking on the filtered end. He smiled before exhaling directly into my face.

I knew exactly what he was doing.

Scents influence an empath’s perceptions, either enhancing or decreasing our capacity to intuit. Cigarette smoke is a definite inhibitor. Waving the stench away, I realized the tobacco fumes were a ploy. Caesar blew smoke to annoy me and reduce my intuitions.

I really did not like the man.

S.J. raised an eyebrow. “It’s no secret, Caesar. My friend Alejandro is picking us up. He will be our driver for the duration of our stay.”

“Obi never mentioned him.” Caesar shielded his eyes from the glaring sun as he peered down the street.

Obi is Caesar's Guide.

Shifting the duffle bag, I regarded Caesar from the corner of my eye. I don't know how Obi managed to put up with this nasty little man.

Hope I never become so egotistic.

"Have you been to Our Lady of Compassion Preparatory School for Girls yet?" I asked Caesar, attempting to strike up a more cordial but work-related conversation.

"Not here, Daphne," S.J. admonished. "We will talk in the car."

Caesar, stroking his mustache, glanced back and forth between us.

Weighing our words, assessing body language. Scrutiny meant to intimidate.

During the flight S.J. provided only minimal information about the Ecuadorian Merkabah Medium. Apparently, Gramps was fearless and accurate, but his intuitive abilities had gone to his head, making him proud and difficult to work with. He was also—to use the vernacular of my students—old school, believing women belonged in the home to serve their husbands. According to his standards, I already had several strikes against me. I was young, divorced, and—up until a few days ago—a ladder climbing academic.

Caesar smirked as though he had read my mind, which is impossible because empaths can't do that. We can only feel another's emotions—but maybe that's almost the same thing.

A bit angsty regarding the lusty feelings for S.J. and nervous about this cosmic assignment, I did not need some sneering senior judging my every move. In fact, this Ecuadorian mission had me baffled. If a seasoned Merkabah Medium couldn't discern the type of cryptivita—hidden life—wreaking havoc at the private girls' school, what made S.J. believe I could? This was only my fourteenth day on the job. Probationary status in the real world.

"Hey Girlie, heard you extracted an aswang." Caesar poked my side with a bony elbow.

"I captured two." My snarky reply.

"I don't believe it. They're vicious buggers. How did you stop one from ripping your heart out and eating it? Let alone two!"

"One at a time."

S.J. burst out laughing.

Caesar took a long drag on the cigarette and smirked—again. "I would love to hear every detail. I need to assess your abilities, Girlie. Know who I'm working with."

S.J. shot Caesar a stern look. “I’ll say it again. No discussion until we are in the car. Too many eavesdroppers linger in airports.”

A dirty gray, late model SUV pulled up to the curb, and a burly man with a shiny bald head emerged from the driver’s side. With his cherubic face, big ears, and broad gap-toothed smile, the driver appeared a jolly sort.

“Alejandro at your service, *Patrón Jalani*.” Alejandro rounded the SUV, both hands extended in welcome. He embraced S.J. with a hearty hug before whirling around to thrust out his hand to me. “This could only be the newest Recruit. Miss Daphne, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

I received a welcoming double handshake. Two big mitts, rough and warm, enclosed my hand. I sensed love, peace, and grace.

Alejandro turned to Caesar, delivered the same friendly greeting.

“And you must be Caesar. I’m surprised our paths have never crossed before now, *mi amigo*.”

He hauled our duffles, garment bags, and suitcases into the rear cargo compartment. Most of the luggage was mine—I tend to over pack.

S.J. laughed upon seeing the four stuffed suitcases I had brought on the trip. I wasn’t sure what to bring for such an exotic destination.

Clothes for adventure, outfits for stealth, dresses for bar hopping—intelligence gathering my Guide claimed—and clothing for a range of weather conditions. Of course, every ensemble required different shoes—not to mention the feminine essentials needed for survival.

The result was two suitcases and two bags—each bulging at the seams. I thought I had done rather well.

“Women like to be prepared for every possible event, no?” Alejandro rightly noted as he wedged a bag between suitcases before slamming down the rear hatch. “They’re always so concerned about what to wear, but men just wish they would wear nothing at all.”

I giggled and smiled at Alejandro; it was difficult not to, he had such an appealing manner.

And then I felt the tingle.

Cold shivers. Icy stings. The pins and needles begin at the base of my neck, spike into my head until lodging in ear and jaw. For years, I thought the prickly skin was my imagination on overdrive, an eerie intuition that something was *wrong* with someone. Now, however, I knew the anxiety-producing shiver signaled the presence of a cryptivita. The stinging sensation was creature radar. A dark matter detector.

My head swiveled around, scrutinizing the people waiting on the sidewalk. Luggage-dragging tourists. Baby-holding mothers. Backpack-wearing students. Briefcase-toting businessmen. Could any of them be a creature from the netherworld in disguise? They all looked normal enough. I turned toward our SUV. The smile melted off my face.

Chapter 3

Was Alejandro causing the creepy quiver?

“Daphne, please get in the car.” S.J. opened the door with a flourish. Experienced Merkabah Medium and newbie Recruit were relegated to the backseat.

Alejandro grinned at me before climbing into the driver’s seat. The tingle grew worse.

I returned Alejandro’s smile, albeit uneasily.

“Hold on, Daphne.” S.J. cautioned as the SUV pulled away from the curb.

What on earth for? It took only Alejandro’s merging onto the main road to appreciate the warning.

Traffic was a nightmare. Not a Hollywood Freeway or New York City nightmare. The drivers in those cities obeyed the rules. Mostly. Here, vehicles violated every traffic law with reckless impunity. Cars swerved around people, honked incessantly, and ignored signage.

