



Three strangers are chosen by God and given magical powers to save the Earth from Demons. A wealthy but grieving father, a hereditary witch married to a minister, and a gay college boy join forces to follow an immortal morphing spiritual guide on an adventure through city streets and barnyards. Love and chosen family are their greatest weapons.

To Be Chosen

Second Edition

by Michael Travis Jasper

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a novel by

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Chapter 1

He stood in the warm cleansing rain for what seemed like hours as it gently washed the blood from his clothes and hands. He had stabbed the big ugly bastard in the chest with one of his good steak knives. It was self-defense of course. The thug had been sent to capture him, but that didn't matter. He had become a killer. He somehow felt stronger and less afraid than he ever had in his life.....and less human.

It had all begun a week ago, when Roman had spent the day raking up huge piles of leaves all over his yard. The peaceful autumn chore had been the perfect distraction for his frazzled mind. He had started to burn a large pile in the driveway. Hazy smoke filled the air with the smell of October. The darkly handsome real estate investor let his mind drift back to his childhood, when he had watched his wrinkled old grandfather rake the leaves of these very trees. This sleepy upscale suburb of Nashville never changed.

He jumped when she said it. "Daddy." He couldn't breathe. "Daddy, look at me." He slowly turned to see her standing on the other side of the crackling fire. His daughter, Jane, was seven years old. She wore a simple white dress and her long golden hair and ocean blue eyes were those of a living doll, but her face showed concern beyond her years.

"What are you doing here, Sweetheart?" Roman was thrilled to see her. He started towards her, but the flames jumped up to intervene.

"There's no time, Daddy!" She was visibly distressed.

"What do you mean, Janie?"

"They're coming, Daddy. You have to go!"

"What are you talking about, Darling?"

"Hurry, Daddy! You have to get out of here!"

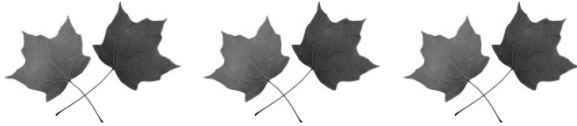
He had worked his way around the fire and reached for her arm. She took a step backward to avoid his grasp. Roman's head was spinning. He considered diving and tackling her.

"They'll be here any second. Go, Daddy, please!"

Roman turned towards the house and the unmistakable sound of movement inside. Something was very wrong. He turned back to grab his baby. Her protection was all that mattered, but she was gone. He spun in every direction, but there wasn't a trace. She had vanished. Her name froze on his lips. He knew it was pointless. They were in the kitchen which gave him only seconds to roll under the marble bench that was mostly hidden by a row of purple iris. His heart stopped beating when four men burst through the back door. They seemed crazed. Predators looking for their prey. One sniffed the wind, which fortunately favored Roman by blowing towards him, away from the intruders. Roman began to tremble as the last of the sinister strangers was about to disappear back into the house where they would rummage further. The man had paused to brush the sweaty hair from his forehead. Roman disbelieved his eyes. The intruder had horns...just like the proverbial devil. He gasped, but the stranger didn't hear him.

Roman lay there for a long time, afraid to move. It had been over an hour since the trespassers had appeared to leave, but he had to be sure. The surreal events had left him unable to trust appearances. His thoughts turned to Jane. If only he could have held her. It had been over a year since she chased her dog into the street in an attempt to bring him to safety. Neither she nor Toto had been a match for that Dodge Ram pick-up truck. She had been killed instantly. Toto too. Roman thought he must be going crazy. None of

this could be real. He didn't know what to do next. The universe had stopped making sense. "Come back, Janie," he whispered over and over, "Come back....."



Days passed without his even realizing. He had searched the house for evidence of the intruders or of Jane's visit, but there was no sign of anyone having been there. Roman now had no doubts about what he had seen, but he had no idea what it meant. He knew Janie had saved his life but couldn't figure out who was after him or why. And those horns. Had it been some sort of mask? Somehow, Roman knew they had been real. He had let the machine pick up calls from his mother and brother. He just didn't feel like talking to anyone...anyone but Jane.

He had begged her for hours to appear again, but she silently refused. Roman assumed she had returned to Heaven. His little guardian angel for one moment. One of his first impulses had been to call her mother, but he had decided against it. She wouldn't have believed him; and even if she had, there was no point in robbing Brenda of whatever peace she had finally found with her new boyfriend.

After a week of calling in sick, things began to seem normal again, and he knew it was time to return to work. He had been orchestrating a deal that would create a massive new housing development, and there were plenty of remaining details to be settled. The Armani suit and black Jaguar seemed pretty trivial that morning, but then things like that really hadn't mattered since Janie's accident. Traffic was a bitch as usual, but it gave Roman a chance to pop in the Tony Robbins tapes that helped keep him thinking just positively enough to get out of bed every day.

Roman was just leaving the posh Green Hills area and beginning to fall into his usual rush hour trance when he heard the screeching tires a few cars back. The wreck didn't impact his car, but he felt compelled to jump out and run back to assist if he could.

When he saw that the little girl of about four years had been thrown from the convertible, he stopped in his tracks. Not again. He couldn't go through this again. He ran to the child. A little Hispanic girl that looked nothing like Janie, but somehow for him, she was Jane.....and he wouldn't fail her again. Her parents were unconscious, and no one else seemed willing to help.

He knew you weren't supposed to move injured people, but he acted without thinking. He fell to his knees, scooped her up, and held her tightly to his chest. They were both covered in her blood. Roman closed his eyes, but the smell of it was inescapable. He was sobbing as he cradled the back of her head and knew the bones were crushed. "Live," was his whispered prayer. Then louder. "Live...Live, Live, Live, LIVE!!!" As he screamed it, he felt the power growing inside of him; then he saw what the witnesses saw. A bright white aura of light surrounded him, and then expanded to surround the girl. The light grew blinding and Roman was forced to close his eyes. He opened them an instant later when the child began to stir. He was so astounded, he almost dropped her. Not only was she alive, she was perfect and healed. Not a drop of blood remained on her yellow sundress or Roman's suit. Her head was normal and there was no sign that she had ever been injured.

By this time, her mother had awakened and limped over to grab up her daughter. "Thank You" and "Gracias" alternately fell from her mouth. She had seen what happened and knew that this man had to be an angel sent by the Holy Mother to save her baby. That was why she didn't even try to stop him or get his name when he stumbled numbly back to his car. Everyone else looked away in fear, and since traffic was moving again, he got in his car and drove to his office.

