

The background of the cover is a photograph of a person's bare chest. They are wearing a thin, silver-colored chain necklace. The pendant is a glowing, circular Sri Yantra, a complex geometric figure consisting of nine interlocking triangles that radiate from a central point, surrounded by two rings of smaller triangles and a circle of dots. The pendant has a soft, ethereal glow. The title text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

The
Merkabah
Recruit

L.Z. Marie

The Merkabah Recruit

Merkabah \mer-käh-bä\
noun

1. Chariot of Ascension
2. Vehicle to reach higher realms

Prologue

A brutal kick sent the woman reeling to the periphery of the ocean breakwater. Staggering from the impact, she slipped on the slick algae. The enemy lunged forward, swiping at her. Although no match for the stronger faster opponent, the astute woman deflected the blow with her free hand. In the other, she held the power to dispatch her adversary. Salt water sprayed into the air, soaking them both. The next assault sent her over the edge into the jagged rocks and churning tide below. Rough seas crashed against the jetty, sending gushes of icy geysers high into the air. The weapon required time to reach critical mass—time the woman did not have.

Bouquets of wilted flowers lay on top the mound of dank dark earth. The headstone hadn't arrived yet; there was no indication who rested beneath. However, the tall, powerfully built man who stood at the graveside knew. He placed a single perfect gardenia on the dirt. He knew secrets about the deceased that no one would have ever suspected. The surrounding lawn, green and wet with morning dew, provided a macabre contrast to the grave bereft of legacy. He turned

from the dead and strode toward his car. He had an appointment with the living.

After sliding into a black Mercedes coupe, he took one last look across the cemetery grounds. His heart was heavy, not with guilt, because he bore no blame for the death, but with a profound sense of tragedy. With a shake of his head, he put the vehicle in gear, drove slowly down the service road, accelerated past the memorial gates, and sped recklessly through the early morning commuter traffic. By the time he arrived at his destination he knew only one solution availed itself to the cause. Only one.

Striding into an elegantly appointed conference room, he nodded to each of the six somber faces already seated and waiting. Everyone was present. He took his place at the head of the table, his back against a misty view of the Pacific Ocean. "Thank you for arriving on such short notice."

A tall, fashionably dressed woman stood, went to a Balinese credenza laden with an assortment of breakfast edibles. She placed a china cup under a silver coffee urn. "She's too young."

The leader remained unmoved. "Obviously."

"Much too young." A dark-haired woman spoke, tapping a finger on the table. "You will be imperiling her life."

"No other choice is available." He relaxed back in the leather chair, interlocking his hands behind his head, and glanced up at the ceiling.

"We reviewed her file." A thick black hand pushed a thick sheaf of papers across the gleaming marble surface. "The findings are impressive. She will be a valuable resource. In the future. Not now. You will be risking a powerful, potential asset."

All eyes were on the leader.

He nodded once. "I'll handle this personally."

The room erupted into a volatile argument. Six members of the coterie did not need to remind their leader that failure meant certain death.

They were all too familiar with loss. Instead, ancient precepts and infallible canons were questioned and debated. This recruit was ill prepared, undeveloped, and raw. The leader demanded a replacement, the situation proved critical.

The meeting lasted a little over an hour. Try as they might, they could not dissuade their arrogant leader from his decision.

Chapter 1

FRIDAY

I saw red. Scarlet slashes began to blur and smear before me. My eyes glazed over, no longer focusing. Most people were unwinding from a long stressful workweek on a Friday night. Single people were on dates or meeting friends for drinks and gossip. Not me. I hunched over a stack of tragically written essays filled with every imaginable grammar error and misused word possible. No wonder I was seeing red. Even the pen color reflected my mood.

Students often asked why I didn't use a friendlier color to correct their written work. Red is passion. Red is blood. Red is danger. Red is power. As an assistant professor of English, I prefer a symbolic color with which to grade.

Tired and irritated, I stared out the small office window to the empty campus below. Staying this late to grade papers was foolish and perhaps mildly obsessive. I should be out carousing with friends or dating eligible bachelors. Instead, my ridiculous self-induced work ethic prohibits me from enjoying myself with the customary mindless activities enjoyed by others—at least that's the indulgent lie I fabricated to rationalize my introverted personality.

I shuffled the red stained essay to the back of the stack and attempted focusing on the next paper. My eyes grew weary. Rubbing them didn't help. Grading these at home over a glass of wine might

improve my mood. Both feet slid into shoes lying under the desk. Time to go.

Down the hall, a door opened; its metallic whoosh spoiling the peaceful silence. Guess I wasn't the only one still working. While gathering my belongings, the muffled thud of footsteps resounded down the hall. Probably just the night custodian, although the jangle of his keys was noticeably absent. He usually whistled, too.

I quickly scanned the area—didn't want to forget anything important. It didn't take long to inspect the tiny cubicle. A battered old desk, stiff office chair, a sagging bookcase, and one metal folding chair were squeezed into the office space. I regarded the two gilt-framed university degrees hanging on the wall. Those indicators of my intellectual prowess were mocking me. A Bachelor of Arts, a Masters in Literature—two down, one to go. The elusive PhD was almost within grasp. Almost.

Another sign of my lowly position in the academic pecking order is the location at the far end of a long hall. The next door over is the janitor's closet.

The footsteps grew louder; someone was headed toward my office. I don't usually stay on campus after hours—being alone in an empty building is dangerous for a young woman...well, semi-young woman. Twenty-eight is still young.

I simply didn't anticipate how creepy remaining here this late at night might be, especially after reading the newspaper report on the brutal murder at the beach. Someone had sliced open a transient and cut out a few body parts. Police speculated the homicide resulted from a drug deal gone wrong. Drugs at the beach—a common scenario. The gruesome killing took place a few miles from the college. I had nothing to worry about. Still...

Surely, these footsteps belonged to a colleague. The footsteps stopped...in front of my office. Curious, I lifted my head. It was neither the night custodian nor a fellow professor.

"Hello." A divinely intimidating vision of handsome stood in the doorway.

I sized him up. Broad shoulders tapered into a lean muscular frame and six-feet five inches of manliness scrutinized me with a beatific grin. A mocha complexion indicated no specific ethnicity and neither did his short dark hair. On the other hand, deep-set brown eyes, straight nose, full lips, and square jaw suggested a genealogy of power and passion. Oh, my.

“Yes?” I responded coolly, “May I help you?” Please don’t say you’re registering for my class next semester. It would be impossible to lecture effectively while drooling.

“I need to speak with you, Professor Daphne Sites.” The deep smoky timbre of his voice was unusually soothing.

“What’s this concerning?” He appeared too old to be a co-ed, too young to be a parent, and too muscular to be a stuffy intellectual. Evidently, some Greek God had gotten lost on the college campus. He stepped into my office, sat down on the metal chair, and crossed his arms; a crisp tailored shirt revealing a chiseled physique. Not that it mattered to me.

Handsome hunk or not, I began feeling uncomfortable. I watched enough movies about sexy looking killers to be wary about any late night visitor.

Worried and uneasy, I fussed with the papers on my desk. This stranger knew my name and location of my office; although, he had the professor title wrong—maybe someday, if I ever complete my dissertation.

There had to be a specific reason for his visiting at this unseemly hour. Evening classes are not held on Fridays, and there were no productions scheduled at the performing arts center located at the other end of campus. Most suspicious. I usually had reliable intuition about people and could discern their true feelings or motives. From this stranger I sensed nothing. Seconds later, it happened.

Tingles. Pins and needles. An icy hot tightening at the back of my neck. An early warning system. Strange premonitions and eerie intuitions usually followed.

I was defenseless in this shoebox-sized office—not good. Determined to indicate my intention to leave, I gathered a few stray papers.

“I have come to train you.” The stranger’s tone was most determined and assertive, commanding deference.

Train me? “Sorry, I don’t understand.” The tingle crept upwards. My jaw clenched—according to the doctor, this was the reason for all my TMJ headaches. The muscles contract whenever I’m nervous or worried or angry or annoyed—seemed any negative emotion caused the tightening. Sometimes the tingle triggered a panic attack. Of course, people often told me I have a tendency to overreact. I took slow deep breaths. Although friendly, this stranger had an aggressive air. Something wasn’t right—something was causing this feeling.

The stranger appeared to be gauging my reactions. “After your training, you will be able to help us.”

OK, now I was definitely confused. “Who are you?”

He leaned over, placing both hands on the desk in a pose that was equally intimidating, encouraging, and—some other behavior I could not identify.

“My name is S.J.”

That’s nice. Greek God has a name. Or rather, initials. I tried appearing calm and unafraid by attempting a little smile. He was infuriatingly cryptic; setting off alarms in my head. The open door—located a mere four feet away—beckoned to me. Could I make a run for it? His muscles might slow him down.

He stroked his chin in thought, perhaps sensing my unease. Resting against the chair, he flashed a wide grin and held one hand up. With brown eyes fixed on me, his other hand slowly pulled an item from his trouser pocket. “You will need this.”

A small ring box of polished wood was set at the edge of my desk. I followed the movement of his hand as he slid it across the metal surface. Oddly enough, curiosity overcame my fear; ring-sized gifts tended to have that effect on most women.

I was both intrigued and concerned by his demeanor. My logical brain screamed danger, my emotional mind expressed fascination, and my body whispered temptation—first impressions that surely did not go together. Or did they? One of my many problems—and I have many—is that I over analyze everything. It drives my family and friends crazy.

I stood, not understanding my politeness towards this mysterious and possibly dangerous visitor. “You caught me at a bad time. I was just getting ready to leave.”

Once again, I sensed he was assessing my emotions and judging my reactions. His manner quite unnerved me.

I pursed my lips, assessed the situation. It was ten o’clock at night. I was alone. In a vacant building. A Greek God look-alike wanted to give me jewelry. Or a psychopathic killer planned on harming me. It was a no-brainer. The second option made the most logical sense. Men bearing jewelry are a rare breed. The box was probably an attempt at a distraction.

I surveyed the items on top my desk. Can you kill someone with a sharpie? Boring him to death while I recite some 18th century English poetry was another option. It worked with my students! Throwing a

pile of essays into the air to create a diversion while running from the room might do the trick. Or just maybe I should stop assuming the worst—I've also been accused of having an overactive imagination. His mouth spread into a bright smile, white teeth flashing. I notice teeth because my ex-husband is a dentist. This S.J. possessed a disarmingly brilliant grin.

"I am here to help you, Daphne. Please, take the box. You are really far too," he laughed, then gazed up as though the word might be written on the ceiling, "...un-reactive."

Oh? On a first name basis so soon? I might look calm on the outside, but my insides were a churning mess of nameless fears and irrational anxieties. "Who *are* you and *what* do you want?" My heart thumped wildly.

"The answers to your questions will take a while to explain." The half smile on his face suggested thoughtful curiosity.

I took a deep breath and with false bravado, glared at him. The longer the standoff, the more time to figure a way out of this disquieting situation. "So explain."

He harrumphed before stretching over the desk again to tap the mystery box. "I believe you are ready, but the others have doubts. However, we don't have a choice."