Lane markings were a suggestion; there were five abreast at an intersection clearly marked for two. White lines, dotted or doubled, provided an illusion of traffic regulations. Our SUV hugged other vehicles so closely I might touch the occupants.

Throngs of people crossed the streets; round-faced indigenous Indians sporting traditional felt hats and vibrant ponchos jostled among trendy Mestizos and chic Europeans. Waving a dirty rag and spray bottle in the air, a young teenager in an AC/DC t-shirt banged on the hood

offering windshield-cleaning services. Alejandro laid on the horn, waving him off.

The SUV lurched over a curb to avoid two women walking in the middle of the street. I hung on the handrail for dear life. Caesar and S.J. merely looked bored.

“Aren’t there any traffic rules?” I gripped the armrest as we careened around a corner of a cobblestone lane.

Alejandro chuckled. “You Americans and your need for rules. Life has no rules; why should driving?”

Safety came to mind.

Alejandro slammed on the brakes to let a group of white-habited nuns jaywalk across the street. “*Patrón* Jalani, all has been arranged according to your orders. First, we go to the hotel where you should rest a bit from your long trip. Perhaps enjoy some refreshment. After the meal, I will take you to Our Lady of Compassion School for Girls.”

“*Perfecto.*” S.J. twisted around from the front seat, a half smile curled on his lips. “Enjoying the ride?”

Hell, no. The sudden stops, jerky starts, and near misses sent my heart rate sky high. Every muscle in my body tensed in alarm. I feared a panic attack—not an auspicious beginning to the trip. “Not really.”

“Miss Daphne,” Alejandro said as the SUV lurched forward, “*Patrón* Jalani says you’re a professor.”

“I’m an English professor.” Almost. I was one dissertation away.

“Ah, then you might enjoy learning the history of Quito.”

Anything to take my mind off the Drive From Hell. “Yes, that would be nice.”

“*Excelente*, I will begin with our airport; it’s the highest in the world—9,350 feet—and is named after Antonia José de Sucre, a hero to Ecuadorians. Did you know Quito, the capital of Ecuador, is near several volcanoes? You might have noticed the Pichincha when you flew in.”

I viewed many volcanoes from the airplane window. White capped pyramids thrusting high into the sky amid green mountains and lush valleys, a magnificent view from 40,000 feet. “I certainly did. Quite spectacular.”

The SUV screeched to a halt, throwing me forward. Alejandro flicked a small toggle on the dash. A loud siren blared, scattering slow moving laborers shouldering shovels and pickaxes.

“In this country, you need two horns; one for driving, one for special occasions, no?” He rolled the window down, shouting and waving his fist. “Now, where was I? Oh, the name for our beautiful city comes from a people who predate the Incas. A thriving city for over 2,000 years. As you might imagine, the Spanish conquistadors desired such a strategically situated city, even tried commandeering it in 1529. The Inca warrior chief, Rumiñahui, was cunning though and he set his town aflame, destroying Quito before the greedy Spaniards could steal its treasures.”

A nerdy academic at heart, I enjoyed Alejandro’s history lesson. I gazed out the window. Towering structures of glass and concrete stood next to imposing gothic cathedrals crowned with ornate spires and guarded by grim-faced gargoyles. The mishmash of architectural styles and people made Quito an interesting juxtaposition of the antiquated and modern. Buses and taxis spewing noxious exhaust crammed the boulevards. A crush of laborers, tourists, and locals crowded the sidewalks. It was impossible to envision the town during colonial times, let alone 2,000 years ago.

Alejandro continued, clearly in tour guide mode. “New Town is very modern, no? The finest dining, hotels, nightclubs, museums—Quito is first-rate. We’re driving through OldTown now. Much different. Almost another world.”

He and S.J. exchanged a furtive glance. Before I could inquire about its meaning, a woman pounded on the window. An indigenous Indian with a moon face and jet hair held out her palm. Several missing teeth did not detract from her earnest expression as she pointed to the swaddled infant cradled across her shoulders.

Alejandro blasted the horn, rolled the SUV forward, startling her away. “Corrupt politicians lure native Indians from remote areas of the Andes with promises of houses, food, and jobs—in exchange for votes. They come to the cities and, as you see, are worse off than if they remained in their villages.” He shook his head. “Ecuador is a country of equal opportunity. Even the dead may vote in our elections!” His laughter filled the car.

“What?”

He must be joking.

S.J. chuckled. “Voter fraud exists everywhere, Daphne. The United States included.”

“Politics!” Alejandro dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand.

“Quito is famous for its location; only 16 miles from the equator—

Mitad del Mundo—the middle of the world. Perhaps, you’ll have time to visit the monument.”

“A tourist trap!” spat Caesar. “I thought this Recruit is here to help solve the cryptivita problem at Our Lady of Compassion, not sightsee!” He leaned over the front seat. “How much does this Girlie know?”

Hellooo. I’m sitting right here, you arrogant old man. For reasons unknown to me, the Grigori did not agree with the longtime Merkabah Medium’s assessment. “I know the Grigori Watchers believe your evaluation of the girls’ condition is incorrect. They think Duende may not be responsible for the mass hysteria at the prep school. I know a priest was called and—”

“It’s Duende! Many of them! A tribe of Duende. I felt them!” Caesar pounded his chest.

Then why wasn’t he able to get rid of them himself? Macho jerk.

“Miss Daphne, what do you know about el Duende?” asked Alejandro.

I fidgeted; Caesar’s confident display unsettled a newbie like me.

“Um...the Cryptivita Directory said—”

“*Dios Mío!* The Cryptivita Directory!” Caesar’s hand smacked the seat between us. “The Watchers send me a beginner—a too young nobody who quotes the Directory!”

The Cryptivita Directory is a compilation of all the otherworldly life in the universe. S.J. didn’t want me relying solely on the information found in the Directory—said it was an elementary primer at best—but a Recruit was expected to memorize its contents nonetheless.