His co-workers and associates were all buzzing about the miracle being discussed on the radio. No one knew the identity of the Good Samaritan, and Roman wasn't talking. He couldn't explain what he had done if he wanted to. He knew he had saved the girl's life, but how? Had he been used by God? Was it simply an answer to his prayer? He avoided several meetings that day and went home early. What was happening to him? He had always prided himself

on being a logical, down-to-Earth kind of guy. His recent experiences didn't have any place in the version of reality he had always trusted to be the truth.

He went to bed as soon as he got home, barely getting undressed before he fell into the deepest sleep. Roman knew he was dreaming, because he had never seen any place like this before. It was daytime here, and he wore jeans and a T-shirt. A beautiful sunny day. He was surrounded by rolling hills of grass. There was an ancient-looking forest perhaps half a mile away. And only 100 yards away, a huge stone castle. People that looked like "peasants" walked along wagons and rode horses in and out of the massive main gate. Strangest of all were the small "spaceships" that flew overhead, some even landing within the castle walls. "Why ride horses, when you could fly spaceships?" Roman mumbled aloud.

"Because it is forbidden for humans to touch their technology without permission, Daddy."

"Jane!" Roman turned to find his daughter sitting on a boulder twenty feet away.

"My name is Joppa here, Da-Roman...You should call me by that name here, and I must remember to call you Roman."

"Janie, I can't call you by another name." He had run to her, and she allowed him a brief hug.

"You must. They don't understand here how my soul moves between dimensions. If they figure out that I was your daughter on Earth, they would think they could use me to trap you."

"What? Who?" Roman was amazed to feel that she was flesh and blood. That she was alive. "What is this place?"

"This realm has many names. The race of beings here that enslave humans is called Legion. On Earth people call them demons, but I don't know what they really are. What I do know, is that they want to capture you and perhaps kill you...You and the other Avatarn."

"The Ava-What?"

"You, Blair, and Darby—The Avatarn."

"Who are Blair and Darby, and what are Avatarn, Honey?" By this time, Roman had helped her down from her lofty perch and

both sat in the grass, leaning against the rock and watching the passers-by who tended to the burdens they carried and paid no mind to the little girl who sat by the boulder talking to herself.

"You'll meet Blair and Darby very soon, Da-Roman. The Legion call the three of you the Avatarn. Thousands of years ago, on a planet far from Earth or this place, a prophecy was given by a beautiful woman to the royal court. It was me," she leaned in to whisper, "I foretold of a time when three humans would lead a rebellion against the Legion slave-masters and destroy them."

"What makes you or they think that I could be one of these... Avatarn?"

"They have spies that live among humans on Earth and many other worlds. When you healed that kid this morning, they knew you were one of the promised ones."

"How do they know the identities of the other two? Did they heal people also?" Roman still wasn't convinced himself that he had actually saved the girl.

"No." Joppa answered with a patient smile, "They do not yet know who the other two are. Only I know. But they will find them. As soon as Darby and Blair discover their powers...which, by the way, will be different from yours. They will not have the healing gift."

"But, Sweetheart, how do you know all of this?"

"I was created a thousand lifetimes ago, to wait for the Avatarn to be born and to guide and assist you in your mission. If I can."

"None of this can be real. I'm just dreaming, right?" He embraced her and kissed her forehead.

"You are dreaming, Roman. But nothing has ever been more real. Be watching for Darby and Blair. They will be entering your life very soon...And you're all in great danger."

"Janie—"

"No, Roman. You mu—"

"Okay...*Joppa*" he said sarcastically, "This is all just too outrageous to believe. I'm just—"

"Roman, you have to wake up now. Right now!...They've sent someone to get you. A human this time. He'll stop at nothing, Roman. Failure in his mission will mean punishment by death."

"Darling, this is crazy. It's just my body reacting to some bad pizza I ate at the office. I'm sure when I—"

"You're running out of time, Ro—"

"Okay, okay, at least tell me how to recognize this Darby and Blair. Maybe then if I meet them, I'll know this wasn't just bad pepperoni."

"You'll know this is real as soon as you wake up...If you wake up." He had never seen her so angry. "But I'll tell you in hopes that you won't miss each other somehow...Darby is a handsome, 21-year-old gay man. He works part time as a personal trainer in a gym and studies history in college...Blair is a sexy 30-year-old woman who is married to a preacher, though she is secretly a witch....It's too late! You have to wake up now!" He was stunned by the terror on her face. "Now! Daddy!" She screamed as she slapped his face with all of her might.

He sat up in bed as he jolted awake. He was home. In his own bed. And there was someone coming up the stairs. He quickly pulled on the flannel pajama bottoms that were lying on the foot of the bed. Roman scrambled to his desk where the plate and silver from some past supper still sat. He grabbed the heavy-duty streak knife just in time to see the man's face revealed in a flash of lightning that seemed right outside the window. The gigantic brute of a man was hideously scarred. He had been horribly burned. Maybe tortured. Janie...Joppa had been right. Was she right about everything?

The goon ran at Roman. He was swinging a baseball bat. Roman barely evaded his blows and watched in terror as first the lamp, then his desk, smashed to bits, knowing that his head might be next.

"Please don't do this!" Roman pleaded, but the guy's eyes already looked dead inside. Roman didn't wait for a reply. He ran out of the bedroom and turned down the dark hall. The enraged man was close behind him, swinging the bat wildly. Roman was waiting just outside the door. There was no time to think. He

plunged the knife into the giant's chest with all of his strength and watched him fall to the floor gurgling blood. Soon all was quiet. Roman stared in disbelief. Was it really possible that he had just killed someone? Could he heal him if he tried? He started to kneel, but no. He didn't want to save this man. Besides...He had a very strong feeling that he had done this man a favor. He called the police, then stumbled down to the front porch to wait. He managed the stairs down to the sidewalk and out into the rain. It was pouring. He stood in the warm cleansing rain for what seemed like hours as it gently washed the blood from his clothes and hands.

Chapter 2

Blair was having a hard time focusing on her husband's sermon. Though his delivery was passionate and sincere, she had heard Thomas lecture about "The Judgment of Others" a dozen times. Her thoughts raced ahead to the hayride and bonfire the church would be hosting after dark to celebrate a plentiful harvest. Both of her sisters had promised, via email, to be there. It had been so long since she had been able to convince them to pass on the excitement of their usual weekends in Atlanta for a few sleepy days in Juniper, Georgia. She stopped twisting the ends of her long red hair as soon as she realized she was doing it. She didn't want Thomas to know she was bored. It was the familiarity of the material that allowed her mind to wander. She always loved being in church. Their little Baptist church was filled with the presence of God. The only time she felt Him more strongly was when she cast spells with her sisters.