For an instant, I thought his brown eyes flashed bright green. I flinched in surprise. A trick of the light? Funky contacts? Who were these others? The tingle in my jaw remained and an oppressive cloud of panic rose off me. I inhaled my own terror. I knew it! This guy was a psycho. Handsome. Polite. Enigmatic. Speaks in the third person. Who does that? Yep, he's probably a psychopath who enjoyed killing English professors. Overpowering him would prove impossible. My options were limited: Run. Scream. Keep him talking. Get out of the building. Stop being melodramatic.

"I don't understand what you mean." I lifted my schoolbag from the floor and, feigning nonchalance, unzipped the side compartment holding my cell phone.

S.J. cocked his head in surprise, chuckling. "I suppose I sound like a lunatic."

I shook my head, still pretending composure. "No, not at all." The phone—a technological safety blanket—was now in my hand. "I need to make a call."

"Please do." He crossed his arms and leaned back on the chair. "We will continue this discussion elsewhere." He tapped fingers on his lips

in thought. “Let’s go some place with lots of people. I have much to tell you. Keep your phone handy if it makes you feel safe.”

My curiosity was piqued. “I’ll ask again. What do you want?”

“I have been sent to recruit you.” His wide smile was irresistible.

I exhaled in relief—he was from another college. Strange, I hardly thought of myself as recruit-worthy. My dissertation wasn’t finished, I wasn’t published, and I didn’t even have a blog.

“Which university are you from?”

“I’m not. I work for an organization that recruits and trains people with your particular skills.”

Ambiguity is a trait I find annoying. I picked up the stack of essays, shoved them into my schoolbag, and rounded the desk. “Can you be more specific?”

He frowned, grunting in frustration. “This is not something which can be explained quickly. You appear rather irritated, so perhaps—”

“I am not irritated! You, you...” I couldn’t tell him the truth—that his presence had set off disturbing alarms in my body and brain.

He rose from the chair. “We have a lot to discuss, Daphne.” His charismatic manner was a compelling mixture of half-concealed amusement and cool determination. After plucking the box from the desk, he shoved it in his front pocket. “Do you know the bar just off campus? It’s always crowded; you should feel safe there. I need you to listen.” Exasperated, he ran fingers through short tight curls. “I’ll buy you a drink.” He walked out the door holding both hands up in surrender.

“You want to go to The Dive?” The Dive is a popular local bar—always noisy and full of people looking to get laid. I closed and locked the door behind me, keeping a watchful eye on him as we headed toward the staircase at the end of the corridor. “Lots of drunk people are there.” I doubted a bar full of inebriated revelers would assuage my uncertain feelings about him.

“You are not a follower of Bacchus?” One eyebrow lifted as he offered a sly smile.

My surprised laugh echoed down the hall. Bacchus is another name for Dionysus, the God of winemaking and festivities. I told my students he is the Party God—patron deity of college students everywhere. “Are you an English professor?”

Although his playful earnestness was quite enchanting, something about him persisted to nag at me. Some *thing* my brain could not

identify, but to which my body felt inexplicably drawn. A singular force that beguiled and seduced.

“No, Daphne. As I told you before, the organization I work for recruits people who possess a unique and specific ability.”

“Can you give me a hint?” The tingle in my jaw began to abate.

S.J. gave me a sideways glance. “You have a rare talent to see what others do not.”

While jogging down the wide staircase, I regarded him skeptically.

“What’s the name of this organization?”

An impish smile. “It’s classified.”

I couldn’t tell if he was flirting or being serious. As he held the door open and we exited the building, I concluded the danger I sensed was not directed towards me—but was rather an intrinsic element of his personality. A magnetizing essence I was unable to ignore. The tingle was now being replaced by the flitting of butterflies in my stomach—part physical attraction, part mental anticipation.

A decision was required. According to this handsome and expensively dressed stranger, a secret organization needed my rare skill. I had no idea what it could be.

Chapter 2

I stood in front of the building for a moment, debating. What harm could there be in discovering the reason for the government's interest in me? I glanced around. A few students were still milling about the campus grounds. Cell phone clasped in my hand, I felt much safer. The tingle in my jaw was gone, and The Dive lay only a well-illuminated block away.

"A secret government organization? I think you have the wrong girl; I don't have any skills they would be interested in." A federal agency had little need of my ability to analyze literature, and I heard enough political rhetoric to know they required no help in the art of obfuscation.

"I do not work for the government."

"A private company?"

"Yes, you might say that." S.J. stroked his chin. "I know you are suspicious because your normal intuitive powers aren't working with me."

Who was this guy? "I would start explaining if I were you."

He pointed toward the bar. "You'll need a drink. Trust me."

I pursed my lips, deliberating. The Dive was close by...this might be a career opportunity...one drink...it couldn't hurt to find out. Curiosity conquered any reservations. Shouldering the schoolbag, I stepped out of the light into the shadowy darkness.

Sensing my wariness, he made polite small talk as we walked, commenting on the alumni association's recent gift and opining about the newest member on the Board of Regents.

I had only been to The Dive a few times. Battered and outdated dive equipment hung from the ceiling and walls. Snorkels, fins, flags, regulators, and bikinis entangled in netting along with plastic sea creatures, toy buckets, and beach balls.

Although crowded, S.J. managed to score two seats at the bar from a tipsy young couple on their way out. Dangling above the back counter, was a life-size blow-up doll someone had rigged to resemble a mermaid. Hanging over her, a three-foot inflatable shark nudged an inappropriate place.

He summoned the bartender, ordered my favorite drink—a long island iced tea—and chuckled at my astonishment.

“May I take your hand for a moment?”

Perplexed, I wrinkled my nose but did as he asked.

A pulse of energy traveled up my arm. I jerked my hand away. Unlike the sharp jolt of static electricity created between two people, this sensation compared to a rolling wave of warmth that—oddly enough—resulted in a calming effect. Very unique.

He smiled. “Why don't you relax for a few minutes while we wait for our drinks? Look around at the people here. Try relying on your intuition and not your fears.”

What a peculiar thing to say. I swiveled around on the barstool, scanning the crowd. Too many people drinking too much, laughing too loudly, and trying too hard to have fun.

Crowds bother me: I become anxious and distressed. Sensory overload. Troubled by the antics of the inebriated, I turned back and picked up the drink now in front of me. “What am I suppose to see?”

S.J. appeared disappointed at my question. “Daphne, I am your Guide.” He took a sip of his drink, looked at me expectantly.

“My Guide.” I rolled my eyes. “You're not a professor?”

“I am your Guide,” he repeated. “We need you now. It's obvious you're unprepared. This is unfortunate. You must become ready.”

I sampled the long island iced tea. The drink tasted sweet and cool and delicious. I gazed at him for several minutes, studying his face. A Hollywood agent could not have found a better man to play the part of the Greek God.

He cocked his head, grinning. “I know you sense the feelings and thoughts of others.”

“Many people do. It’s not a special skill.” I took another sip, wondering why I needed a Guide.

“Yes, this is true; however, you perceive other qualities about certain individuals as well. Am I correct?”

S.J. drank a dirty gin martini. He swirled the olive around, speared it with the tiny plastic condiment fork, popped it into his mouth, and slowly chewed. He smacked his lips in appreciation. The man certainly enjoyed his food. When he caught me gawking, he winked. Flustered, I hunched over the glass and slurped. “Sometimes.” The nectarous liquid went down smoothly. Maybe quaffing this drink and ordering another might help me handle all of ...this.

He pointed at me. “You are an empath with special skills.”

“An empath? What do you mean?” Was he referring to my oversensibilities about people? Or was he alluding to my impressions—often uncomplimentary—I have about a person? I usually kept those feelings to myself. The bizarre notions I have when first meeting someone are difficult to explain. No, not difficult. Too weird. My sisters accused me of being hypercritical; my parents claimed I was imaginative.

Slurp, swallow, repeat. The alcohol warmed me, although sitting next to a mysterious and muscular hunk of handsome might be another reason for the increase in body temperature. My Guide. Very good-looking.

“Daphne, you are able to discern the concealed emotions and moral character of others; however, it is your ability to detect people in their true form which is unique. We need you to refine this skill.”

I sensed his stare, but avoided his eyes by pretending to study the cocktail napkin. Emotions flooded through me. Confusion. Curiosity. Anxiety. Attraction. I didn’t dare make eye contact.

“We know you perceive strange creatures in human form.”

His words were chillingly accurate.

Chapter 3

I promptly drained the glass. No longer nervous, I marveled at his pronouncement. He knew. This stranger knew my dark secret. “I...” S.J. hailed the bartender and ordered another round, saving me from a bumbling reply. I used this opportunity to observe other patrons. Perched seductively on a barstool, a young woman—golden hair to her waist—was checking out my hunky Guide. She smoothed her mini-skirt with a slim manicured hand. When she caught me staring, her nose wrinkled. Impudent Strumpet.

Embarrassed, I looked away. Twelve hours had passed since I left the house. My make-up—now long gone—complimented my hair, uncombed since early this morning. Conservative professor garb of tweed skirt, cotton blouse, and sensible pumps also figured into the frump-tastic look. Ivy, my fashionista sister, harped on me to forego the dowdy-wear for more hip styles. Looking trendy took too much time. I am a busy assistant professor. I have things to do. Lectures to prepare. Essays to grade. A dissertation to avoid.

I sighed. If Greek God look-a-likes were going to show up at my office offering to buy drinks, I should heed Ivy’s advice. An unsuccessful attempt at smoothing my dark brown hair still left me feeling tired and disheveled. A quick peek at Impudent Strumpet confirmed my first impression. She had set her sights on a more available man. Witch.

S.J. covered my hand with his. “Your impressions about people are accurate. The creatures you see are real.”

His thumb gently stroked my skin, sending a current of heat up my arm. OK, it had been a while since I was intimate with anyone, but my body should not have *that* kind of response.

I pulled my hand away, the infusion of alcohol making me brave and a little bit tipsy. “I don’t understand. You seem to know an awful lot about me—my favorite drink, the eerie impressions I get about people...”

“I will explain.” He picked up his martini, took a sip. “My full name is Serik Jalani and I work for an organization which prepares individuals, such as yourself, for their true calling in life.”

He stumbled over the words *organization*, *prepares*, and *true calling*. I arranged my face so it implied skepticism. Another long island iced tea might be nice, but I knew better. I’m a lightweight.

“Your skill is authentic and extremely valuable. You are an English professor who has read a story or two about mythical creatures, yes?” Intrigued, I nodded.

“They are not mythical.” He studied me, intent and waiting for a reaction.

I narrowed my eyes. “What do you mean?”

The bartender set our drinks down, and I brought the glass to my lips, taking one last giant gulp. Alcohol supplied a fine source of liquid courage.

S.J. spread his arms wide. “The world and universe are bigger than you can possibly imagine. Life forms exist—creatures that are very real. Some in particular are quite dangerous. Your world—”

“My world?”

“This world,” he amended awkwardly, “is not as advanced as they suppose.”

“What do you mean? Advanced in what way? Physically? Spiritually? Intellectually? Scientifically?” I pushed the drink away, already experiencing the effects of the first one.

Chuckling as though I asked the most ridiculous questions, he moved his hand toward mine. He must have thought better of it, because he stopped midway. I was strangely disappointed. His touch soothed my anxieties, yet energized my body. Very, very peculiar.

S.J. lifted his head, tapped his finger on his chin. “Do you see the disdainful young woman in the snakeskin skirt?”