S.J. frowned at Caesar. “The Watchers sent Daphne to confirm your empathic supposition. Arrogance clouds your judgment, Caesar. Surely, Obi warned you about this attitude.”

An awkward silence ensued. Caesar stared out the window, arms crossed in anger. His indignation was so palpable I could almost see the steam rising from him.

“Miss Daphne, please continue,” Alejandro entreated with a broad smile.

I touched the Merkabah hanging from the thin chain around my neck, this astral accessory for which I am the conduit. Lucky me.

Enclosed within two rings, seven tiny spheres hung in suspension.

Each hematite, onyx, amber, peridot, lapis lazuli, turquoise, and alexandrite stone generated an ancient elemental power. Encapsulated within the orbs existed a sophisticated alien technology.

“Duende are little mischievous goblins who live in the walls of a house. Each culture has a different name for them. Nisse, lutin, leprechaun, brownie...I can’t remember them all. In every illustration I’ve seen, el Duende is portrayed as a creepy-looking gnome. Parents tell their children to beware el Duende—he will eat them if they don’t behave. The Directory lists them as a harmless nuisance—they enjoy frightening people.”

I glanced down at the Merkabah. One of the stones appeared to be rotating...ever so slowly. Not good. Rotating stones and orbiting rings meant a cryptivita was nearby. Maybe it *was* Alejandro. Then again, pedestrians and traffic surrounded us—possibly a cryptivita lurked outside. “Duende have a domestic classification. Not sure what that means.”

“Bah!” Caesar grimaced. “It means, young Recruit, that Duende belong in this world, but do not inhabit our dimension.” He jabbed a finger in my arm. “They belong here as much as you and me. The houses they live in are their homes. The only reason people see them at all is because of irregularities in the dimensions. We humans live in several dimensions but Duende occupy several others.”

S.J. explained. “Duende share only one of our human dimensions. Caesar is correct about the fabric of the universe. It’s always shifting, never static. This is one reason why people often catch fleeting images or shadows. The Butterfly Effect is one explanation. The smallest changes have significant impact on something seemingly unrelated.”

“Ah yes, Chaos theory,” Alejandro added. “Earthly terms to explain what mankind cannot understand.”

According to my Guide, there was a logical scientific explanation for everything. Unfortunately, humans were only beginning to comprehend the science of the cosmos.

I shook my head—science confused me. “Does that mean we can’t send the Duende back?” I leaned forward to ask this of S.J., since I had no desire to communicate with the grouchy Merkabah Medium. Alejandro responded instead. “Only temporarily. They’re like roaches. Hard to get rid of. In fact, the word el Duende means charm or spirit. The creatures are a blend of mostly energy, their physical form merely a fraction of humans.”

I frowned. “What are we?” And by “we” I meant me, Caesar, and—I’m assuming—Alejandro. S.J. was not entirely human. He was a Nephilim; an angel-demon human with a celestial commission to serve as guide and protector for empathic individuals.

S.J. chuckled. “C.S. Lewis said it best in *The Screwtape Letters*: Humans are amphibians; half human, half spirit.”

“Is spirit the same as energy?” I stared at his hair; dark curls begging to be touched.

S.J. was more than spirit and body—he possessed a rarefied force to which I was undeniably drawn. Physically. Emotionally.

That *other* way.

Alejandro and S.J. gave each other a meaningful look before bursting out in laughter.

Must have been a private joke.

Alejandro veered left down a narrow street lined with shade trees and tall palms. Wrought iron fences and high stone walls enclosed grand manors. Beside each gated entrance a man stood nearby. Guards.

Although, they didn’t appear to be typical guards. No uniforms. No observable weapons. But it was clear they were guarding the palatial homes.

I took a quick peek at Caesar. He was twirling his droopy mustache again.

He whipped around and glared. “Girlie Recruit, you will see for yourself there are many evil Duende creating the problems at Our Lady of Compassion.”

Alejandro braked before an ornately gated entrance. “We have arrived, *mi amigos*. Hotel Conquistador. *Exclusivo*. Elegant. Your home away from home.”

Or in S.J.’s case, hotel away from hotel—since he was owner and resident of the posh 5-star hotel in the beach town where I lived.

The adobe wall surrounding the property was embedded with broken shards of glass. Sharp protrusions stuck in the mortar, guaranteed to discourage any would-be thieves.

Alejandro rolled down the window to speak with the guard. Unlike the others, this man wore a pressed uniform, stood straight, and held a two-way radio receiver. Alejandro handed the able-bodied guard a pack of cigarettes—a Cuban brand.

The man bent over, stuck his head through the window, a lopsided grin on his face. “Welcome to Hotel Conquistador.” His accent was thick.

Alejandro pointed to me. “This *bonita*—pretty—woman is an important *professora* in the United States.”

I smiled, gave a little wave.

S.J. leaned over to shake the guard's hand. A fat roll of bills was exchanged. The guard quickly pocketed the cash as they conversed, nodding solemnly all the while. A few times the guard glanced my way, eyes wide. Finally, he directed a terse comment to Caesar, who grimaced.

Alejandro howled with laughter.

"Several women have asked about Caesar today. He is, apparently, quite the ladies man," S.J. explained.

Eeewww.

The guard slid the bolt back and rolled the gate open.

A wide flagstone driveway curved toward the stately mansion.

Reminiscent of a classic Italian villa, the charming balconies, regal columns, elaborate cornices, and ornate widow's walk harkened back to a nobler era.

"I hope you like the hotel." S.J. looked over his shoulder, grinning.

"Long ago, this mansion was the residence of an influential business tycoon. Obi has done a superb job restoring the mansion to its original grandeur. I believe you will find the accommodations both lavish and endearing."