She knew her friends in the congregation wouldn't appreciate the fact that they are hereditary witches, not traditionally Wiccan. They worshipped no other god than the Trinity of Christianity. They just happened to be born to a family that had been gifted for generations with a subtle magic. They used these powers only for good, knowing that one reaps what she sows. Blair had never been

able to work even the smallest charm on her own, but with Sarah and Molly at her side they could enchant men, sooth troubled hearts, and sometimes see angels.

The rest of the day passed quickly. Blair was busy with preparations for the celebration, and nightfall would come early for the contented housewife.

Sarah and Molly arrived before dark with plenty of time to help prepare food and flirt with Thomas. They both had crushes on him. Blair always found their overtures amusing, but her shy husband was a bit overwhelmed by them.

"I know!...Let's do a spell to charm the best lookin' guys at the festival. That way we're guaranteed a good time." Sarah smiled deviously as she piled cookies into a basket.

"I know!....Let's do a spell to charm Thomas." Molly winked at Blair as she finished putting her long black hair in a ponytail and turned her back to the window that looked out on the driveway where the reverend with chestnut hair was busy loading the pick-up with enough food for an army.

"I'll help you cast a spell," Blair gave her sister's ponytail a quick yank, "but not on my husband."

They were all still giggling when Tom came in, pulling up his shirt to wipe his sweaty face. Sarah faked a swoon.

"All right, girls. What are you up to?" Thomas attempted to look stern. "No hocus-pocus tonight. I mean it. No De Sortilege."

"Just girl talk," Molly batted her eyes, "Nothing that would interest a big hunky stud like you."

Thomas smiled and blushed and went about completing his chores. He almost felt sorry for the local boys who would be bewitched by his sisters-in-law even without the use of magic.

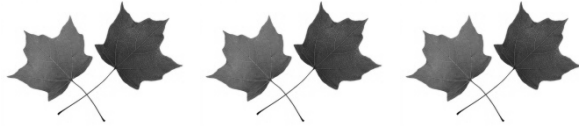
"We'll wait till tonight, when we're in the woods. The spell will be more powerful when we're communing with nature. Don't worry; we'll find you both paramours," Blair suggested.

"Do you think that's wise?" Sarah was the blonde sister, and the worrier. "We'll be surrounded by the congregation...What if we get caught?"

"What if we do?" Molly was the rebel. "We'll turn them all into toads." Again, with the wink.

"Yea, and right after that, we'll all fly away on our broomsticks." Blair offered, rolling her eyes. "No one will see us...We'll be careful...Besides, what's the worst thing that ever came of someone doing a love spell?"

Sarah cleared her throat sarcastically, "Heeellooo!.....Salem, MA!"



The flames of the bonfire were at least fifteen feet high. The witches were torn between being drawn to the magic of the fire and repelled by the knowledge that churches had burned witches for centuries. Blair shivered as the waves of heat washed over her, and her friends belted out hymns. The scene could have been from any place, from any time. She couldn't explain the sense of dread that made the hairs on her neck stand up. Her first instinct was to look for Thomas, then her sisters. She spotted her adorably rugged husband sitting on the back stairs of the church, with a few of the deacons whittling points on long sticks to be used for the weenie roast later. She caught his eye and he flashed her one of his reassuring smiles that always put her mind at ease.

"Have some lemonade, Sis," Molly had appeared on her left and Sarah on her right, "Someone spiked it," she added.

"You?" Blair scolded, but was secretly glad.

"No...But I would have if someone hadn't beaten me to it." Molly raised her plastic cup to toast Blair's.

"I don't know what they used, but it packs a helluva punch." Sarah joined the toast.

"Magic time?" Molly suggested eagerly.

"Let's do it!" Blair and Sarah chimed in unison. They made their way over to the large lawn behind the church and past the dozen or so children that were playing with the baby goats. The church's answer to a petting zoo.

The sisters entered the woods on the all-but-hidden dirt path the teenagers used to reach a little grotto that accommodated their forbidden make-out sessions. The small clearing wasn't far from the boundaries of the church yard, but the ancient trunks and reaching branches provided complete privacy. This wouldn't be the first time the girls had made magic in the moonlit temple of bark, grass, dirt, and starry sky. All three girls flinched when their entrance to Mother Nature's private courtyard was heralded by several large crows that fluttered just over head in the surrounding canopy. The sisters knew beyond doubt that 'ravens and crows close at hand were an omen of life-altering changes soon to come.' The girls were usually comfortable in the night, and uneasiness was quickly forgotten.

Joining hands, they tried to stop laughing. "Count of three," Blair squeaked out between giggles, and on three all became serious and began the incantation.

*"Hecate, turn your face away,
We call real power as we may, Lovers come, and lovers go.
'Tis true love's face I long to know.
Earth bring forth the man for me. Yahweh's will our destiny."*

They had chanted it three times over, when the growing intensity of light from above caused them to open their eyes. The three angels appeared to be standing in mid-air above the treetops. They were shining like liquid silver, but the sisters knew the radiance of their visitors would not be seen by their nearby friends who were caught up in their own worship ritual. The witches had seen angels many times and, in many forms, but none quite like this.

"Prepare yourselves, Daughters of the Prophets," the words of the beautiful silver lips seemed deafening, though only the sisters heard, "A time of great sacrifice is at hand. You must pay a great price to awaken the Avatarn. Blessed Be the Avatarn. God's hammer, man's hope."

Massive translucent wings unfolded behind them with lightning speed. The trio merged into one creature as they shot heavenward and disappeared into space. The witches had been unable to speak

in their presence and continued to stare dumbfounded at each other until Sarah finally found her voice. "The lemonade...I think it was drugged...Something strong."

"I know," Blair interrupted, "I can feel it...But this was real," she was still in a state of awe.

"We know it was real," Molly stepped forward. "But what does it mean?"

"We're in danger," Sarah whispered.

"I agree—" Blair's sentence was cut short.

"WITCHCRAFT!!!" The old man's voice rang out through the woods. Old Man Jenkins had been spying on them. He had heard them chanting but had not been allowed to witness their glorious vision.

"Wait!" Molly cried out as the sneaky old man turned and began to run as quickly as his withered legs would carry him back towards the churchyard, yelling all the way.

"Let us explain!" Blair sobbed as she joined her sisters in the chase.

"Stop him!" Sarah screamed, "They won't understand!"

The entire multitude had begun to run towards the woods to see what the fuss was about. Joseph Jenkins burst from the trees with absolute terror on his face. "Witches!" They're all witches!" He managed to call out, still running towards the crowd.

"Shut up!!!" The three sisters shouted simultaneously as they emerged from the forest, stopping when they found the entire throng facing them half-way across the yard.