The Impudent Strumpet? “Who can miss her?”

“Why do think she’s a witch?” A wicked-sexy grin stretched across his face.

Did I say that aloud? “I didn’t mean she was an actual witch....Is she?”

He turned from the bar. “Tell me, Daphne, what do you observe? More importantly, what do you intuit?”

After scrutinizing the Impudent Strumpet—who doesn’t love Othello’s cruel name for his wife Desdemona—I replied, “She’s very pretty but desperate, which doesn’t make any sense. A woman that pretty is never desperate.”

“Continue.”

“She’s wearing a snakeskin miniskirt—kind of reminds me of a reptile. From here, her eyes appear sort of beady and sinister and...I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. What else?”

“Well, I think it’s the latest beauty fad, but her toenails are long and painted black. The pedicure makes her feet look weird.”

“Explain weird. Clarify what your mind intuits, not what your eyes see.”

I exhaled in frustration. Impudent Strumpet, stroking her glass provocatively, appeared to be cooing to the man sitting beside her.

“Her fingers and toes look like talons,” I whispered.

“She’s not a witch,” S.J. whispered back, a smile playing upon his face.

“She’s not?” So much for my special empath skills.

“The woman is a Lilithian.” He tapped the tip of my nose with his finger. “You will need to study.”

“What’s a Lilithian?” Study what? Was there a book?

S.J. sat back, stretched his legs out before crossing his arms. “You may have read about her. She is the mythological demon Lilith. In actuality, she is a being who can only procreate with humans. In a manner, you are correct. She is desperate. Myths and stories of Lilith’s exploits have been chronicled as far back as the Epic of Gilgamesh. As with most ancient narratives, the facts are grossly distorted.”

“Gilgamesh, the King of Uruk.” I had not read the epic poem for many years.

He grinned. “Excellent, you are acquainted with the stories. Then perhaps you will also recall that the Sumerians recorded the tales of the King.”

“Um...not really.” I read the epic in college, never taught the poem and possessed only a rudimentary knowledge of its history.

“Gilgamesh lived over 4,700 years ago. Sumerians transcribed the poem into cuneiform 700 years later. Those cuneiform tablets ended up in the Assyrian library in Nineveh, which, you might recall, the Persian army destroyed in 612 BC. Of all the tablets, only twelve detailing his adventures were recovered. One of those tablets recounts how Gilgamesh helped the goddess Inanna kill a serpent. Do you remember the story?”

“Sorry, no. I read the poem so long ago.”

“Well, Inanna needed a particular tree chopped down—a special tree imbued with great mystical powers. The goddess planned to build her throne from its hardwood. She could not however, because the serpent who lived in its branches refused to leave. Now Gilgamesh, ever helpful, kills the snake for the Goddess. It always helps to have a goddess on your side. Don’t forget that, Daphne.”

I bobbed my head in agreement. Whatever.

“Another snake lived in the tree as well—Lilith lived in the trunk. Angered that her home is destroyed, Lilith flies away and decides to take revenge on mankind. Lilith, so the story goes, is responsible for bringing evil into the world.” He lifted his eyebrows, waiting for my response.

Puzzled, I shrugged my shoulders; consuming alcohol on an empty stomach turned my brain to mush.

“Lilith is often depicted as having wings and reptilian like hands and feet,” he added.

Wow, I actually did detect mythological creatures masquerading as humans. “The snake in the tree theme seemed to be all the rage in ancient times,” I pointed out. “Why do ancient myths always include stories in which evil is unwittingly released into the world?”

“Man’s earliest legends are a simple attempt to explain the unexplainable. Lilith appears in many other religions as well. Muslim folklore explains that Djinn, evil supernatural creatures who toy with humans, are the progeny of Lilith and Satan. Jewish Talmudic stories believe Lilith was Adam’s first wife who, instead of being sexually submissive, chose to leave the Garden of Eden to make demon babies with evil fiends.”

I found it terrifying my flippant moniker proved so accurate.

“Other Hebrew accounts say Lilith is a fallen angel or the being who deceived Eve by taking the form of a snake in the Garden of Eden. In Mesopotamian legends, she is a barren demon who kills small children and pregnant women in jealousy.”

“There seems to be some conflicting accounts.” I glanced at the slutty sylph. She was leaning on some young man, whispering in his ear. “Is she dangerous? Is that guy in trouble?”

S.J. laughed, “If you call having sex with a beautiful woman who only wants to get pregnant trouble, then yes.”

“I don’t understand. Which story is true?”

“I told you. Lilith is a life form who can only produce offspring with humans.”

Several questions and a few snappy retorts came to mind; instead, my mouth hung open as I stared at S.J. in utter wonderment and confusion. After stuttering a few times in an attempt to bring forth some sort of intelligible response, I gave up. Fatigue settled over me. Lecturing, grading essays, experiencing panic, drinking alcohol, and learning I had some otherworldly skill tired a girl out. I yawned.

S.J. frowned. Once again, I thought his eyes flashed green. He stood, pushed my unfinished drink away, and pointed to my schoolbag.

“The box is in there. I’ll walk you home now. We will finish our discussion tomorrow. Time is short, Daphne. You have much to learn.”

He knows where I live? He certainly had a lot of information about me.

He flagged down the bartender to pay the tab, giving me the chance to study the fabled femme-fatale. How had I identified her with such accuracy? Did this mean every weird feeling I had about someone was accurate? What a ghoulish skill!

After S.J. settled up with the bartender, we left the noisy bar and headed home. We strolled in silence for a bit, the quiet street providing a respite from the shrill voices, screeching laughter, and constant clamor of the bar. The full moon glowed bright. It was a perfect cloudless night.

“Oh night with hue so black! Oh night, whichever art when day is not! Oh night.” Shakespeare is best remembered and quoted after a few drinks. Does that make me an ass? I giggled.

S.J. gave me a long sideways glance before taking my hand. A few years had passed since a man held my hand; I had forgotten the warm, safe feeling. I wondered if my Guide was a good kisser; he certainly looked like he would be good.

“Tomorrow we will continue our discussion regarding your recruitment. Coffee will be a better beverage.” He spoke these words with a straight face.

“No, no, I can’t, S.J. I’m meeting my sisters in the morning. We’re shopping for Ivy’s wedding dress.” I looked forward to searching for my little sister’s wedding dress all week.

“Shopping can wait. You have much to learn about yourself and the task you are being recruited for.”

“No, it cannot wait. Choosing a wedding dress is the most important and wonderful event in a woman’s life. It’s her chance to be princess for a day.”

He halted in mid stride, drawing me near, and held a warm finger to my lips. His ears moved or pivoted or something as he searched the dark sky, listening intently to the sounds of the night. Rustling leaves. Chirping crickets. Croaking frogs. The low hum of automobiles in the distance. The caterwaul of a cat. After a few moments, the tension drained from his body and, although he visibly relaxed, he continued to hold my hand as we walked home.

“What’s wrong?” I asked quietly.

“I thought I heard something.”

“What? The Lilithian?”

“No. Something else.” He gave me a meaningful look. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

Another ominous comment. Too much weird for one day. Uneasy, I glanced around for a few minutes before realizing my big strong Guide could—without a doubt—handle any situation we might encounter. I decided to enjoy the midnight stroll. Night blooming jasmine perfumed the air, its sweet scent allaying any of my illogical fears.

Ten minutes later, we climbed my porch steps. As I fumbled for keys at the bottom of the schoolbag, I heard Foo jumping at the door. S.J. waited while I searched.

Finding keys in the shadowy darkness proved difficult. Why are the linings black? The color choice makes no logical sense. Dark lining absorbs any light, thereby creating a hopeless abyss.

I rifled impatiently until my fingers touched cool metal.

The moment I walked through the door, Foo danced and jumped around me. “How’s my girl?” I bent down to scratch the top of her scruffy head. “This is Foo.”

My white Maltese poodle mix stopped jumping the moment S.J. crossed the threshold. As per typical canine behavior, Foo sniffed new people before proceeding to prance around, begging for attention. Not

tonight. Foo stared—motionless. No sniffing. No tail wagging. Only staring. Not an auspicious sign.

S.J. regarded Foo with amusement. “Foo? Not much of a Chinese Foo guard dog is she?”

S.J.’s familiarity with the name for the lion statues that guard the Chinese Imperial palace did not surprise me as much as Foo’s next move. My white ball of fluff rolled over on her back in total submission.

S.J. rubbed her belly. “You need two, you know. There are always two Foo; the male, whose paw sits atop the world, and the female who has a puppy on her back.”

“One spoiled pup is all I can handle.”

I was unsure about allowing a man I barely knew—Guide or not—into my home, although Foo, who gazed adoringly at S.J, had no problem with him. I trusted her doggie instincts.

S.J.’s eyes flared green. “Rest well tonight; tomorrow will be a busy day. You have a lot to learn, and we don’t have much time.”

He moved towards me until only a few inches separated us. I felt the heat from his body, smelled the scent of his skin. So many questions to ask, so many answers I needed, but I was too tired and addled to think clearly. I yawned, the late hour and alcohol the reason for my sleepiness.

Warm lips touched my forehead. For an instant, I wondered if the physical attraction was mutual.

“Tomorrow morning,” he said before striding out the front door.

I climbed into bed that night, pulled the covers under my chin, and stared at the ceiling. I have a Guide. His ears pivot, his eyes change colors, he works for a secret organization, and they don’t have much time. Time for what?

Blood dripped from its fingertips, creating bright red specks on the white tile floor. Two eyes shone with delight. The being’s work proved easy. Too easy. Unfortunately, it required more. More must be sacrificed. Sitting on its haunches, the creature piled viscous organs in a crimson heap. Thin fingers efficiently manipulated the grisly mound. Winnowing out the undesirable parts entailed time-consuming procedures. The being grinned proudly, the task restored his honor.

Chapter 4

SATURDAY

Demonic creatures had sex with beautiful women while a giant black snake coiled around my head. Laughing, King Gilgamesh tossed his sword to me as I attempted to rid myself from the constricting grasp of the serpent. The demons laughed at my feeble efforts before resuming their erotic fornications.

A pulsating buzz startled me awake. The alarm. Someone had used a jackhammer on my skull during the night. I sat up, shaking off the nightmares.

Morning sun shone in through the blinds. Birds were chirping and Foo was barking at something in the back yard. Happy thoughts of shopping for wedding dresses somewhat alleviated the steady throbbing in my brain. I trudged into the bathroom, swallowed two aspirin, stepped into the shower, and let the hot water revive me.

What a bizarre night! More bizarreness to follow! I had a Guide! Why, exactly, did I need a Guide? I was an empath. The definition of the word was foggy. While towel drying my hair, I decided internet research might produce a few intelligent answers. I resolved to web browse after shopping with my sisters—due to arrive at any moment. Half-formed questions from last night swirled in my mind, nebulous queries I could not articulate. Mythical creatures? Life forms? The

Universe? I had to make a list. Organization junkies like me write lists and create categories. Logical, methodical cogitation. Right now, my brain—pounding from a headache—refused to speculate and reflect upon all the unknowns.