Alejandro parked the SUV at the entrance, where a bellhop in a colonial costume came to our assistance.

I stepped out, shouldered my purse, and paused to admire the whimsical depictions of mythological creatures over the front door.

"Ah, of course you would enjoy the zoophorous." S.J. chuckled, taking my duffle bag.

"A what?"

"That fanciful bit of art is called a zoophorous. It describes any mold or carving of animals and figures on a wall."

I raised an eyebrow. In addition to possessing a wealth of knowledge about science, mythology, religion, and ancient history, my Guide was also familiar with architectural terminology.

A porter held the door as we entered the lobby. Caesar shuffled behind. Not three steps in, a woman squealed in delight from behind the reception desk.

"Serik Jalani! How long it has been, dear friend!" A middle-aged woman with a Frida Kahlo uni-brow leapt off the chair.

Thick waves of hair bounced merrily as she slung around the corner to embrace my Guide. A snug red skirt and button-straining silk blouse barely contained her curvaceous figure. She air-kissed each cheek

before embracing him in a tight hug. They spoke and joked with the comfortable familiarity of old friends.

Every few minutes she called out, “Zeno! Zeno!” to no one in particular.

I shifted nervously from foot to foot, waiting for an introduction, marveling at the lobby’s splendor. Golden-hued walls, carved moldings, crystal chandeliers and a breathtaking array of antiques and art filled the intimate space. Bouquets of exotic flowers and potted plants garnished every surface. Aged oriental carpets lay atop marble flooring.

“Daphne, may I introduce Araceli, a very old and dear friend.”

“Not so old!” She wagged a finger. “Any recruit of Serik’s is a friend of mine.” Fleshy arms squeezed around me. Two air kisses brushed my face. Araceli took both my hands in hers and held tightly, staring into my eyes. “How young you are.”

I squirmed under her searching gaze. She closed her eyes, a small smile on bright red lips.

My empath abilities kicked in, a strange mixture of intuitions and fleeting sensations. Until just a few days ago—fourteen to be exact—I had no idea an empath felt the emotions of others; sensing and experiencing a person’s mental state, be it pain, joy, anxiety, or anger. Although people gravitate towards empaths and find comfort in our presence, strangers make us anxious, often overwhelming our senses. Learning about empathic abilities confirmed the odd thoughts and behaviors I experienced around people. This also explained my inability to remain peaceful in a crowded room or my own perplexing emotions.

I forgot my initial nervousness concerning Araceli as her weirdly contradictory emotions flooded my senses.

Chapter 4

Araceli exuded wisdom, discernment, and kindness; however, I sensed a division within her. Or perhaps, her belief system included a certain prescribed dichotomy. I took several deep breaths, concentrating.

My intuitions often become jumbled, and I'm not always accurately able to identify the perceptions. Like having two sets of puzzle pieces in one pile. As if being an emotional sponge wasn't trying enough, I'm a distinctive empath. A brain anomaly—something to do with super specialized neurons—permits me to recognize dark matter and operate the Merkabah. So far, I've been exceptionally lucky, escaping almost certain death twice. S.J. saved my life each time, but that was his job after all.

My eyes flew open the moment I heard Araceli suck air between her teeth. A large smile was plastered on her face. A phony trying-too-hard grin. "You are most *bonita*, most...um..." she turned to S.J. in confusion, "...exceptional." Her face registered alarm.

Not an auspicious introduction: I was zero for two so far.

"Is this the new Recruit?" Another voice bellowed from the other side of the reception desk. Another happy hug. Another hand squeeze. Another penetrating look into my eyes. This time from a bear of a man who introduced himself as Zeno, doting husband of Araceli.

Welcomes, hugs, handshakes, and badinage later, Araceli and Zeno insisted we partake of some light refreshment. They escorted us to a courtyard dining area where a table awaited. My Guide, our hosts, Caesar, Alejandro, and I sat down, which left one chair vacant. My stomach growled. The trip from California to Ecuador took 11 hours, and although I slept for most of it—the flight departed at nine in the evening—I was hungry by the time S.J. woke me to admire the volcanoes.

Two crystal goblets, three different length forks, two knives, and three spoons were arranged with precision. This was their idea of a light meal?

Two people joined us on the veranda: Obi, Caesar's Merkabah Guide; and Jack, my metaphysical guru.

"Jack!" What a happy surprise. "I didn't know Jack would be here," I said to S.J.

"Jack will continue your training," he whispered, taking a seat on my right.

I certainly did need more training.

Jack bestowed his usual top-of-head kiss, the location of the *sahasrara* chakra.

More commonly known as the crown chakra, this energy does not fully develop until age 50 or 60—and was the basis for Caesar's criticism of my abilities.

Jack embraced me, inquired about the flight, and settled into the empty chair.

A wizened old man with dark wrinkled skin and the habit of materializing from a nearby tree, Jack is the legendary Green Man incarnate. Nature made flesh. The embodiment of the natural world. Jack brought peace and composure to my soul.

He scooted the chair in, patted my hand, and scowled at my Guide.

The two men in my new Merkabah Recruit life did not get along, maintaining a sort of begrudging tolerance for one another.

Jack and S.J.: My personal Merkabah team.

Even though S.J. claimed Jack's purpose was to continue my instruction, I had doubts. I suspected the Nephilim sent Jack to prevent any further scandalous behavior between S.J. and me.

Suitcase in his hand, Obi stood in the doorway. As tall as S.J.—six feet five at least—he possessed the regal bearing of all Nephilim.

They are a formidable race—imposing, but also kind and compassionate.

Both S.J. and Obi belong to a secret organization that protects empaths. They answer to The Watchers, aka, the Grigori. The Watchers are a physically and intellectually superior race who pissed off their superiors thousands of years ago when they impregnated a few human women. The Bible claims the Watchers are fallen angels—demons, in other words. The Nephilim are their progeny, a half-human, half-fallen angel race with haughty attitudes and superhuman strength.