The old man spun around when he heard them, falling as he turned. He was dead before he hit the ground. The former celebrants erupted into screams. The horror was contagious.

"Thomas!" Blair screamed. She knew the congregation was going to misinterpret what they had just seen in their drugged state. And she knew they would over-react. This was what the angels had spoken of.

"What's happening?" Susan Myerhoff, the church pianist; cried between sobs. It was Lucien Jones that boldly stepped forward. He had arrived in town just a few weeks before. The tall classically

handsome highway patrolman had been instantly liked by the people of Juniper.

"You all heard the man! God help him! They're witches! Don't let them get away!" He took several steps in the girls' direction before Thomas pushed past him to position himself protectively in front of his family.

"Stop!" Thomas put on his most authoritative persona. "This is ridiculous. My wife and her sisters are not witches. They're Christian. Ya'll know that as well as you know me!"

"Then how do you explain that?" Lucien was pointing behind the reverend. Thomas spun around and stumbled backward in disbelief. Blair, Molly, and Sarah had joined hands behind their backs and were floating two feet off the ground.

"What the hell are you doing?" Thomas was terrified of what this would mean to the crowd.

"It's never happened before," Blair struggled to control her breathing; "We've never been this scared."

"Well, this isn't helping. Get down." Thomas had to suppress a smile despite his fear. He had always dreaded this day, and always knew it would come. The girls released each other's hands and fell without grace to the ground.

"See?" Lucien had turned back to the crowd that was slowly fanning out to surround the girls. Everyone wanted to be able to see what was going on. The look on the big cop's face was more one of anger than of fear, and for some reason he was wearing his uniform. "He's a witch too!" He accused. "Don't let them escape! The Bible is crystal clear about how to deal with witches! Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live!"

"What? Are you insane?" Thomas was terrified. How had things gotten out of control so quickly?

"Why don't you just arrest them?" Harold, the church maintenance man, had moved to the front of the crowd.

"Arrest us for what?" Blair screamed.

"Murder!" Tiffany Chambers was pointing at the sisters. "You all saw what happened!"

"What are you—Oh, wait...of course," Blair cut her own sentence short. Tiffany had been in love with Thomas ever since she became his secretary.

Lucien shoved Thomas aside with one hand sending him sprawling in the fallen leaves. Everyone else hesitated, unsure of which side to believe. The muscular cop sprang forward grabbing

Molly by the hair. "You're gonna burn, witch!"

"Enough!" Blair instinctively threw her arms up as if reaching toward Heaven. She was as shocked and amazed as everyone else when she saw what happened next. A giant oak tree reached down to snatch Lucien up in its limbs, lifting him forty feet in the air.

Molly and Sarah stared at Blair in dumb surprise. "How?" Sarah whispered.

"I don't know," was all Blair could muster.

"My God! They are witches!" Harold was shaking.

"Run!" Thomas screamed as the crowd started forward. He jumped to his feet, prepared to do battle with those who had been his friends less than an hour ago. Molly and Sarah took off in opposite directions, around the edges of the gathering. Both headed past the giant bonfire, towards the church.

"Get them!" Lucien called down from the tangled branches. Several men ran forward and engaged Thomas hand-to-hand.

"Help us!" Blair cried out to no one in particular. The dogs that had been playing in the churchyard froze in their tracks, turning to face Blair. In an instant they ran to stand guard behind her fleeing sisters, and seconds later, the three snarling former pets were joined by a half dozen wolves that came bounding from the woods in every direction. The growling animals fell into formation to create a barrier beyond the mob.

Blair turned her attention back to Thomas.

They had beaten him down. So much blood. They were killing him. How could she stop them? Her mind was racing. She looked to Heaven again, and the answer came to her as she watched a hawk soar past the moon.

"Birds!" She cried out, too rattled to make up an incantation. "Birds! Birds! Birds! Birds!" They descended from every compass

point. Mostly crows, but a few owls, and a small hawk for good measure. The winged creatures attacked the men who were punching and kicking Thomas with no more mercy than the mob was showing him. Biting, pecking, clawing. The ravens chased the vigilantes all the way to their cars.

Blair fell to her knees at her husband's side, cradling his head in her lap. "Oh, Darling," she wept. He was conscious, but he wasn't attempting to get up.

"Go to your sisters," was all he could get out before drifting into sleep.

Laughter from above demanded her attention. Lucien had finally broken free of the gnarled tree limbs, and was falling directly towards her. It was too late for her to move out of the way, but it didn't matter. Just before impact, he disappeared in a shimmer, and reappeared, still laughing, at the entrance of the church. Blair was through asking "How?" She ran toward the church. The crowd parted, allowing her to pass. They were too afraid to interfere after all they had seen. Lucien hadn't materialized on the front steps empty-handed. He was holding a torch, presumably from the fire.

The dogs and wolves had fallen in behind her. Not chasing her but escorting her. Blair looked wild herself with her long red hair and long black coat streaming behind her as she ran faster than she had ever ran before. She had almost reached the front steps when all the windows and doors were shattered in an explosion of flames. The First Baptist Church of Juniper wasn't just on fire, it was completely engulfed. The force of it threw Blair backwards and she sat motionless for a moment. Stunned. She would have run inside, but the children surrounded her and held her back.

*"Rain fall down like Noah's flood.
To stop this fire from tasting blood.
Come to serve my new-found powers.
Come to me, torrential showers!"*

She repeated the chant and soon the children were chanting with her. It was only a few moments until the clouds opened up and poured. The rain fell in sheets, but by the time the flames had been tamed, the fire department had arrived and no one was allowed to

enter the church. All that remained inside were the skeletons of two women. There was no sign of Lucien. The ambulance had arrived with the fire truck and Blair had followed it to the edge of the forest where she had left Thomas. Half of the congregation had left, and the others wondered around aimlessly. No one seemed sure of what had happened. Thomas still lay where she had left him. The EMTs reached him before she did. "Sorry, lady," the tech had just checked for a pulse. "He's gone."

"He can't be," Blair managed to squeak. "I need him."

The rain had stopped, and Blair sat on the ground, wet and cold, but not feeling anything, as she watched them load his body into the ambulance. Thomas's voice kept running through her head. It was her husband's sermon against judging others. He had not exaggerated the dangers of it. It had killed everyone she loved.

The last thing Blair remembered before waking up in an Atlanta psych ward was being led by the hand to a police car by a sweet small blonde girl. She had never seen her before. "Thank you, Darling...Do I know your Mommy or Daddy?" Blair muttered through tears.

"Not yet," the beautiful child hugged her and ran away into the darkness.