I wiped steam from the mirror, dragged a comb through tangled wet hair. The mirror is hateful—pure evil. Mirror, mirror over the sink, who needed to refrain from mixed drinks? My nose is too long; my lips, too pale. My eyes are too close together and my chin, too pointy. Was that a wrinkle next to my eye? A tan would be an improvement. My mirror enjoyed torturing me. Two-dimensional devil!

Mmm, the smell of bacon wafted in the air. Guess my sister Rose arrived early and decided to cook breakfast before we went shopping. Wrapping myself in a large towel, I headed into the kitchen. The Saturday morning chef was not Rose.

“What are you doing here? And how did you get in?” I kept a firm grasp on the towel. One slip and...

My Guide, wearing a tan t-shirt that hugged a lean torso, sported a mischievous grin.

Nervous, I fussed with the towel. He leered playfully at my bare shoulders, exposed décolleté, and legs. Even though the towel covered all the strategic areas, I felt naked. Mere seconds ago, my skin was cool and refreshed—now heat emanated from my body.

“Good morning, Daphne. I’m glad you’re rested and ready to start our busy day. I made bacon. What kind of eggs do you prefer?”

I felt vulnerable in nothing but a towel. “I don’t have time for breakfast.” Most distressing. My Guide had somehow managed to gain entrance to my home. I was positive I locked the door last night. Almost positive.

Hungry eyes traveled up and down my body. “Nice towel.”

Foo hovered expectantly by S.J.’s feet, her tail wagging in anticipation of a greasy pork morsel.

“I told you, I’m busy today.” I clutched the towel tight as he stepped towards me.

“And I told you, we don’t have much time.”

“What the—”

A loud summons interrupted my rebuke.

“Daphne! Daphne! I can’t wait to—” Barging through the kitchen door, my sister Ivy stopped mid-sentence upon seeing a strange man standing with her towel-clad sibling. “Ooh...”

I stepped back, turned beet red.

S.J. faced her calmly. “Hello, you must be Ivy.”

“Am I interrupting something?” A smirk flitted across her gorgeous face as she crouched down to scratch Foo behind the ears.

“Indeed not. It’s nice to meet you. I’m a friend of Daphne’s.” He turned his back to flip the sizzling bacon.

Ivy pointed to him, silently mouthing her question. “Who is he?”

The towel slipped, I yanked it up clumsily. “Ah, this is S.J. He’s a guy who...ah...” Who was he? A sexy hunk who worked for a secret organization that needed my empath skills—a Greek God look-alike who intended to prepare me for my true calling in life—my Guide who would help me do...something...I don’t know what.

Handing me a mug of coffee, S.J. smiled as I struggled with an explanation.

I peered into the coffee cup, frowning. “You forgot cream and sugar.” The stalling tactic might not fool my savvy sister.

S.J., still grinning, shrugged his shoulders. Either he didn’t care about my coffee needs or he was enjoying my feeble attempts to account for his presence. I was guessing the latter.

I tried again. “He is...”

“I’m a visiting professor from Canada.” S.J. extended his hand to Ivy, shaking it formally. “Daphne was kind enough to show me around town yesterday. We ended up at The Dive and...” He held his palms out, feigning embarrassment. “I got drunk and crashed on her couch.” A most plausible explanation. She would never believe it.

Ivy lifted an expertly groomed eyebrow, glanced at me *sans* clothing, and then to S.J., who didn’t appear at all as though he spent a night on the couch. “Ah...sure. Daphne, let’s get you dressed.” She grabbed my arm, yanked me toward the bedroom.

“Did you sleep with him?” Her tone was much too casual. “You haven’t mentioned him before. Don’t tell me you just met him yesterday and you already slept with him.” She went to the closet, began flinging clothes from its depths.

“No, I did not!” Although, the thought had briefly crossed my mind. Very briefly.

“You’re lying. How could you not? The man oozes sexiness.” Ivy emerged from the closet, gave me an arched look. “Don’t get in a huff; I don’t care if you did. Just admit you slept with him.” Two pieces of clothing flew through the air. “Here, put this on. The appointment at Couture Bridal is for ten o’clock. Hurry up.”

“I did not sleep with him!” I caught my azure tunic and black stretch pants before they fell to the carpet.

“If you say so. Wear your black wedges with the ankle strap.” She opened a drawer, rifled through my unmentionables before discovering my only black lace bra. “Oh, and wear this, because you might need it later on.” She snickered.

“Ivy!” My protest came out like a whine.

“Shut up and put some make up on,” she laughed.

Ivy is drop dead gorgeous. We look nothing alike. Whereas I am tall, Ivy is petite. People do not believe we are sisters. Blonde hair cascades to her waist in perfect waves and long bangs frame big brown eyes. Always athletic, Ivy maintained a sculpted body even with a demanding engineering job. She believes working out helped her cope with the stresses of the profession. I hate to work out.

Walking to the coffee shop is my idea of exercise.

She cupped her breasts with both hands. “Do they sew padding in those wedding bodices?”

“Of course, they do.” I tugged on stretch pants, pulled the tunic over my head, and slipped on the shoes. “OK, I’m ready.”

As we returned to the kitchen, the back door swung open. My other sister Rose—like Ivy—walked through the door as she called out to us. Maybe talking while entering is an inherited trait. “Yo ladies! Let’s do this thing.”

Ivy couldn’t keep from giggling, delighting in Rose’s reaction to the handsome man holding a plate of bacon in the middle of the room.

“Well hello, sweetness,” she drawled, never missing a beat and giving S.J. the once over. “You cook too?” She winked at me.

He held the dish out. “Hungry?”

“Rose,” Ivy began, “this is S.J. He’s a visiting professor. Daphne got him drunk last night so he made her bacon as a type of fatty protein punishment.”

Once S.J. began laughing, I appreciated the silliness of the situation. A sexy man cooking breakfast in my kitchen was the last thing my sisters expected to see.

Rose took a piece of the proffered bacon, chewing thoughtfully while she scrutinized me. I’m not a skillful liar and she knew it.

Ivy began herding us out the door “OK, let’s go. We can’t be late for the appointment—I hear fabulous wedding dresses calling my name.”

She pointed to S.J. “Are you staying or going?”

“Staying. Daphne, how much time does dress shopping require? We have a lot to do.” He gave me a meaningful but slightly intimidating look, held his arms out to indicate the vast amount of work to be done. My sisters watched him carefully, concerned by his admonishing tone. “This...” Rose mockingly mimicked his gesture while glaring at him, “wedding dress shopping will take as long as it needs to.” She frowned at me but addressed her comment to S.J. “Mr. Hotness should relax.”

The stress in the room was palpable; I became anxious. Luckily, a cloyingly sweet greeting from outside broke the tension.

“Daphne!” My neighbor Tiffany stood at the door, a large black cat in her arms. “Daphne, do you have any cat food?”

I pushed the door open.

Four is a crowd in my tiny kitchen. Foo immediately began barking, and yet the fat feline only buried its head in the crook of Tiffany’s arm.

“Did you get a cat?” I asked.

Tiffany waved to my sisters, then zero-ed in on my muscular Guide. “Hellooo,” she purred.

Many men—not all—drool over women who look like Tiffany. She has ostentatiously large silicone breasts, collagen enhanced lips, and platinum dyed hair that hangs limply past her shoulders. She has the beach Barbie look some guys find sexy. This morning she was wearing her standard casual ensemble; white sports bra, yoga pants, and some kind of ridiculous platform flip-flop. I watched, incredulous, as she arched her back, breasts bursting forth as she extended a hand to S.J. Thanks for the nipple show, Tiffany.

Rose rolled her eyes. Ivy tapped her foot impatiently. Tiffany has a habit of showing up whenever I had guests. She was just nosey.

S.J. shook her hand, but surprisingly focused his attention on the plump ball of fluff in her arms.

“Nice cat,” he grunted while observing the cat.

“Tiffany, this is S.J.” I tried to sound neighborly. “Sorry, but I don’t buy cat food. I have dog food because—you know—I own a dog.” I pointed to my barking pooch.

Tiffany stroked the cat lovingly. “I found her yesterday. This is my lucky kitty.”

The cat lifted its large head to hiss loudly at Foo. Burly kitty weighed more than my dog. If they had a fight, I had no doubt who would win. S.J. tilted his head to one side as he studied the cat. “Why is that?”

Tiffany heaved her bosom and smiled flirtatiously. “Right after I found her, I spotted a hundred dollars lying in the parking lot. She’s a very, very good pussy cat.”

Rose began coughing and Ivy scowled.

“That cat will steal your soul,” S.J. stated simply. He turned to me, his eyes boring into mine.

I offered an insipid smile, guess he was more of a dog person.

Tiffany suggestively bit her lip. “That’s what a good pussy does.”

I couldn’t help myself; I burst out laughing. My sisters followed suit, although S.J. only smiled wanly. Unable to catch my breath, I snorted with glee.

The intense expression on S.J.’s face melted and he began to chuckle.

“Yes, I believe that is an accurate statement.”

“Tiffany,” I said, “the cat looks pretty well-fed to me. I’m sure she’ll manage without food for an hour.”

Her Ferrari-red nails raked the cat’s thick fur. “You think so?”

“OK, OK, if we don’t leave now, we’ll be late.” Ivy kept flapping her hands at us, pointed towards the door.

Tiffany batted her eyes at S.J., waved goodbye, and sauntered passed him.

“I will await your return, Daphne.” S.J. moved toward me, planted a kiss on my forehead.

Ivy and Rose giggled as we headed out the door.

I glanced over my shoulder before leaving. My Guide was not smiling.

“**What a hottie!** But he’s a bit on the controlling side.” Rose climbed into the backseat of Ivy’s new car. She tapped Ivy on the shoulder.

“Hey, why isn’t Stewart coming with us? Don’t you want his opinion? Or do you believe in the old wives’ tale that the groom can’t see the wedding dress until his bride walks down the aisle?”

Ivy sniffed in irritation. “I don’t need Stewart’s approval for *my* wedding dress. Anyway, he’s out of town this week meeting clients.”

Stewart, Ivy’s fiancé, is an amiable and intelligent man. He cheerfully copes with Ivy’s giant ego, bossiness, and shopping addiction. Must be love.

I glanced back at Rose in time to see her eyes roll upwards at Ivy’s comment.

Rose, the middle child, marches to her own tune. Well, maybe we all do. For many years, my sisters' relationship with each other had been acrimonious. However, during the past few months, they were more forgiving of their petty grievances against one another.

Rose settled into the backseat, snapped on her seatbelt. "I can only go with you for a few hours, cuz I've got a meeting with the sausage rep and I'm still training the new guy."

Rose owns a small sandwich deli in town. Two years ago, she had been working at a dead-end job, partying every night, and pretending to take courses at the local community college. Her life changed when a trip to Las Vegas resulted in a lucky pull of the wheel at some two-bit casino. Rose hit the jackpot. The Gods must have been smiling upon her because it happened at just the right time. Several months and multiple family meetings later, we convinced Rose to open the deli she always dreamed of owning.

She named her little lunch joint Bite Me. The menu features a collection of distinctive and trendy sandwiches, cupcakes, and soups. She makes everything from scratch. My favorite item is the Italian sub, which consists of roasted chicken, tomato, provolone, fresh basil, baby lettuce, red onions, and pesto mayonnaise on garlic rosemary bread. Rose had finally found her calling, and my parents were delighted to see their wayward daughter find happiness and confidence in her new venture. The restaurant affords a decent income and she enjoys being owner/operator of her little establishment.