“Welcome, young Recruit. I hope you enjoy the accoutrements of my humble hotel while on this mission.” He kissed my forehead, the traditional third eye or *ajna* chakra location. Somehow, the physical contact acted as a supernatural accelerator encouraging the energy field to mature.

His eyes bore into Caesar’s. “Serik will assume guardianship. Be polite and show care toward our youngest Recruit. You may both learn much from each other.”

Caesar snorted his disapproval.

Obi’s eyebrows shot up, and I noticed a blink—one beat too long—aimed at S.J., who lifted his chin ever so slightly. A mutual understanding? A secret code? The air crackled with static. Or was I imagining things? No one else detected anything out of the ordinary. Not even Caesar, a veteran Merkabah Medium.

“You’re not staying?” I asked, while a waiter poured bottled water into my goblet.

Obi smiled broadly, his face brightening with pleasure. “Another matter requires my immediate attention elsewhere. I go where our superior sends me.”

The Nephilim have a boss?

Obi made his farewell, casting a severe eye to Caesar before he left. Servers placed bowls of *ceviche* before us and all conversation ceased as everyone dug into the limejuice-cooked seafood compote.

Caesar held a piece of juice-soaked bread to his mouth. “Ready to extract some Duende, Girlie?”

Zeno shook his head. “I know you’ve already visited the school, Caesar, but this is unlike any typical Duende high jinx. Why do you persist in believing this vexatious spirit is the cause?” He gestured to me. “It’s good a new Recruit is here—a fresh perspective will be most beneficial.”

“What exactly is happening?” I asked as the waiter served the next course—a creamy potato soup topped with sliced avocado and shredded cheese.

Alejandro rubbed his hands with anticipation. “My favorite.” He smiled broadly when he caught me staring.

Some *thing* about him bothered me, but I couldn’t pinpoint the feeling. Alejandro was friendly, funny, polite, and intelligent. S.J trusted him. Still, there was something...

Unfortunately, the flavors and textures of the food proved a distraction. This was either the result of ravenous hunger or the residual trace of hypersensitivity from the Nephilim energy spike. My Guide’s romantic attentions produced an interesting side effect. After our one night together, my sense of taste and touch became extraordinarily acute. The effect wore off after a couple hours; except, every now and again, the super sensitivity reappeared.

I secreted this wee detail away. No point telling S.J. What harm could there be in experiencing a surge of heightened sensations once in a while?

“Eight more girls are exhibiting symptoms,” Zeno announced, snapping me out of my food coma.

“Duende can take over someone’s body?” I asked.

S.J., Zeno, Alejandro, and Araceli issued a collective no, only Caesar disagreed.

Araceli touched the cloth napkin to her lips. “Because the doctors found no medical reason for the students’ behavior, the nuns whisper of demonic possession.”

I picked up a glass of water. “If demon is another word for a creature from a different space-time dimension then the nuns are correct.”

Caesar smiled at me for the first time since we met. “Exactly! You see, Girlie agrees with me. It can only be Duende—many demon Duende.”

I doubted the Watchers sent a newbie like me across the globe to get rid of a few nasty gnomes!

S.J. turned to me. “Duende do not seek human hosts. For this reason, the girls’ symptoms cannot be attributed to Duende.”

“Then who or what is causing the weird behavior?” Surely, someone had an idea.

S.J. drew me close, pressed lips to my forehead. “That, Sweet Nymph, is why you’re here.”

I blushed; bit my lip, my eyes sweeping over the table, immediately sensing the others' reaction for his term of endearment. Caesar squinted in suspicion. Araceli and Zeno registered surprise. Jack appeared annoyed, and Alejandro snickered. The awkward silence that followed was replaced with oh's and ah's while the servers arrived with the next course—succulent pork morsels mixed with hominy and vegetables. For the remainder of the meal, Zeno and Araceli regaled us with the antics of their more colorful hotel guests. A few football-sized mango slices later, S.J. reminded us that we had a three o'clock appointment with *Señorita* Espinoza at Our Lady of Compassion. As we waited for the elevator, I observed Araceli. A trace of confusion crossed her face before she disguised the emotion with a smile. Once again, I sensed a division within her, as if she struggled coming to terms with a phenomenon beyond her understanding. "Do you sense something?" asked S.J. who must have noticed me chewing my lip. "I'm not sure. Can't quite put my finger on it. Araceli and Zeno are fully human?" "Yes." S.J. pressed the elevator's call button. "What's their connection to the Nephilim?" "Araceli and Zeno have been caretakers for Obi's hotel for many years. What specifically do you intuit?" "Well..." No adequate words described the intuition. It's difficult to articulate the fleeting images or nonsensical premonitions racing through my mind. Impossible to explain such ephemeral notions. Even for an almost-English professor with a penchant for vocabulary. S.J. touched my arm. "Daphne, it's important to give words to your sensations. Without words, your intuitions remain only unformed impressions. There is power in ascribing words. Words create meaning—give meaning. Without being able to label your thoughts, you cannot act upon them." "Ahem," Jack cleared his throat. "I disagree. When we assign a mere word to an impression, you instantly create boundaries and limitations. A definition restricts and inhibits true thinking. An empath must embrace and master a world that defies explanation. You must resist the urge to shackle pure sensation with conventional vocabulary."

I sighed dramatically for their benefit, glanced from one to the other. S.J. and Jack were at it again, expressing opposite views. Both logical. I pondered my own need for absolutes. S.J. insisted the universe did not conform to narrow ideals and yet he demanded an explanation for the indescribable.

What was the adage about serving two masters?