Chapter 3

The only lectures Darby attended regularly were for his history classes. They were morning classes, but interesting enough for him to drag his sleep-deprived ass out of bed every other day. Besides, there were several hot guys in his Ancient & Medieval History class. The sky-blue baseball cap he had thrown on over his tousled blond hair matched his eyes. He hadn't bothered to shave. He was running late as usual. He felt like a bum, but knew he looked pretty good anyway. He worked as a personal trainer at The Gym downtown on the side. A part-time job that had rewarded him with an extraordinary body. He was covered in perfectly sculpted muscles.

"Glad you could join us, Mr. Zaid." The professor scolded when Darby sauntered into the room.

"Sorry," was all he offered as he climbed the steps past a few admiring girls to reach his usual seat. Darby wasn't worried about being in trouble. He knew the teacher, Professor Taylor, had a little crush on him.

The day's lecture was about the late great city of Alexandria, and while he found it fascinating, he was soon distracted by a cute Italian boy a few rows over. His name was Paolo. And he was beautiful. Probably around 21 like him. Not a gym-bunny, but fit.

His huge brown eyes could melt popsicles, and they were staring right at Darby.

Darby had to adjust his package. It was starting to swell against his will. He tried to look away. To focus on the famous lighthouse of Alexandria, but his gaze kept returning to the bronze boy who seemed embarrassed but refused to let go of this moment's fragile boldness and what it might bring. Paolo was also getting an erection, and when he saw Darby's his mouth dropped. Darby flashed a smile, any embarrassment completely over-shadowed by pride in his king-size pocket-rocket.

Their mildly obscene but brief flirtation was broken by Prof. Taylor who stepped between them in the process of handing out their graded tests from the previous week. Their excessive bulges were soon deflated, and they managed to concentrate enough to get through the rest of class. Darby kept thinking about how Cleopatra had met her best lovers in Alexandria.

Paolo lingered at the water fountain just outside the classroom. Darby wasn't surprised. "How's it goin'?" He winked at Paolo and bent to get a drink. He was acting much braver than he felt.

"Great." Paolo sneaked a peak at his behind. "I've wanted to meet you for a long time, Darby."

Darby invited him to get some coffee at Starbucks. They talked for hours before Paolo said, "I hope I can see your apartment sometime."

"How about now?" Darby held his breath as he waited for an answer.

"Why not?" Paolo kept forgetting to breathe too.



Darby had never done it before. Have sex with someone that was nearly a stranger. But he didn't hesitate. Besides, he always practiced safe sex. Paolo was so good-looking. Short messy black hair and a 5 o'clock shadow. He just stood there, in the living room,

as Darby undressed him. Darby remained fully dressed at first, just holding Paolo's nakedness tightly against him as they kissed. The kissing was the best. Darby had always liked it better than sex. Paolo unzipped Darby's fly.



The steaming water cascaded over Darby's beefy body, washing away all the scents and textures associated with what they had just done. It had been special. Nothing casual about it, even though they really didn't know each other. He was smiling to himself and already beginning to stiffen again, when Paolo stepped into the shower behind him. Paolo hugged him from behind, sliding his hands over Darby's hairy pecs until he found his nipples. They were both ready to go again. "My client's gonna be waiting for me at the gym," Darby moaned.

"Let me tell you a quick story before you go."

"Okay," Darby had stepped out of the shower and was drying off, "Make it fast buddy...No rest for the wicked..."

"...And the righteous don't need none...Isn't that how the saying goes?" Paolo added, "That's you."

"Not me. Nobody ever used that word to describe me before. Trust me." Darby grinned.

"But you are," Paolo argued, "I mean, I realize I don't know you, but I can tell. You're a good person. I mean, in every way that matters."

"Debatable. Tell me your story. I've got to go." Darby had a hard time taking a compliment for anything but his appearance.

"You're not going to believe any of this, but I swear it's all true...When I was eight, I was playing by myself in an isolated section of the playground. It was recess and as usual, no one wanted to play with the sissy-boy, so I was left to amuse myself, sitting on faded hop-scotch squares and playing with a couple of matchbox cars...Suddenly, I was no longer alone...An angel appeared to me.

She was standing on some steps a few feet away. I could have reached out and passed my hand through her foot if I had dared. She didn't appear solid. She was semi-transparent. Her golden hair was in a ponytail and was so long, it almost touched the ground. She was dressed in a warrior's outfit of metallic gold. She was tall and looked like an Amazon to me. A beautiful one. I never doubted for a moment that she was real, and when she spoke, she had my undivided attention. She said, "Do not be afraid. I am a messenger sent by God. You have been chosen. Someday, when you are a man, you will encounter someone God has sent to Earth on a great mission. You shall be the companion of an Avatarn.

Blessed be the chosen, for you will earn a special place."
"What's an Avatarn? I didn't have a clue." Paolo mused.

"Neither do I." Darby raised his eyebrows.

"She never explained. She just said, 'With eyes wide open, you will see your destiny in the peace of sleep. Be still and await truth.' She smiled and faded into nothingness."

"Sounds to me like a tiny kid with a big imagination." Darby smirked as he shaved.

"I know it sounds crazy, but it's true...I wrote it all down as soon as we went inside, and I memorized it. Until today it was the most amazing thing that had ever happened to me."

"I had a great time too, but I'm not that good." Darby blushed a little.

"Not that." Paolo was serious, "I mean that was wonderful, but you don't understand...It's you. You're the one...."

"Ah, man! You're freaking me out. This shit is starting to sound pretty psycho, dude. I think you should—"

"I realized it while you were sleeping. I woke up and you were sleeping with the most extraordinary expression of peace on your face, and then I saw it...This incredible blue aura around your head."

"Now you're telling me that I have a halo?" Darby was torn between disappointment that his new friend had turned out to be mental, and fear that he might actually be dangerous.

"For lack of a better word." Paolo replied, "I can see it now. I don't see it all the time. It seems to come and go for me.

"Well, I hate to cum and go," Darby laughed at his own joke, "but I'm late for work. I need you to get dressed and leave, please." Damn this guy is hot, Darby thought to himself looking over his still wet and naked classmate.

"I don't know what it all means," Paolo wasn't laughing, "but you are something special. Special to God. I'm not afraid. I've been preparing myself for this my whole life. I'm not trying to proselytize you for some crazy new religion; I just know how much this matters."

"If you expect me to accept this big geas you're placing on me, tell me something to convince me you're not insane. If you can." Darby was rapidly putting on his gym clothes.

"There is only one other thing the angel told me that I haven't already mentioned. I don't know if it will mean anything to you, though." Paolo reached out with a single finger and wrote her name in the steam on the mirror that covered the shower door.