"Are you joking? A sausage sales rep is a real job?" Ivy laughed.

"Yes," Rose replied. "The company I buy my meats from wants me to sample their new sausage selections. I'm thinking of expanding my menu. Everybody loves sausage. Which reminds me, Daphne..."

"No!" I snapped too loudly. "We did not have sex. I hardly know him. He's a professor from a Canadian university. We went to The Dive where he got too drunk to drive and crashed on my couch. End of story."

"I wonder if his sausage is as big as his pecs?" Rose taunted.

"I wouldn't know," I grumbled. A change in topic was necessary before they began asking questions requiring more lies. I knew one subject matter sure to ignite a few sparks. "So, Rose, did you consider Ivy's suggestion?"

Rose groaned dramatically, all smirking ceased. "I told you already. I'm not interested."

“Rose, don’t be an idiot,” admonished Ivy. “Why not? Give us a good reason. You could become famous.”

“I don’t want to make a cooking video, and I don’t want to be the internet Julia Child.”

Ivy and I had been pestering Rose to video a cooking segment for the past few weeks. So many awful cooking videos are posted on the internet that we believed we had the skills and creativity to produce a better one. Didn’t hurt to try. Many people attained notoriety from internet videos and blogs; and it seemed like a trendy way to get Rose’s deli some exposure.

“Why not?” Ivy and I asked in unison.

“You’re both bitches!” Rose took sunglasses out of her huge purse, put them on, and folded her arms. Case closed. Discussion over.

“That’s not a rational answer.” Ivy was ever the logic pundit.

“Rose,” I turned around in my seat. “Give us a reason. Don’t you want to even try to see if anything comes of it?”

“Make your own video,” Rose huffed.

“Nobody wants to watch an English professor grade papers.” I reached out to rub her shoulder. “You’re very photogenic. Come on, Ivy will video, I can be your helper. We’ll upload it on the internet and see the number of hits you get. Why not? Why are you so obstinate?”

Rose turned her head to stare out the window, sniffing loudly.

Sometimes I do not understand why people will not jump at every chance given to them. Life only doles out a finite number of opportunities. We ought to seize all of them. Who knows how many chances you are going to get in a lifetime? Personal growth is important. Risk and failure may result, but not even attempting to take a chance was beyond my understanding.

More sniffing from the back seat. Ivy and I were used to the tears and the attitude.

“Get over yourself,” Ivy said. “Think about it, please. You’re funny and sassy—you might even enjoy yourself. We’ll just make one and won’t even upload the video if you don’t like it. Hey, I have an excellent idea. We can video after you drink a beer or something.”

Rose wiped her eyes carefully so her makeup didn’t smear but said nothing more.

I sighed in frustration. For the remainder of the drive, Ivy and I discussed wedding plans.

“Here we are,” Ivy announced as we pulled into the bridal store parking lot. “OK, ladies,” she said, winking at me, “Let’s find a wedding dress worthy of a movie star.”

Shopping for Ivy’s wedding dress was not as fun as I thought it would be. My sisters bickered. There were too many styles of dresses from which to choose. The sales associate’s saccharin demeanor rankled, and I had first wedding flashbacks.

As the day stretched on, I grew uneasy about my Guide and the unnamed organization. More worrisome, I remained uncertain about the real reason for my recruitment.

“S.J.!” I shouted, walking through the front door.

No answer. He was gone. I sat down heavily on the couch. Being a wedding dress critic was exhausting. Too many choices. Too low, too high, too white, too much beading, too much lace, too severe, too frilly, too plain, and so the minutes passed for several nuptial nauseating hours. After Ivy finally found a gown she liked well enough to put on hold, we went to lunch.

I was relieved S.J. wasn’t here. The morning and afternoon had been a whirlwind of activity leaving no time to ponder the prior evening’s events.

I fell back onto the couch, exhaling loudly. On the coffee table lay my laptop computer, a stack of ungraded essays, and the mystery box S.J. left last night. The lustrous cube beckoned. Leaning over, I ran my fingers over the smooth wood grain. In truth, I was afraid to open it. I suspected once the lid was lifted and I saw what lay within, nothing would be the same. I like my boring life. It’s safe. It’s predictable. I do not like surprises—do not like change. S.J. claimed the contents inside the box would help me. Help do what? Opening it may—like Pandora—change my world.

The irony! Only a few hours ago I chastised my sister Rose for not taking a chance. Was I a coward, or merely cautious? Both S.J. and organization were a complete mystery. Who knows? I might be nothing more than a pawn in some weird cosmic game.

I traced the edges of the box. To open or not to open; that was the question.

The creature abandoned its task. Attempting completion proved futile for hatred and rage consumed it both night and day. Convulsive fits of anger caused its body to shake and shudder in an ineffectual effort to maintain emotional control. Despite the situation growing ever more intolerable, it struggled to overcome its plight.

Noble and impressive, physically fit, spiritually strong, the creature had never before experienced pain, want, or need. I am great, it thought. I am honorable. I am dutiful. I am esteemed. The creature balled its fists in fury as it repeated its mantra. This debasement will not go unpunished.

Chapter 5

Asking the right question is critical if one expects a correct answer. My question about whether to open the box missed the mark. The better question—what did this organization want from me?

I touched the keypad on the computer, waited for the screen to light up. S.J. had typed the word *empath* on the search engine home page. All right then, I thought, pressing the enter key. Although S.J. said my empath talents were unique, I knew nothing about the abilities attributed to that of even a normal empath.

In seconds, almost 400,000 hits for *empath* resulted. I scanned the first few pages searching for an accurate definition. So many websites. So many self-assessment quizzes. So many self-help books. Only a few minutes passed before I was sucked into the abyss of cyberspace. Informational infinitude...

Hours later, I felt strangely vindicated. Now I understood why I was an over-sensitive, crowd wary, party pooper.

Empaths are emotional magnets. Individuals are drawn to empaths because of the comfort, strength, and energy they receive from them. And like vampires who suck blood, people drain an empath's energy. Empaths not only sense others' emotions, they actually *feel* their

emotions. No wonder I became exhausted after dealing with an emotional friend, student, or relative!

In addition, empaths are sensitive to the overall vibration of emotions in a room. This explained my acting in a manner that was often incomprehensible to me. Emotionally charged crowds especially deplete an empath's energy. My investigation had barely scratched the surface; there was so much more to learn.

I stood, stretched, and considered the daily meditation many of the web sites insisted was necessary for psychic health. Nah. Instead, I stuffed a five-dollar bill in my pocket, hid the key under the mat, and headed for the nearby coffee shop. Perhaps later I might find a website that advocated the inclusion of café lattes as a form of liquid healing therapy.

It was my favorite time of day. The sun was descending on the horizon, casting a luminous quality of light which always nurtured my spirit. The world in soft focus; golden hued and dreamy. I strolled down the sidewalk and waved hello to Tiffany who sat on her porch drinking and laughing with her date *du jour*.

One of the benefits of living in this beach town is its pedestrian friendly charm. The scents, sounds, breeze, and landscape always centered me—bestowing peace and contentment. I inhaled the scent of jasmine and fresh mowed grass, enjoying the fragrances of flora and foliage. This locale offers an abundant variety of both local and exotic vegetation. Standing in the yard after a rain was also a delight.

Empath websites claimed scents especially influenced empaths. I was not surprised. According to one website, odors had the power to transform an empath's moods or alter their ability to perceive.

My mind-clearing stroll to the coffee shop had come to an end when the heady aroma of coffee saturated my senses. Ambrosia and Brew is not my favorite because the cafe served over-priced, designer coffee concoctions but because it offers an incredible ambiance.

Annexed to the main building, the owner had built a greenhouse and filled the small space with ferns, palms, birds of paradise, and other tropical foliage. The solarium provides a verdant retreat. Inside, statuary of imaginary creatures perched on faux Greek columns next to plush wicker chairs. Gnomes and fairy sculptures nestled next to the plants in a celebration of terra firma reality meets mythical fantasy. I wondered how accurately this green house portrayed our mysterious world. In the center of the atrium—demanding allegiance—stood a splendidly tacky, six-foot tall fountain of

Aphrodite emerging from a clamshell. Someone had stuck a USC cap on her head. What could I say? I loved this coffee shop.

I entered Ambrosia and Brew anticipating a frothy coconut mocha of high caloric value—the perfect beverage for pondering my otherworldly opportunity. After I ordered, I answered messages from Rose and Ivy until the barista called out my order. Mocha in hand, I headed into the atrium hoping my favorite lounge chair was vacant. It was not.

S.J. sat in my preferred spot. His long muscled legs were crossed, the perfect picture of god-at-repose. Smiling when I entered, he majestically waved me over.

“What are you doing here?” The scalding brew required a careful sip. “I’m waiting for you.” He indicated the seat next to his. “Tell me everything you learned about the traits of an empath.”

I inhaled the sweet aroma of my cup o’ caffeinated sugar, settled back on the wicker chair, and proceeded to share everything I learned during the past few hours.

S.J. listened with rapt attention, nodded periodically, and spoke verbal affirmations at appropriate intervals. Eventually, I ran out of things to say.

He patted my leg. “Do you have any questions?”

“I don’t quite understand. Sure, I fit the description of an empath, but exactly what does your organization expect me to do?”

“You are expected to use those skills to identify beings not of this realm.”

His statement was so calm, so rational, I felt like an idiot for not making the obvious connection.

“Realm? You mean this world?”

He exhaled loudly. “Yes.”

“I identify these creatures. That’s all?” I doubted the task could be so simple.

S.J. stood, pulled me up off the chair. “Let’s take a walk.”

The creature found it tiresome to maintain the deception. The lies, half-truths, and misdirection needed to sustain the ruse became increasingly annoying. The deceit provoked his ire. Previous moral codes ceased to apply. It had difficulty accepting that those actions once believed inconceivable were now commonplace. The creature

did not know how much longer it could sustain its lifestyle. Even a few more years might be interminable.

The creature straightened up, stood tall, determined to overcome anything and anyone. Fear was an alien emotion. It intended to prevail. The creature expected to succeed because it possessed every attribute necessary: intelligence, speed, agility, cunning, bravado, and charm. These qualities, when combined with unbridled fury, made for a formidable adversary. The creature smirked. Nothing stood in its way.

Chapter 6

After divorcing my narcissistic ex-husband Randy, I relocated to the beach. Both of my sisters had been living here for the past several years so the move seemed like a fine idea. It turned out to be one of the best decisions I ever made. The added benefit was the high probability of never running into my ex-husband.

I got lucky and found a one bedroom fixer-upper I could afford on an assistant professor's salary. Located only a mile from the beach, the little bungalow became my sanctuary. Because I did not have to compromise decorating decisions with anybody, I filled my new home with eclectic treasures scavenged from flea markets and antique stores. The whimsical furniture, art, and colors make me happy. My sisters call the decor bohemian chic. I call it perfect. The house is within walking distance to the college, grocery store, coffee shop, downtown area, and strip mall with all the important chain stores. Although the home required some renovation, the charm of the neighborhood made up for its inflated beach price. What need have I of a state-of-the-art kitchen and luxurious bathroom? Location, location, location. Right?