From now on, I would find specific vocabulary for S.J., and use ambiguous terms with Jack. Problem solved.

The elevator door swooshed open at the top floor. Jack's room was conveniently adjacent mine; my Guide's room was located at the far end of the hall. Whoever booked the reservations knew about our lusty feelings for each other.

A few days ago, S.J. had given me a choice. Reject my cosmic calling to be his lover or embrace my destiny. After careful deliberation—hemming and hawing mostly—I chose the Merkabah mission.

My physical attraction for him was something I simply had to endure. Attraction was an understatement. I felt irresistibly drawn to the angel-demon; a pity, since ancient rules forbid Nephilim from having sex with an empath. They altered our unique brain chemistry, reducing our ability to intuit dark matter and activate the Merkabah. My Guide broke sacred rules that night. Wish I knew why.

S.J.'s fellow Nephilim believed our working together risky because emotion might supersede duty. Not your everyday flirtation.

No matter, I'm a mature, responsible woman: I can handle sexual tension. A wondrous ability was in my possession; I wasn't letting a muscular hunk of handsome with a colossal ego prevent me from realizing my destiny.

“Meet me in the lobby in half an hour. Wear a skirt; the nuns appreciate guests who adhere to the school's dress code.” S.J. continued down the hall.

I unlocked the door and traipsed into the room, tripping over luggage as I gaped at the suite's splendor.

Turkish carpets spread atop parquet flooring, ornate crown molding accented sweeping drapery, and a marble fireplace emphasized peach-hued walls. My fingertips brushed across a sumptuous canopied bed. My hand ran over a carved chair back. I threw open the French doors to the balcony.

A breathtaking view of city and sierra awaited. Emerald mountains and a snow-capped volcano rose skyward in the distance. Below, low hedges surrounded a green lawn lush with fruit trees and brilliant with

flowers. A slate-colored Great Dane sprawled in a shady corner. Sweet fresh scents perfumed the air, filling my senses with peace. Nothing bad could ever happen in a suite so lavish with luxurious comfort.

After unpacking the suitcases and duffle bags, I hung up the more wrinkle-prone clothes, began arranging toiletries—women require far too many gadgets and lotions and makeup—when I heard a knock on the door.

It was Caesar.

He sauntered in, head swinging right to left as he scanned the room.

“Sit down, Girlie. There are a few things you gotta know.”

Reeking of cigarette smoke, he strode toward the balcony, glanced outside for who-knows-what, then spun around. His finger jabbed the air. “The Nephilim are lying to you.”

Chapter 5

Nephilim lie?

Caesar had my complete attention. I perched on an antique gilded chair, hand gripping the embroidered armrest.

Satisfied no one lurked about or was hiding under the bed, the cocky Medium headed for the bathroom to check behind the door. “You’re new—so you don’t know this yet. S.J. cannot be trusted.” He plopped down on the chair across from me.

I thought of all the secrets S.J kept from me in the two short weeks I had known him. The side effects of the Merkabah. The dangers I would face. The repercussions from our intimacy. The strength of the aswangs. The pain incurred when activating the device. His true identity.

Were they lies or merely omissions? There was a difference—or was I simply fooling myself?

I felt sick; the truth behind the Medium’s statement set my stomach lurching. “How many years have you been a Merkabah Medium?”

Caesar reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a cigarette.

“Please, don’t smoke in here.”

“Gringos,” he muttered before stuffing back the crushed pack. “I’ve been a Medium for twelve years, and during those years, I learned much.” He leaned forward. “Obi is a wise and powerful Nephilim, but he answers to someone else. Don’t ask who: I don’t know. He disappears for days and offers poor excuses for his absences. During the first two years, I asked the same questions over and over again. I bet you ask similar ones. Obi never answers my questions. Always it is riddles with him. I’m telling you this because...because I pity you.” “Why?” My empathic ability was desirable, not pitiful.

Caesar poked my knee with a wrinkled finger. “You. Me. Eh? We got a gift. This gift is also a curse. We see creatures from other dimensions and far away places in the universe. Our bodies are conduits for a strange force that opens a wormhole. Never even heard of a wormhole until I became a Medium.” He chuckled, a smoker’s hacking wheeze. “Thought a wormhole described how a dead body decomposes.” He stroked his mustache. “Do you get the dreams?” Oh God, yes! I had dreams. Frightening, surreal, sexual dreams waking me in terror, my body aching with lust. I buried my head in my hands. Caesar’s sympathy saturated my senses.

“I don’t get the dreams everyday, but when I do—*Caramba!* I asked Obi if they’re real. Are the creatures in my nightmares cryptivita? Obi tells me they are only dreams—only the brain releasing random thoughts. Bullshit! They are real! I think when we sleep, the creatures torment us... play with us. We are inferior beings to them...they play as a cat with a mouse.”

I already had one bad experience with a cat. I squeezed my eyes shut, remembering the demon cat my ditzy neighbor found—the cat who almost stole her soul.

“This is why I pity you. You’re so young, too young—something isn’t right.”

I lifted my head, made eye contact with the old coot.

“The Nephilim are keeping a secret from you.” His finger jabbed my knee again, punctuating every word. “They lie to you.” A forlorn smile through nicotine-stained teeth.

A classic over-thinker, I rarely accept facts or opinions at face value, preferring to draw my own conclusions.