One lone word: "APSARA"

"Sweet Jesus!!!" Darby fell back against the vanity.

"What? What's it mean to you?" Paolo was startled by his reaction.

"But how? Where did yo...No one but my parents know that name and they wouldn't mention it to a soul. There aren't even physical records of it anymore..."

"How? What's it mean to you?" Paolo knew he was staring at someone who had just had an epiphany.

"Apsara was my birthmother's name. She died when I was born."



Darby was only a few minutes late for his appointment at the gym. The client was a middle-aged housewife who would forgive

her studly trainer anything. The only reason she had hired Darby to train her was her not-so-secret hopes of eventually luring him into her bed.

Darby had been completely convinced by the revelation at the end of Paolo's story. No one else could know that name. Paolo's angel or ghost had been Darby's long dead mother. His head was swimming with strange information, and he had hated to leave, but Paolo had said he had to get home as soon as possible. Some issue with his roommate. They had exchanged phone numbers and kissed good-bye.

The hours at the gym passed quickly. Darby was in a daze and barely noticed as his muscle-bound friends greeted him as they made their way from cardio to weights and back again. He had just undressed in the busy locker room when an angry man burst in.

"Which one of you is Darby Zaid?" The guy headed straight at Darby was a steroid freak. Huge, even by gym clone standards.

"Can I help you?" Darby couldn't imagine who this guy was or what he wanted.

"Sure, if you can explain why you just fucked my boyfriend!"

"What? Who are you?" Darby was humiliated as everyone in the locker room stopped to see what all the commotion was about...And to see who had just been outed.

"My name is Cinder, and the hot little stud you spent the afternoon pounding is mine, asshole!" The Neanderthal was flexing his fist, and Darby knew what was coming.

"Believe me, I had no idea Paolo had a boyfriend. That's not my style, man. *He picked me up,*" Darby was cringing at all the knowing grins that surrounded them, "How did you even—"

"He told me as soon as he got home. Not that he fucked somebody. I know what he looks like after sex. He couldn't wait to tell me he had met the Avatarn." It was obvious that Cinder was about to lose control. Some of the gymbots stepped forward to let Darby know that they had his back, but he dismissed them with a jerk of his head. He wasn't about to get anyone else involved in this farce.

"He told you about that?"

"He's been telling me that story for years. I know it's a bunch of horseshit, but the only way I can convince him you're not some kind of godsend is to kick your faggot ass."

"There's no chance of me convincing you that I would not have been with him if I had known about you?" Darby really didn't want to lose this job, or get his ass kicked in front of his friends.

"It doesn't matter. He'll be building shrines to you by tomorrow unless I prove to him that you're just another butch-wannabe slut that needs taken down a few notches." Cinder stole a quick glance down at Darby's dick.

"Bring it," Darby said, raising his chin.

Cinder threw the first punch. Darby threw the last. He barely had time to grab a towel in a belated attempt at modesty as the members hoisted him to their shoulders for a victory march through the showers and the co-ed whirlpool room. The kick-boxing classes had paid off.



It wasn't Darby's idea to visit a psychic. It was his friend Rachel who had heard about the woman from a work associate. The co-worker had given "Miss Luna" a ninety percent accuracy rating, so Darby and Rachel were on a clairvoyant escapade.

He hadn't told Rachel, his best friend from high school, about Paolo or Cinder. He told her the guy who picked a fight with him at the gym was just some homophobe who thought he was staring. She had no reason to doubt him. She had seen him as the target of plenty of prejudice over the years, all because of other people's personal insecurities.

Miss Luna's cozy apartment was in a very ghetto neighborhood. Darby was a little nervous about being there. A very white gay boy and an especially beautiful black girl might draw unwanted attention in this neighborhood. Little did he know that nobody ever bothered Miss Luna's visitors. They didn't dare. They hopped out of

Darby's black Jeep and darted up the stairs of the brownstone-like apartment building.

It took a long time for the old woman to answer the door. They had started to think no one was home. "Welcome, children." The ancient-looking black woman wore her hair in braids neatly twisted into a bun. She was extremely thin and wore a long loose apple-red dress, "Sit at the dining room table, young man. I sees only your future tonight."

"But I thought," Rachel began.

"I know, Darlin'," Luna cut her off, "This isn't your time. The spirits tell me this boy needs more guidance from Miss Luna tonight. You'll sparkle in yer turn, Sweetpea." Darby glanced at Rachel and shrugged his shoulders. Who was he to argue with a nutty old fortune-teller?

Miss Luna sat across from him at the four-top table covered with antique lace. There was nothing on the table, but a few candles placed randomly around the room created an intimate birthing place for secrets. Darby thought the tattered little room felt magically safe, set apart from the real world. A place where a retired cook from the corner diner revealed her true nature. An oracle, casting off her nearly worn-out disguise. A prophetess took his big hands in her bony ones.

She looked at their hands for a moment before looking him in the baby-blues. "You don't need to aks me no questions, Baby," she was smiling warmly, "I'm just gonna tell ya a few things 'bout yerself. First off, ya can stop lookin' fer Mr. Right. Ya already done met him...And yer little girlfriend here...She'll find one if she's sponse to 'cordin' to the Lord." She added with a wink in Rachel's direction. "Now, ya need ta know. You're more than human."

"What?" Darby hadn't seen that coming.

"I knowed it when I saw ya get out of yer car. Blue light all 'round yer head. A halo, I calls it."

"What are you talk—?" Darby was in shock. This couldn't be happening. His life was taking on a bizarre new pattern. What did it mean?

"Now, don't go gettin' yerself all worked up. I know yer scared 'bout what's been happenin'. The unknown is scary. Ya never did much thinkin' on the Unseen. But it's real. And it's headin' yer way. Ya was born fer a higher purpose, Boy. You and the other Avatarn have a mission. Time ya got 'bout yer business."

Rachel was giggling. The old lady was crazy after all. Darby was dizzy. "There are others?" Darby knew Rachel was saying something to him, but he couldn't hear her. There was only Luna. There was only truth.

"Course, Sugar," the old woman cackled like he had just asked if the sky was blue, "Two others. A woman and a man. Your destiny."

"Hey! He doesn't get a man and a woman," Rachel off ered in jest. If he did end up with a woman, it had better be her. The old shining one and her spellbound querent didn't even hear her.

"Who are they? When will I meet them? How will I—?" She cut him off again.

"Shush, Baby...Just listen. I can't tell ya much at this time. That ain't the way of it. You'll hook up with'em soon, and you'll know'em when ya see'em. Now God has chose ya to serve Him in a divine mission. There is evil in this world...Don't be afraid," His hands were sweating. She squeezed them and continued, "You will stand against Legion. The slave masters of many realms. The time has come for the Great Emancipation. The Avatarn will battle to free humankind and the others from those of God's children that have turned to darkness. It is the appointed time."