From the coffee shop, a short stroll brought one to the tourist strip adjacent the beach. As S.J. and I walked the dimly lit streets towards town, we made small talk concerning the weather and local events.

My Guide possessed a wealth of information regarding the neighborhood's politically controversial issues. When we turned the corner to Beach Street, the town was already humming with activity. Loud pulsating music escaped as patrons ventured into bars, cars cruised for parking spots, and sunburned tourists milled about the stores. A few wetsuit-clad diehards carried surfboards to their cars. Together, my Guide and I moved through the crowds on the sidewalk and headed toward the shore.

I refrained from asking any of my many questions, sensing S.J. would dispense more information only when he was ready.

The luminous glow of the moon, low in the sky, granted a beautiful view of the starry horizon. I did not visit the beach at night—for obvious reasons—but felt safe with S.J. by my side. All those muscles had to be good for something.

S.J. sat down and patted a spot beside him. Taking the hint, I plopped down. Several quiet moments passed. I listened to the calming sound of the surf and inhaled the salty marine freshness while waiting for him to speak. Did he harbor second thoughts?

“S.J....” I was impatient.

He scooped up a handful of sand; let the granules run through his fingers. “Daphne, how many grains of sand are in this world?”

I frowned. “That’s very cliché, you know. What’s your point?”

He took my hand, grabbed another fistful of sand, unceremoniously dumping it into mine. “Look at the night sky. The stars are beautiful, yes? What you don’t see are galaxies. There are billions of them. Billions. Within each of those galaxies exists multiple dimensions.” Sand poured through my fingers. Billions. A formidable number to imagine.

He continued. “Relatively speaking, the people on this planet are young and primitive. Scientists and mathematicians are just beginning to grasp the complexity and ramifications of the universe in which they live.”

“I agree.” Universe. Complex. Got it.

“On earth, humans fight in religious wars and go hungry on a planet of plenty. A majority of people live in substandard housing—many illiterate. Half of the population suffers from malnutrition. In fact, only a small fraction of the world’s people have access to wealth and education.”

“I am aware of this.”

“Even now knowledge of mathematics and science is sorely lacking.”

He caught me scowling at his gloomy speech.

“Don’t look at me like that, Daphne. Although rapidly increasing, scientific knowledge remains in its infancy. Scientists are only in the early stages of comprehending what they call theories like quantum physics, superstring theory, black holes, wormholes, and dark matter.”

“I am well aware of the state of the world...except for the science.”

Science baffled me.

He flashed a wide smile.

“Is it important to understand the science to do whatever you need me to do?”

“Couldn’t hurt.”

“OK, but explain in a way I’ll understand.”

“I’ll try.” He patted my leg. “Let’s begin with quantum physics.”

“You want to start there? Are you joking?”

My Guide chuckled. “Quantum physics theories suggest that matter is composed of parts which cannot be divided—they are indivisible.

These indivisible parts are called quantum and scientists believe all energy is made up of these units. Now these quantum move in a random fashion—very erratically. In fact, the sub-atomic waves and particles move and act in ways scientists are unable to imagine.”

Science was never my strong suit. However, I learned long ago that rephrasing what I heard helped increase understanding. As a teacher, I recognize the value of repeating information to reinforce learning.

“Let’s see...scientists don’t know how or why these indivisible quantum move erratically. Go on.”

“Have you ever heard of string theory?”

“Yes, but I have no idea what it is.”

He patted my knee again. “String theory is a mishmash of many different theories. The premise asserts that much like guitar strings, which must be stretched tight to vibrate, the quantum or elementary particles possess a certain tension. String theory allows scientists to understand the world on a multi-dimensional scale.”

I grimaced, trying to process the information. “Um...string theory relates to quantum physics and so now the multi-dimensional world is—”

“The multi-dimensional world becomes a provable reality.”

I struggled to understand, I really did. “OK. The world has many dimensions. You’re talking about dimensions we can’t see.”

He nodded. “Indeed. In recent times, scientists have begun to explore the mysteries of dark matter and dark energy. Dark matter is important

because it's composed of particles which emit no electromagnetic energy."

Science was boring. Where was he going with all of this? And why did I feel an odd flicker in my leg?

S.J. patted my leg a third time. "Pay attention because this pertains to your special skills. Dark matter and dark energy are invisible; and yet six times more dark matter than regular matter exists. In fact, billions of these particles passed through us since we sat down. These dark forces interact with each other in a manner scientists do not yet understand and cannot even begin to imagine."

Huh? I was confused. "Let me get this straight. Billions of invisible dark matter particles passed right through me and scientists don't know anything about them?" Although my science knowledge was lacking, I had read somewhere that recently acquired technology was capable of performing sophisticated quantum theory experiments. Scientists had to know something about this dark matter world.

"Scientists know a little but not enough."

"What does all this have to do with me?"

S.J. clasped my hand, warm fingers interlacing with mine. "You perceive dark matter."

A sharp pin danced lightly on my skin, the result of his touch.

"Daphne, you are blessed with the innate capability to recognize or intuit other life forms who are posing as humans. You don't actually see them: You perceive them. You possess the ability to discern dark matter and sense dark energy." He paused a minute while I digested this pronouncement.

"Like the Lilithian."

"Yes. Exactly. You intuit their dark forces when they assume human form."

"So that's what you meant when you said mythical creatures are real."

He smiled. "The world's ancient mythologies and religions gave many different names to the events, phenomena, and life forms they did not understand given their limited technological advancement."

"Makes sense. Primitive man needed an easy way to explain the weird and unusual."

"Indeed, they did. Now, like the Lilithian, many beings are harmless or even benevolent, but some are dangerous and deadly."

"Please don't tell me I kill the bad ones." I could never kill something.

English professors did not make suitable super heroes. We are an academic breed who live in our heads.

“They can’t be killed. You must not kill them.”

“That’s good...I guess. I only identify them?” I could do that. “I’m curious though, why can’t the evil ones be killed? Is it some kind of cosmic law?”

S.J. tried taking both my hands in his, but I pulled away. I thought more rationally when he wasn’t touching me.

“It’s not that simple. Nothing is simple.” He sighed, took a lock of hair, which had fallen in my face, and tucked the strand gently behind my ear. “The universe is so complex a lifetime is needed to sufficiently explain it to you. I will, however, tell you all life forms exist for a reason. Destroying a life will have repercussions I am unable to disclose at this time.” He turned his head, looked out at the ocean. “Since time primordial, humans have innately understood they are part of a larger whole. Religion provides people a way to understand and interact with the elements of the Divine in the universe. Ying and yang, karma, prayer, meditation, sacrifice, sin, and ritual are all attempts to describe or excuse what humans do not comprehend.”

He turned to face me. Glowing green eyes bored into mine and his body emitted an inexplicable energy force. Now that I understood more about empaths, I knew his powerful vibrations were affecting both my physical and mental states. It was unnerving—and extremely seductive.

I closed my eyes to concentrate on the captivating force.

“Quantum physics.” He lifted my hand, stroked the sensitive skin on the underside of my wrist.

My eyes flew open. I was enthralled—not by the science—but by the tiny oscillations of current traveling up my arm into my body. I became paradoxically light and heavy, energized and tranquil.

“Scientists understand little about this theory, but as an empath you experience the world on a quantum level. Scientists call it entanglement. For the briefest moment in time an empath experiences the essence of entanglement on the sub-atomic plane.”

“I don’t understand.” The roar of the surf and his charged touch were hypnotic.

“The swallow.”

I pulled my hand away. “Are you referring to the bird or the act of taking in food?”

“I am speaking of the swallows, the birds which migrate to San Juan, Capistrano every year. Those particular birds, or any migratory animal for that matter, migrate because of the principles of entanglement.”

“I don’t understand.” Again. “I’m an English professor remember? Talk about F. Scott Fitzgerald or Jane Austin or Thomas Pynchon and I understand. OK, maybe not Pynchon. Discussions on the subject of science make my head hurt.”

His brow furrowed. “What compels a certain species to migrate to a distant location at the exact same time? One explanation is entanglement. Released energy currents interact or entangle with each individual so that a whole flock or herd of animals instinctively knows it is time to migrate. Through entanglement your consciousness senses a life form not of this space-time dimension.”

I finally appreciated why he did not reveal all this the night before: I would have been unable to comprehend all the information. “I can do all of this because I’m an empath?”

“It’s not quite so simple. You are a unique empath. Your brain is different from most others in the world.”

“How so?”

One corner of his mouth lifted in amusement. “Your brain is an anomaly. In fact, very few people possess your distinctive brain abnormalities.”

“I have an abnormal brain?” I knew it!

“Yes, and these tiny deviations result in significant differences.”

“More science?” I asked. The science surplus taxed my abnormal brain.

He nodded. “As you may remember, the brain is composed of cells called neurons which are responsible for sending chemical and electrical signals. Like the internet, neurons use connecting networks. Your brain has three unusual differences. One: It contains a few more links between neurons than is typical. Two: Your axons, which are the long tails at the end of the neurons, are a mite thicker than most. Three: Your neurons are packed a little bit closer than most human brains. These infinitesimal differences work in harmony to create your unique intuitive quantum sense.”

I liked the sound of that. Unique intuitive quantum sense. And I had it.

“How can you possibly know my brain is different? I never had a brain scan!”

“We know.” His tone became ominous.

Abnormal brain or not, this was too much information to absorb. “So having this intuitive quantum sense allows me to perceive life forms no one else can.” I stared at my palms, felt a vestigial trace of his touch. “I’m an alien hunter?”

“If by using the word alien you are referring to those life forms who are incompatible and different than humans, then yes.”

“You’re arguing semantics?”

“Daphne, do you recall our discussion about dark matter and the universe being multi-dimensional?” S.J. appeared frustrated with my unscientific abnormal brain. “What you or humans call alien is, in fact, quite normal in another space-time dimension.”

I peered out at the ocean waves. The water, like the stars above, sparkled and shimmered in the moonlight. How many times had I sat on this beach contemplating the vastness of the universe? How many times did I marvel at the synchronicity of seemingly random events in my life? How many times did I wonder about my place in the world? A few months ago, I was reading a historical fiction novel about Queen Nefertiti of Egypt, when a scarab-like beetle landed next to me. Coincidence or synchronicity? I never again saw that type of insect. Years earlier, the scent of roses filled my house. The sweet aroma lasted for over an hour. I learned later that my grandmother died. Roses were her favorite flower.

I considered the disconnect and acrimony between science and religion. I contemplated the wonder of miracles, the power of prayer, and the effects of meditation. I reflected about ESP, clairvoyants, and the incredible abilities of autistic savants. I mulled over the uncanny similarities of every religion’s creation myth. I pondered extra terrestrials, the pyramids of Egypt, crop circles, and the Drake equation—which estimates the possibilities of life on other planets. I speculated about all the random tragic events happening each day. Then I thought of the little wooden box on my coffee table; a box containing an object that might help prevent an otherworldly tragedy from occurring. Was I up to the task?

“Daphne, you have been quiet for a long time. What are you thinking?”

I tore my gaze away from the lure of the hypnotic ocean waves.

“What’s in the box?”

Chapter 7

My Guide stood, dusted off sand, and then pulled me to my feet. “You are ready,” he declared solemnly before kissing my forehead. Another forehead kiss.