The Nephilim could not possibly be expected to divulge all their secrets. Perhaps Mediums asked questions Nephilim were not permitted to answer. Maybe it never occurred to Caesar that too much

knowledge might endanger us. Caesar's opinion was overly simplistic. Nephilim had been acting as Merkabah Guides for thousands of years; surely, they were experts at fulfilling their sacred duties and dealing with Mediums. "It doesn't matter if Nephilim lie to us because what we do is good. We send evil cryptivita home. We save human lives." "Oh yes, this is so. That's why I stay." He lifted the Merkabah from under his shirt. It was identical to mine. "There are many benefits from wearing this Merkabah. Benefits I will never give up." Caesar lowered his voice. "I'm sixty seven years old." He pulled up his pant leg, pointed to a muscular calf. "Eh? Not bad for an old man." Next, he pushed the shirtsleeve high on his arm and flexed. "I'm stronger than ever before. I have energy, so much energy." He grabbed his crotch. "I'm like a young man here. Virile and potent. I have many girlfriends and satisfy them all. My friends are old men; they no longer have sex with their wives and mistresses. They waste money on expensive potions from the local market that don't work." He shook his head. "They ask me, Caesar, how do you do it? I cannot tell them this Merkabah..." he twirled the chain, "...this alien technology is the reason."

I nodded, questioning his motives behind such a personal disclosure. I thought he hated me.

He stroked his mustache. "You don't trust me."

Damn, he was *good*.

I took a deep breath, shrugged my shoulders. "I'm suspicious."

"No shit." Caesar reached into a bowl filled with red apples, threw four pieces of fruit high into the air, and began to juggle. "Weird things will happen."

No disagreement there. I had already been attacked by a giant carnivorous bird, identified two ghosts, and witnessed an alien birth.

"They already have."

"Ghosts?" Three of the apples landed back in the bowl. The largest one he took a bite from.

"Yes." Ghost sightings were one side effect of wearing the Merkabah; a small detail both Jack and S.J. had neglected to mention. The first ghost appeared at the local coffee shop, the other phantom was my neighbor's grandmother. Ghosts levitate a few inches from the ground, a foolproof way for differentiating the living from the dead.

"You been attacked yet?" He crunched on the apple, sucking the juice loudly.

“Not by a ghost, but a harpy tried to hurt me.” A bird-human hybrid from Greek mythology, the creature was depicted as either resembling a beautiful young female or hideous old woman. Harpies were the vicious birds of prey who snatched sailors in *The Odyssey* and stole food in *The Aeneid*. Dante upped their spooky in the *Inferno* when he wrote about the winged creatures inhabiting a forest in hell.

Caesar laughed. “Those damn birds. They keep you on your toes.” The carnivorous bird almost killed me one night. I was standing outside the house when the harpy came out of nowhere and dive-bombed for my head. Luckily, the neighbor’s demon cat attacked and frightened the fearsome fowl away.

Caesar finished the entire apple, core and all. “What did your Guide tell you about himself?”

“I know he’s a Nephilim; part angel, part human, and works for the Grigori Watchers to keep the planet free from evil creatures who don’t belong in our world.”

“Did he tell you anything else?” His tone was suspiciously casual.

“Not really.” I rubbed my stomach. Too many fried bananas. Or anxiety indigestion. Or both.

“Then you don’t know.”

The giant knot in my belly tightened. “Know what?”

Caesar settled back into the chair, reveling in my ignorance. “Those Grigori Watchers were a bad bunch—disobeyed their superiors. They were angels who fornicated with innocent human females. Disgusting! Their mutant children are called Nephilim. They made two hundred of these freaks. The Bible says Nephilim were terrible monsters who tortured and murdered humans. They started wars and screwed anything that moved. Those mutants destroyed God’s peaceful world. God was angry! He sent his messenger—the good angel Suriel—to tell Noah he must build an ark. God used the flood to kill the Nephilim.” A pregnant pause. “They didn’t all die.”

“If God thinks Nephilim are so bad, then why did he let some of them live?”

“I do not question His reasons.” He pointed to his chest. “I had lung cancer when Obi recruited me. The doctor gave me only a few months to live. I was poor; an honest laborer all my life, lived paycheck to paycheck. Didn’t have money for fancy cures or medicines. Next thing I know, the cancer disappears, and I’m healthy again. Was it the Nephilim or the Merkabah that cured me? I don’t know, but I’m grateful. I enjoy this life, have fun with my mistresses, and play with

my grandchildren...for now. But just as I believe the Nephilim healed me, so I also believe when they are done with me, I will die. This is why I pity you. You are too young to die.”

Had to agree with him there.

On that dour note, I decided to end this un-cheery chat. “I don’t know why you’re telling me this.”

He scratched his head. “Your Guide is a handsome man and you’re a pretty young woman. I sense you have strong feelings for your Guide. Do not trust him! Nephilim have lived for thousands of years; they play by a different set of rules. Do not be fooled! Do not become emotionally attached. They use humans.” He swaggered to the door. “In public, we are enemies. They expect me to be jealous of you. As one Merkabah Medium to another, remember we share a bond—an empath bond. They need us, Girlie. Without us they cannot...” he tilted his head and grimaced. “They’re not worthy somehow...this is what I believe.”

I watched as he strode down the hall. The old Medium had neither the arthritic gait nor painful plod of someone his age, instead displaying the energetic bounce of youth.

I shut the door, threw my overwrought self on the bed, and burst into tears. And it wasn’t even that time of the month!

S.J. insisted I trust him—explained the necessity of having complete faith in his actions. Faith and trust: Those two sentiments had given me trouble in the past. Especially regarding men. I blamed my ex-husband.

Several sniffing minutes later, I put the kibosh on my neurotic outburst, even though a good cry is therapeutic.

I splashed water on my face, ran a brush through tangled hair, reapplied make-up, and struck the tuning fork against the sink several times. The frequency did wonders for my headache. Cleared the metaphysical air so to speak. I peeled off wrinkled trousers, swapping them for a nun-approved, over-the-knee black skirt. The Merkabah, dangling from a thin silver chain, lay concealed under a silk emerald blouse. Black suede pumps completed the modest ensemble. I tucked the transcendental tuner and Cryptivita Directory into a messenger bag, and locked the door.