"I'm no leader. I'm okay one-on-one but this is...I don't want to be *chosen*. I just want to go on with my normal life. If my pious aunts ever hear that God selected me to save the world, they would crap their...Sorry."

"Yer not just savin' the world, Sweetie. Yer freein' the peoples of countless worlds and realms ya never imagined existed. Now I've done told ya more'an I was meant to. Now go boldly, knowin' that God Himself set ya on this path."

"So, I'm safe. I mean, I don't want to die. Are we talking about an actual physical war here? Or is this all just some kind of spiritual thing?"

"If you die, you die. This ain't pretend. But you always knowed deep down that death ain't the end. He'll keep sendin' ya'll back till ya get the job done. I don't think that'll be necessary though. This is it. The big one."

"But how are we supposed to stand against anyone? I can do hand-to-hand, but how do we fight the forces of evil? I just don't see how—"Darby felt helpless.

"You will each be given a special power. An ability that will help you do what must be done. We're talkin' 'bout the supernatural here, but don't worry; you'll get your hands dirty." She patted his hands to reassure him.

"I don't have any powers." Darby wondered for a moment if she could be crazy after all, but he knew she wasn't.

"Ya will when ya need it." She stood and walked to the door. Rachel was disappointed to have been excluded, but after hearing Darby's reading, she was convinced the old bat was a fraud. She went ahead into the hallway.

Darby stepped out the door but turned to face the old woman. He handed her a twenty-dollar bill. He wasn't about to insult her by discussing money. When Rachel had called to make the appointment, she had been told that whatever donation they thought appropriate would be acceptable. He wanted to give much more, but being a poor student had its limits. Luna handed it back to him with just the slightest bow of her head. "Not from you, Blessed One." She said, her tired eyes twinkling. "It is my honor to have served ya. To have served the great Avatarn. It is the reason I was gifted with The Seeing my whole life. To assist ya at this time."

"Well, thank you so much...I think I have more questions now than when I got here. I hope we can come see you again when all this becomes clearer...I'm pretty freaked out...By the things you know, and the things I never wanted to know. Darby was starting down the steps. Rachel was already waiting by the Jeep.

"I'll always be with ya, Child. Where-ever else I am."

"Goodbye, Mame!" Darby called out and waved as he climbed into the driver's seat after opening Rachel's door.

"Not 'Bye' Baby. Just 'Later'." Luna closed the door to the outside world and hobbled back into her apartment. She was tired. Her job was done. She had never known what the true purpose of her gift was until tonight. Until she saw that beautiful golden young man. His lovely face surrounded by blue light. She done good. Told him just enough to keep him alive (she hoped), but not enough to make him as scared as he ought to be. Keep a close eye on him, God. She looked heavenward as she changed into her nightgown. He has no idea. Her bed felt better than it ever had before. As she drifted off to sleep for the last time, a whisper escaped her lips just before her heart stopped, "God's hammer. Man's hope."

Rachel couldn't believe he had taken a word of it seriously. She had laughed at him for at least five minutes. When he couldn't take any more of her mocking, he started from the moment Paolo had cruised him in class and told her the whole story up to the point when he had picked her up from work. She listened. Rolling her eyes at first, but slowly being convinced. He stopped the car in front of her house and said, "You know the rest." She wasn't laughing anymore.



Zoology was more crowded than usual. It was Darby's favorite dance club. Wild, even by gay bar standards. It was a normal Saturday night for him, Rachel, Yoshi, and Josh. Pre-party at Josh's house. Heading out around midnight. Darby had called Paolo earlier. Luckily, Cinder had been out. Paolo was meeting them on the dance floor around 1 a.m. As always, Yoshi was grinding on Darby while his boyfriend, Josh, looked on approvingly. Darby had been taken with Yoshi's exotic good looks since the moment they met, but never allowed things to go beyond the occasional grope and kiss. He knew they were into three-ways, but he felt that on some level it wasn't really what Josh wanted. Joshua's conflicting emotions could be so extreme. Darby suspected he was distressingly

close to a full-blown personality disorder...At least when it came to affairs of the heart. It just wasn't worth the risk of hurting his friend.

Rachel and Josh were bustin' a move right beside them. None of them could resist Madonna's siren call to the dance floor, even when she wasn't the most en vogue diva of the day. Darby was finding it more and more difficult to keep pushing Yoshi away. He allowed him to slip in a lingering kiss. (Those full lips were the stuff of dreams.) His eyelids had barely parted when he saw the look of utter sadness flash for an instant across Josh's face. Darby broke the embrace as nonchalantly as possible and started dancing in Rachel's direction. Everyone laughed to play it off as they always did. It wasn't denial on anyone's part, just one of those things no one spoke of so that they might avoid the undoing of their little "family."

Darby was flooded with relief when he saw Paolo boogying in their direction. "Paolo!" They waved to acknowledge each other. The gang stopped dancing and stood gawking as Paolo slid into Darby's arms. It was like a scene from a romantic movie. The young couple madly in love, but tragically separated by some over-the-top conflict, finally reunited. Rachel hadn't even thought Darby was that interested in the guy.

Darby was taken off guard by his own reaction. It was like reconnecting with a part of him. He wondered if he was being influenced by what Luna had told him. Was it the power of suggestion, or was he really experiencing emotions that defied logic?

"I couldn't wait to see you." Paolo wasn't letting go. He just looked up into Darby's eyes. Smiling. Radiating admiration, devotion, and love. Honest...and clean. Darby was blown away."

"Paolo, you don't even know me." Darby gently pushed him away.

"You're wrong." Paolo wouldn't let go of his hands, "I've known since I was eight years old that there was someone waiting for me out in the world. It's you, Dar. It's you."

Would there be no end to the shocks this week had brought. No one had called him "Dar" since his grandmother had died. Just

hearing it infused him with love and security like the muchmissed caress of Grandma's hand on his cheek. "Paolo, what are you going to do about Cinder? He's crazy, man. He'll kill you."

"He knows I won't stay with him. That I can't. And he knows why. I told him about all of this years ago when we met. I don't want to hurt him, but we've been growing apart for a long time. I would never have gone home with you if things hadn't been more or less over with Cinder for a long time...I'm not saying it will be easy. But we have to—"

"Stop. You've got this whole big future mapped out for us, and we just met. We need to take some time to see if we even like each other before—"

"I didn't map it out, Dar. God did. And you know it." There wasn't a shred of doubt on Paolo's face.