The kiss elicited a giggle. I suddenly felt wonderful. The world made sense. Well, not complete sense, but now I believed the universe at least contained a few answers. With Greek God Guide in tow, I sprinted from the beach. We had to get home. The box was waiting for me. A few hours ago, I had no desire. Now I felt compelled. Except for one minuscule concern. Lurking in the corner of my brain—where those vague fears and nameless terrors reigned—a horrible idea was taking root. A sinister notion. A murky dread. I chalked up my misgiving to fear of the unknown.

Right now, I felt so capable, so connected, so right with S.J. at my side. He must be conducting his positive energy vibrations to me. This robust sensation was his energy flowing through my body. Alien and exotic, the strange stirring equally soothed and energized, even as a small seed of doubt began to sprout.

But were my capable and enthusiastic feelings the result of something else?

Total blackness shrouded the porch. I had planned to get coffee, come directly back. No reason to turn on the light. I bent down, lifting the welcome mat to pick up the key.

“That’s not the safest location,” S.J. scolded.

“I only do it occasionally.” Maybe I ought to find a better place for the rare occasions when I hide my key outdoors.

Once inside the house, I headed straight for the coffee table, almost tripping over Foo who danced around my feet. I picked up the box and glanced at S.J.

He nodded once, lifted his eyebrows.

Only two simple hinges and a latch adorned the small box. I unfastened a small clasp, slowly lifting the lid. Nestled in silk lining, lay an odd-looking bauble. I coaxed out a silvery object.

An odd-looking ornament twirled and spun from a thin chain. Two metallic rings formed a sphere that encircled a finely wrought three-dimensional star. Within the space of the star, I counted seven tiny multi-colored stones. I held the delicate orb at eye level, examining it closely.

As the sphere twisted and twinkled, the stones appeared to float within their hexagram enclosure. I squinted at the star. It, too, defied gravity. I could not detect what held all the parts in suspension.

“It’s beautiful and amazing.” Never had I seen anything like it. “What is it?”

“This exceptional piece is a Merkabah Prana Sphere and its geometric shape is one many religions believe has divine origins. However, its beauty is second only to its true function. It is actually a Space-Time Egress Portal Device.”

“Could you repeat that?”

“A Space-Time Egress Portal Device—an EPD. Think of the Merkabah as a vacuum cleaner for the cosmos.” My Guide bent down to pet Foo who licked his shoe adoringly.

“I need a better explanation than that.”

S.J. laughed. “OK, but more science is involved.”

I scowled in mock dismay. “Oh, goody. Can’t wait.”

“A little over fifty years ago, scientists discovered the existence of rotating cosmic masses. They are called Kerr black holes or Kerr wormholes. These rotating masses cause the space and time inside to bend and curve. Because of this phenomenon, scientists believe Kerr wormholes permit space and time travel.”

“Are they correct?” Don’t know why I asked—the answer was obvious.

“Indeed, but their understanding is superficial at best.” He gestured to the Merkabah. “See the seven stones inside the Merkabah? Those stones contain the technology needed for your task.” He took the Merkabah from my hand, pulled the necklace over my head, and carefully centered the pendant.

I wish I could say the Merkabah looked lovely nestled in my ample cleavage; unfortunately, it rested atop the sternum of my B-cup bosom. I lifted the orb, examining the space-age sphere. “What’s my task?” My head—spinning from the evening’s lessons regarding modern science—could not digest any additional cosmic commentary. Instead of answering, S.J. pulled me off the couch and propelled me out the door to the front porch. He pointed to the cushioned Adirondack chair.

I sat down, anticipating another long lecture. Foo jumped on my lap, burrowing her muzzle under my arm.

S.J. settled into the chair. “I like pizza,” he announced after a local delivery car went whizzing down the street. “Are you hungry?” Instead of waiting for an answer, he pulled a cell phone from his pocket, tapped the screen. Any man with the neighborhood pizza joint on speed dial probably doesn’t do much cooking. Sometimes it’s the small things that offer a glimpse into a person’s personality and lifestyle. Giggling, I listened to him order a large vegetarian pizza and bucket of hot wings.

His face broke out into an expansive grin. “You find it amusing that I ordered a vegetarian pizza and chicken.”

I laughed. “Yes, but typical. Whenever I go to the movies, I get a diet coke and popcorn with extra butter. As a teenager, I worked the theatre concession stand and most of the women would buy a candy bar and a diet drink.”

We shared a laugh and then he grew serious.

“Seven stones are suspended within the Merkabah.” His voice was solemn. “Hematite, onyx, amber, peridot, lapis lazuli, turquoise, and alexandrite. The shiny grey stone is hematite, an iron oxide in its mineral state. The word *hematite* derives from the ancient Greek word for blood, because when crushed into a powder, the stone assumes a blood red hue. Ten thousand years ago, hematite powder was used to decorate pottery and tombs. Hematite’s magnetic properties bind one’s energy to the earth.”

I rubbed my eyes. My abnormal brain had trouble absorbing both a physics and geology lesson in the same hour.

“You must understand this, Daphne.”

“I’m on information overload. Do I really need to know all the details about this Merkabah?”

His eyebrows shot up, dismayed by my question. “The green stone is—”

“Peridot!” I interrupted. “It’s my birthstone. I read somewhere that historians believe jewelry worn by Cleopatra and other ancient royalty was made with peridot and not emeralds—like everyone believes.”

“Correct. Peridot is a type of olivine, a common mineral found in mafic and ultra-mafic rock, which makes up the earth’s interior. It’s also found in lava and meteorites. Peridot harnesses positive energy.”

Two stones explained. Five remained. “Let’s get on with it,” I urged, impatient with the lecture.

Bristling at my not so subtle suggestion, he abruptly stood up, crossing the porch with two strides. Hands clasped behind his back, he gazed up at the night sky.

Oops, I hadn’t meant to sound rude. He didn’t like taking orders—at least not from me.

Thus far, he had treated me with patience and kindness, and yet I sensed he possessed uncompromising and fiercely aggressive qualities as well. My Guide was an enigma, exuding danger and trustworthiness in equal measure. I took a deep breath, fighting off the frustration.

As I pondered his character, I became distracted by his broad back, slim waist, and rounded ass. Why do women always fall for the bad boys? I was a cliché! I knew better!

My ex-husband is the stereotypical bad boy and our marriage ended in divorce. I would not fall into that trap again. No sir. No more drooling over my Guide. He was my Guide, not my friend. No harm in enjoying the eye candy, though.

“Are you angry?”

“Should I be?” he asked innocently.

“Your silent and aloof behavior means something else?” I responded almost as innocently.

“If I am angry you shall know.” He turned towards me. “You will not mistake that emotion.” He walked back to the chair, sat down, and grinned.

I patted his knee hopefully. “What about the rest of the stones?”

“The black stone is onyx. Like hematite, this mineral also has a strong magnetic charge. Jewelry and pots from Egypt’s second dynasty were crafted from onyx. The Book of Revelation claims this chalcedonic stone will be the foundation for the City of Heaven, which is relevant because onyx has powerful regenerative properties.”

“Mmm...regenerative properties? What am I bringing back to life?”

“The Merkabah sphere restores life.” He quickly corrected my faulty definition.

“Again you’re arguing the meaning of a word?” I teased.

“I am merely correcting any mistaken ideas you may have.”

“This stone looks like turquoise.” I rotated the Merkabah, inspecting its tiny stones in the dim light of my porch.

“Correct again. For thousands of years, religions have claimed turquoise was imbued with special powers. The ancient Egyptians, Ottomans, American Indians, Aztecs, and the people of the Shang Dynasty of China all believed in its healing and protecting power.”

“I wasn’t aware of all the history behind these stones.” My stomach grumbled. I hadn’t eaten since lunch when Ivy and I tried a new restaurant with big prices and small portions.

“The blue stone is Lapis Lazuli. Egyptians claimed Lapis was a gateway to the heavens and had the power to transform. The mineral has been mined from limestone deposits in regions of Afghanistan and Siberia for thousands of years and was used by civilizations such as the Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians.”

The name for one of the ancient dynasties brought a well-known poem to mind. “The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold...”

S.J. closed his eyes as he recited the rest of the verse.

I gaped at him in admiration. The man could recite poetry!

“What made you think of *The Destruction of Sennacherib*?” S.J. narrowed his eyes.

“I’m an English teacher, remember? Random bits of poetry are always floating around in my brain. I use Lord Byron’s poem to teach my students about rhyme and meter, specifically the little used anapestic tetrameter. The poem has no deep symbolic meaning.” My stomach growled again.

“You are mistaken.”

“What do you mean?” Poetry analysis I understood.

“Sennacherib, as you will recall, was the King of Assyria—what is now modern day Syria and Iraq. In 701 BC and after many successful

campaigns to expand his territorial reign, he decided to attack Jerusalem. However, King Judah, the ruler of that city and a follower of the Jewish God Jehovah, wasn't too worried because a prophet named Isaiah informed him that God would protect his land and people. As Sennacherib's army of about 185,000 descended upon Jerusalem, the angels of the Lord stopped them dead, laying waste to the marauding invaders. The defeat acted as the catalyst for Sennacherib's quick demise, and several years later the Assyrian King was brutally murdered by his own sons."

"And the poem?"

"Byron's poem of the biblical account of the battle holds some interesting clues as to the real events which transpired."

I opened my mouth, a question on the tip of my tongue, when a pulsating thump of bass and the clanking vibrations of an old car violated the quiet of the peaceful street. A beat-up Ford chugged to the curb, and the pizza delivery boy slid out. He reminded me of a fish, all bulgy-eyed and lower jaw hanging open.

There I go again. I chastised myself for being so critical about someone's appearance.

S.J. was looking at me with anticipation. He had a gleam in his eye.

Chapter 8

“Say it.” S.J. whispered as the pizza delivery boy slithered up the sidewalk to the house.

I scrutinized the young man. “He’s a fish?” I whispered back. “A mermaid? A merman?”

“Indeed, he is.”

Pizza fish-boy flopped up the steps of my porch.

“Pizza?” he asked, balancing the pizza box and bag of chicken wings with one translucent hand.

While S.J. dug in his pocket for money, I studied pizza fish-boy. He smelled of the wharf. Foo sniffed the air; she likes fish... and pizza.

“You like anchovies?” An appropriate, if not an original, question. I didn’t want to appear too obvious.

“Love ‘em,” pizza fish-boy answered, handing S.J. the boxes.

“Thanks dude. Have a good night.” He limply dropped down the steps as though his limbs had no bones.

I wondered if I only imagined his skin possessing the iridescent quality found in fish scales.

As pizza fish-boy submerged into the car, S.J. chuckled.

“The human brain makes judgments about someone in one tenth of a second. The intuitive part of your brain—the dominant side—especially for an empath, allows your instincts to instantaneously perceive that which is not normal. You sensed the dark matter and

intuited he was not human.” He set the pizza box down, headed inside. I followed like a dutiful student.

“Should I have done something?” I was still unclear on my job description.

“No, he’s harmless.” S.J. found the napkins on the kitchen table, took a few, and headed back to the porch. “He’s a selkie.”

“Is that a type of merman?”