Time to visit the ghoulish-infested prep school.

Chapter 6

Serik Jalani was waiting in the foyer. My breath caught in my throat—he had changed into an elegant yet conservative suit. A dove gray pinstripe and cream shirt accentuated his dark skin. Square jaw, deep set brown eyes, full lips; his features suggested an exotic ethnicity. One transcending a specific race or region. He cut an imposing and dashing figure. Near impossible not to be anything but thoroughly smitten.

Which I was not.

I glanced down and decided my skirt was a bit baggy—although if I continued eating like I had today, it would be tight within the week.

“I’m a little nervous about this meeting.”

The SUV idled outside, Alejandro at the ready, dark shades propped atop his hairless head.

“I have faith in your abilities, Sweet Nymph.” He opened the back door of the vehicle.

“Is Caesar coming with us?”

“He’ll meet us there.”

I strapped on the seatbelt and wondered if Alejandro would think me rude to ask for a blindfold. Any modicum of composure I now felt was sure to be lost while we navigated the Quito traffic. I shouldn’t have been worried. Alejandro had already displayed a few creative

and complex driving skills. On second thought, this was precisely the reason for my concern.

“Hello again, Miss Daphne.” Alejandro pulled the mirrored sunglasses from the top of his head and put them on. The change in his appearance was instantaneous. From paunchy pal to burly badass.

“How did you find our local cuisine?”

“Everything was delicious. If I eat like this everyday, I’ll have to go on a strict diet when I get home,” I laughed.

“Women and their diets! Always worrying over each pound,”

Alejandro accelerated around a corner. “Araceli and Zeno are gracious hosts, no? They are warm and friendly people. Not at all like Caesar.”

“Look past his less than cordial personality; he is a very successful Merkabah Medium,” S.J. directed his comment to me.

I supposed—mere conjecture—that a *successful* Medium was defined as one who is still alive. “I’ll try.”

“Caesar is as wise as he is cranky. Listen and learn from him.”

S.J. obviously didn’t know the sort of advice Caesar was dispensing.

“What are your empathic impressions of Araceli and Zeno?” asked Alejandro as he blew through a red light.

Those feelings concerning our hosts continued to be vague. “I can’t assign a name to it yet.”

S.J. glanced over his shoulder, arched an eyebrow. “Try.”

I sighed. “Are they conflicted about something? About me? About Nephilim? I sense a division within them. Like they were melding two discordant ideologies into one.”

Hooting with laughter, Alejandro pounded the dash. “She is excellent, *Patrón*. And so young.”

S.J. turned his head and winked.

“They are Zoroastrians!” Alejandro announced as if his response clarified everything.

“Who or what is that?” By focusing on the street directly ahead, my anxiety decreased.

S.J. explained. “Zoroastrianism is a faith-based philosophy.”

Sometimes empath skills are frightening.

“The religion is one of the oldest in the world, although today there are less than two hundred thousand self-proclaimed Zoroastrians.

Modern day Christianity stems from its teachings,” S.J. continued.

“The religion predates Christianity?” I asked.

“By thousands of years,” S.J. answered. “But much of the information regarding the founder has been long since destroyed by the ravages of

time. Legends contend a man named Zarathustra from Bactria—northern Afghanistan—was the originator. Although little is known about his early life, many believe his birth was heralded by a miraculous event. One day a God—”

“Ahuramazda,” Alejandro interjected.

“Yes, the most high god of the people gave Zarathustra a wondrous vision. A spirit delivered several powerful and unconventional messages. The first decreed that man must no longer sacrifice animals. Another was that all good things come from Ahuramazda and through his Holy Spirit. This messenger also announced the existence of six other holy spirits called the Holy Immortals who were responsible for the creation of the entire world. Lastly, the heavenly apparition proclaimed that mankind must oppose evil forces in three ways; through right reflection, right word, and right deed.”

“Except for the mention of six other spirits, Zarathustra’s vision seems a bit tame.”

“Not eight thousand years ago. His radical thinking created a big upheaval.”

“Why?” Our conversation kept my mind off Alejandro’s erratic driving.

“Primitive religions of the time found Zarathustra to be heretical and subversive to ruling leaders. Priests who worshiped the god Mithra thought him especially dangerous. Zarathustra barely escaped the country with his life.”

“His beliefs were that radical?”

“Indeed. Eventually the prophet gained many supporters and his teachings became incorporated into numerous religions. One in particular forever changed man’s perception of his world. In Zarathustra’s vision, the Holy Spirit spoke of the division between good and evil. To be right or good meant deliberately choosing the good side. In other words, good men must defeat evil demons. There is no in-between. No ambiguity. A believer must choose between good and evil. This was perhaps the first time in history where mankind was forced to make decisions based on ethics.”

“I don’t understand.” My all-too-frequent Merkabah Recruit response.

“Ethical choices are what separates humans from animals,” explained Alejandro for—I’m assuming—my philosophical befuddlement.

I smoothed my skirt. “So, apparently Araceli and Zeno are uneasy with the ethically contradictory nature of Nephilims. This must be the confusion I sense in them.”

After learning a demonic cat had saved my life, S.J. had explained how corresponding and interdependent forces of the universe worked in harmony. Therefore, nothing happened without a reason. Evil could do good and vice versa. A blurry line between good and evil. A Nephilim's lineage was proof. No wonder Araceli and Zeno found it difficult to reconcile a Nephilim's mission and behavior.

"Indeed. They are good people. The Nephilim trust them." He chuckled. "They chose an interesting place to work don't you think? I wonder why Obi hired them."

"Maybe because—"

A horn's deafening blare. Squealing brakes. Panicked, my head swung toward the noise.

A car barreled towards us. Our SUV the target.

I braced myself for the impact.