"What I know is that fate has thrown us together for some reason beyond my understanding. As part of some unfolding story that I want no part of. I know this too. I won't be told whom to love. I choose. Me. I admit that I am drawn to you. More than to anyone ever before. But I don't know you. I hope to get to know you. I am open to the possibility that this could be the real deal, but we need time. So, don't be planning the honeymoon just yet.

Let's just see where time takes us, okay? Are we cool?"

Paolo's eyes were glistening with unfallen tears, "We're cool," was all he said before taking a deep breath, swallowing the rejection and transforming it into the most amazing smile Darby had ever seen. He hoped Paolo was right. He would be so easy to love.

Darby slid his arm around Paolo's shoulders and turned him towards his friends. "Everybody, this is Paolo. Paolo, these are my worthless friends."

"Hey!!!" Rachel, Yoshi, and Josh were unanimous in their mock indignation. They pounded on Darby. Transformed into tickle monsters. No one hated being tickled more than Darby, and soon they had pulled Paolo into the fray, making him their willing second victim. The mostly drugged-out dancers that surrounded them paid them no mind. They were carried away by Amber's admonitions to "Love One Another" to a techno beat. The gang had

composed themselves at a tall table at the corner of the dance floor and were sipping on fresh cocktails when people started to scream.

The huge video screens in the corners of the bar were filled with visions of panic. Drag queens and leather men were scrambling like someone was handing out free Prada boots in the parking lot. "What's going on?" Rachel was the first to realize that something was very wrong.

Paolo couldn't speak when he saw the source of their terror. It was Cinder. He had a gun, and he wasn't alone.

Darby was frozen. Cinder was walking straight towards them, and there was no escape. Cinder and his two sidekicks stopped about ten feet directly in front of them. All three had handguns aimed at Darby, Paolo, and their friends. "I warned you, Motherfucker!" Cinder was yelling at the top of his lungs. He had lost his grasp on sanity. Darby knew there would be no reasoning. Cinder turned towards Paolo, "Name one thing I didn't give you. We were good together, Pal. You had to go and throw it all away, and for what? Some dime-store holy man you just met? More likely you fell in love with his big meat...I know how you are. You little fucking whore...Trickin' might not come so easy if I blow that pretty fuckin' face of your—" Cinder raised the gun as he ranted. He was pointing it at Paolo's head. Rachel's screams were echoing through the converted warehouse. The music had stopped and almost everyone was gone. Darby watched as Cinder seemed to pull the trigger in slow-motion. His reaction was purely instinctual. He stepped in front of Paolo, throwing out his arms as if to shelter his friends behind him. All they saw was a gold shimmer as the bullet ricocheted away from them shattering a neon rainbow flag. The confused gunmen unleashed their fury. They opened fire with unbridled abandon. The rapid impact of the hail of bullets revealed through golden contact flashes that a sort of energy field had formed a protective shield between Darby's friends and their attackers. Darby had found his power. He knew without question. This was it. The bouncing bullets continued to ricochet wildly until two go-go boys and one of Cinder's goons lay dead on the floor. Josh was holding his stomach. He felt sick.

"Stay behind me," was all Darby said. Cinder and his buddy rushed them, prepared to do whatever it took to remove Darby and friends from Paolo's life, and to teach Paolo a lesson he would never forget.

They ran into an invisible wall and waves of golden shimmers appeared briefly in the air surrounding Darby and the others in his party. Cinder and the other thug sprawled backwards onto the floor. "What the hell?" Cinder would have been afraid, but his madness transmuted the fear into blinding rage, "It's true. You really are some kind of magical freak. Guess you're not too holy to screw my boyfriend though, huh, asshole?"

"Don't do this, Cinder. You can't force someone to love you. People are dead, for Christ's sake." Darby had taken several steps in his direction and was hoping to at least create enough of a distraction for his friends to slip out.

"You're done, Zaid," Cinder was standing and had pulled a switchblade from his jacket.

Suddenly Darby wasn't afraid anymore. Cinder aimed at Darby's heart and threw the knife. It sailed end over end at super speed. Darby raised his hand, palm out, in front of his heart. The six-inch blade slowed and came to a stop in mid-air about two feet in front of Darby's hand. It was surrounded by shimmering gold light in which it continued to revolve slowly end over end. Suddenly, with lightning speed, it hurled back in Cinder's direction. It struck his own heart and penetrated the entire length of the blade. Darby was as shocked as Cinder. He hadn't made a conscious decision to launch the knife back at his attacker. The protective energy field he had generated had acted autonomously. Darby was simultaneously relieved and horrified by the outcome. Paolo and the others had joined him and were standing at his sides. Cinder's cohort had fled the building in fear for his life. No one bothered to check any of the casualties for pulses. It was obvious that they were dead.

No one said anything as they exited the front door to wait for the arrival of the police. The witnesses were struggling to believe what they had seen. It was easier to believe it had been the drugs or

the alcohol, but Darby's friends knew. It was real. People were dead. And their lives would never be the same. "I'm sorry," Darby said to Paolo, "I'm sure you loved him once."

"That wasn't the man I used to love in there. He stopped being that person a long time ago," Paolo joined Darby sitting on the sidewalk, leaning against the concrete wall painted with a giant mural of men mutating into animals. "You had no choice, Dar. They would have killed us all. You're a hero, man."

"Then why do I just feel dirty?" Darby was so exhausted; he couldn't imagine ever standing again.

None of them paid much attention to the scruffy homeless girl that had been sleeping on the bench at the bus stop on the corner until she got up and began to wander towards them in an unintentional, casual fashion. Roaming with no destination in mind. Her long blonde hair was matted and tangled, and she was covered in filth. Her most alarming aspect was her age. She couldn't have been over eight years old. She drifted over to the weary group sitting in front of the bar. Police sirens could be heard somewhere in the background. "Can we help you, Sweetheart?" Rachel leaned down to talk to her, "Where are your parents, Honey?"

The dirty little girl just looked at her silently for a moment before turning to Darby. She leaned in and whispered something in his ear. His only response was to turn and look directly into her smudged tiny face. She darted away then. Skipping around the corner of the building without speaking a word to the rest of them. Yoshi ran after her, thinking he would hold her there for the police. The streets were no place for a child alone, but she was gone. Vanished into the night. Yoshi gave up and returned to the group. "What did she say?" Paolo asked Darby as the police cars finally came into view.

They all had to move closer to hear his whispered reply. "She said, 'You are the last of the Avatarn to awaken. Beware of Legion. They must not find you before the meeting of the triad.'"

Paolo pulled Darby's head down on to his shoulder and kissed his forehead, "You'll find them in time...We'll help you."