“Indeed, although selkie can be either male or female. They are shape-shifters from another dimension. Each culture has a different name for them. The English mermaid, the Scandinavian *havmand*, the Irish *merrow*, the Chaldean *oannes*, the Philistine *tagon*, the Syrian *atargatis*, the Japanese *ningyo*—”

“OK, OK already. I get it. Lots of names for the same creature. What am I suppose to do with this?” I pointed to the Merkabah, before trailing him outside.

We had company. Someone was sitting on my chair, munching on a slice of pizza.

“Rose!”

“Hey, hey.” She smirked at S.J. “Still hangin’ around, handsome?”

“When did you arrive?” I asked.

Rose rummaged through her colossal Peruvian print tote and brought out a bottle of wine. “Got here right after the pizza guy left. Perfect timing, huh?” She lifted the bottle into the air. “I found a new cabernet you might like.”

Exhaling in frustration, I walked back into the house. Part of Rose’s charm is her unpredictability. Sometimes she stopped by every day to chat, and then weeks might go by before we visited again. When I returned a few minutes later with the wine opener and three glasses, S.J. was looking at me oddly, a finger tapping his lips in thought.

“Oh, dear. What did you tell him? Jeez, Rose!” I handed her the goblets.

Judging from her guilty expression, Rose disclosed a piece of juicy personal information.

S.J. regarded me with amused pity. “Rose informed me that you haven’t had sex since your divorce.” A large bite of pizza went into his mouth.

I tossed the corkscrew at Rose, sat down heavily on the last remaining chair, and reached for a piece of cheesy deliciousness. “Thank you Rose. Thank you very much. I am not having sex by choice I’ll have you know!” I took a huge bite of pizza. A stress eater, I tend to start

stuffing junk food in my mouth whenever I'm angry, anxious, or bored. Cheese, bread, and chocolate are the preferred opiate. Rose waved her hand—evidently divulging intimate details about my life was no big deal. “Lighten up, Daph.” With a skilled hand, she removed the cork and poured three generous glasses of wine. I glared at my sister. Her inappropriate disclosure was—without a doubt—emotional payback for hounding her about the cooking video. “Are you staying here again tonight?” Her voice dripped with innuendo as she handed S.J. a glass of cabernet. “I'm staying with friends.” He swirled the wine around. Rose scrunched her face, annoyed by his vagueness. “Are your friends local?” She is relentless when it came to prying. S.J. sniffed the wine thoughtfully before taking a small sip. “California?” Why was he avoiding her question? “Yeah, where in California do your friends live?” She glared at him. “Is this from Napa Valley?” He held out the wine glass. “My friends are staying at Casa de Playa.” Rose leaned forward, wine splashing out in her excitement. “Oooh! Casa de Playa! The hotel is incredible! Daphne, have you been there? It's like five stars. Small, but so charming. They have this amazing seafood restaurant—Pescado Enchante.” Rose pointed to S.J. “Your friends are at the hotel? I'm so jealous. Daph, stop by and check out the lobby. You'll love it! It's got like these huge palm trees and tile floors and—oh, the art—you will absolutely love all the old art. You love all that weird stuff.” S.J. seemed ever so pleased by Rose's spirited description. He kept bobbing his head in agreement. “When were you there?” I took a much-needed sip of wine. “Remember when I dated Patrick? You said he reminded you of a leprechaun.” This statement elicited a hearty laugh from my Guide. Rose peered at him quizzically. “Yeah well, we went to lunch there one day.” I began to giggle, but not for the reason Rose imagined. Her statement confirmed my strange skill of seeing life forms from other space-time dimensions. My whole life I believed I was a bit wacky. What a relief. Neither critical nor condescending about a person's appearance, I was spot on.

Did S.J. share my joy at the epiphany? Or was he laughing at my naiveté?

Rose gave us both a strange look. “Hey, S.J.! You should take Daphne to Pescado Enchante. Cuz, really dude, pizza on the front porch on Saturday night?”

S.J. fixed his brown eyes on mine. “Would you like to go to dinner tomorrow?”

Lovely. My sister was wrangling dates for me.

“Are you allowed?” Perhaps there were rules prohibiting Guides from socializing with their protégé.

“Why does the university care if you go out with a visiting professor?” Rose asked.

“I can take you to dinner,” S.J. assured me as he finished off his third slice of pizza.

Rose nodded, pleased with her match making skills. “Excellent.” She leaned sideways to elbow me in the arm. “Bimbo Barbie is heading this way.”

Tiffany walked towards my house. “Hey, everyone! I smell pizza.” Tiffany had exchanged her early morning body-hugging apparel for scantily clad clubbing attire. White halter-top—no bra—black Lycra booty shorts, silver platform sandals, and an armload of rhinestone bangles completed the hoochie bar hopping ensemble. She flipped her hair back coquettishly when she spied S.J.

“I’m on my way to the clubs and noticed you were home. You’re smart Daphne, so you’ll know what to do.”

“Nice outfit,” S.J. commented dryly as he opened up the box of chicken wings.

“Why thank you, sir,” Tiffany replied in a horrid impression of a southern accent.

I had never before witnessed Tiffany-in-action. Her flirtatious behavior was disgusting. Even more disgusting was my jealousy of her ability to be such a tease. Irrational, I know, but I was envious of her perfect silicone-enhanced body. Another bite of pizza went into my mouth.

“What’s wrong, Tiffany?” I cast my most withering look at her.

“I tried feeding Princess—I named the cat Princess—cat food but she won’t eat it.” She pouted prettily for S.J.’s benefit. “What should I do?”

“Did you try canned cat food?” Cats were finicky, wasn’t that the old adage?

She squealed in delight, executing another sexy hair flip. “Good idea. You’re a genius.”

“That’s our Daph; she’s a major brain,” Rose mumbled.

“I’ll buy some canned food tomorrow. See ya around. Ciao!” Tiffany and her bouncy breasts bounded away.

The three of us observed her retreating figure cross the lawn until she disappeared into her car.

Rose stood up, yawning. “I actually came by to tell you about my new crush.”

“Did you meet someone new?” I took another long sip of wine hoping this new urge to imbibe alcohol wasn’t the result of anxiety regarding my new Merkabah duties—a bad case of pendant panic.

“Yeah, I had a meeting with the sausage sales rep this afternoon.

Turns out, he’s a major hottie. I’m in lust. Kinda got the feeling he was into me too.” She shrugged, rolled her eyes, acting blasé. “The new guy I hired though, I dunno about him...”

“What’s wrong with him?” I asked.

“A little too intense...too eager...overly polite ...yes ma’am, no ma’am.”

“Sounds like a great employee to me.”

Rose scowled, wrinkled her forehead. “I guess. We’ll see...anyway, the sales rep has this sexy surfer look goin’ on.”

We gathered the remains of our pizza and wing feast, Rose’s hilarious commentary regarding customers-from-hell keeping us in stitches for the next ten minutes. Finally, I hugged her goodbye and waved from the porch as she drove away.

The moment I shut the door, S.J. stepped toward me. Like the night before, he stood so close I felt the heat radiating from his body. Eyes intent on mine, he lifted the Merkabah sphere from my chest. Even though his fingers barely grazed my skin, I detected a faint flicker, caught the hint of wine on his breath, and marked the intensity of his stare. My heart thumped wildly.

“Technology of incalculable worth lay within the Merkabah sphere. Guard this necklace well.”

A warning. His eyes flashed green. Quite peculiar.

“The Space-Time Egress Portal Device is priceless?” I assumed such superior alien technology could be easily duplicated.

“Yes, the EPD is priceless and, as the human conduit necessary for the technology to function, you are also invaluable.” His voice, low and deep, reverberated in my ear.

Did he use his sexual appeal to get women to do his bidding? Was I falling for a male version of Tiffany?

I might control my impious thoughts if he were not so damn close. Moving away wasn't possible; he continued to hold the Merkabah sphere between his fingers. I did my best to appear composed. My chest heaved. I breathed slowly, needing to break the electrifying sway he held over me. “How does the Merkabah work?”

With a gentle touch, he laid the mystic orb on my skin and stepped back. “I don't know.”

Lying in bed, I contemplated the last twenty-four hours of my life. Normally, I used the late hours to mull over past mistakes and personal faults. For some odd reason I enjoy being my own worst critic. Tonight however, I marveled over all the cosmic and scientific wonders in the world.

The universe was incredible and extraordinary. My mind could not fathom its complexity and immeasurability. I felt tiny, the equivalent of a microscopic speck in a vast universe—nothing more than an imperceptible fleck in an infinite cosmos. Nevertheless, I was a teeny particle with a function. This made me feel marginally better.

I had a wee bit of regret for throwing a hissy fit in front of S.J. What kind of Guide gives you an ancient galactic globe and doesn't know how to turn it on?

He was purposely withholding vital information about my role for a particular reason, although—now that I thought about it—his ploy to conceal important facts made sense. Full disclosure would have scared away a prospective recruit—like me.

I wished he were more forthcoming. To his credit, he displayed patience while I ranted about his lack of Merkabah knowledge. He knew more than he was letting on, I was certain of it. Why the subterfuge?

Restless, I rolled over and looked out the window. The moon shone into the bedroom giving a lustrous glow to Foo's white fur. About to close my eyes, I heard an odd noise from outside. I listened carefully. A faint ticking sound. Foo lifted her head. Was I imagining things? Alert now, Foo stood and stared out the window.

“What is it, Foo?”

The *tik-tik* became louder and louder until the metallic clicking simply stopped.

I yawned, drew the covers to my chin. Foo, in watchdog mode, stood with her eyes trained on the open bedroom window.

“It’s OK,” I murmured before finally drifting off to sleep.

But of course, it wasn’t.

Earth’s inhabitants were dim-witted and easy quarry. The being circled lazily for several moments before claiming its next victim. This particular assemblage of society suffered greatly from narcotics, psychosis, and failure.

Their lives would fulfill a glorious destiny, the creature thought. With terrifying speed, the creature snatched an adult who slept within the tall beach grass of the shadowed dunes. The crashing surf muffled his startled cry. The wind carried away his scream.

A half mile away, the creature dropped its victim on the beach. The man, a diagnosed schizophrenic who refused to take medication, was all too familiar with surreal hallucinations. This psychotic episode was different—so real. He actually smelled the demon aberration. A sweet scent of black licorice. As the creature sat on top of him, he fought back, striking the creature. The creature shook its head and smirked. The man squirmed, thrashed about, only to receive a brutal blow to his face. He heard a sickening crunch, felt the hot blood pour over his mouth and down his cheeks. Dazed, the man heard the creature rip open his shirt, felt the sharp point of a blade trail across his chest. He did not recognize his own unearthly scream as the next slice cut much deeper.

The being never looked into the eyes of its victims, never listened to the cries, and never wondered of its life. With skill and urgency, the creature split the victim open exposing both the heart and liver. From a pocket, the creature took a small metal cylinder and, using the sharp point at one end, plunged it into the pulsing organ of its live victim. While the heart continued to beat, the creature used a thin blue blade to free the liver from the spleen and stomach before placing the blood soaked organ in a sterile container. Next, with the cylinder attached, the heart was removed and a second container filled and sealed.

Bloody from the task, the being lifted a hand to his face, inhaled appreciatively, before licking off every drop of the tainted fluid. Knife sheathed, containers secured, the creature disappeared into the night.