

Awakened

Preview

Gods & Guardians Volume 1

C. J. Anderson

Copyright © 2022 by C. J. Anderson

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

This is a work of fiction; therefore, the novel's story and characters are fictitious. Any public agencies, institutions, or historical figures mentioned in the story serve as a backdrop to the characters and their actions, which are wholly imaginary. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This content may be unsuitable for minors younger than 14 years of age and contains violence, sexual references and innuendo, and strong language.

Get a Free Book



THANK YOU SO VERY much for purchasing Awakened! I am so excited for you to jump into the world of Gods & Guardians and fall in love with Dru and Alayna.

I have received countless requests from readers since first publishing Awakened asking for a reference book to help keep track of characters, names, acronyms, and other terms specific to this world. Per reader request, I have created a companion book to Gods & Guardians Awakened called Zaneopedia.

A bit of a warning, though. If you look too much in the encyclopedia before reading Awakened you may come across spoilers. So, I would advise downloading it and using caution when looking through it until you have finished the book.

To download the Gods & Guardians Awakened Zaneopedia you can scan this QR code.

Happy Reading!

XO – C.J.





For Poppie, Papa Cut, and Nanny

Your memories and love are with me every day.

Contents



Prologue	VI
1. Chapter 1	1

Prologue



ADRENALINE COURSES THROUGH MY veins with an intensity beyond comprehension. My upper arms and back feel like someone is drawing a picture with the pointed end of a hot poker, searing lines into my skin. I look down at my arms to see blue-green light snaking down and around my bicep, following the line drawn by the scorching pain.

Mesmerized by what is happening to me, I run a finger over the skin on my arm, examining the design. Somehow my body is transforming; rigid scales cover my body like armor.

Marveling at the transformation, I run a hand over my smooth scales. Spikes, three-dimensional, with sharp edges protrude from my shoulders. At the same time, my now-iridescent skin transforms; rigid scales cover my body like armor.

Liquid metal pools in the pockets of my skin, forming sharp incisors that slice through my gums. With them comes an intense hunger for blood and flesh. An awakening power surges within me, making me feel alive in a way I didn't know was possible. Hunger surges through every muscle. Power courses through every vein in my body.

Power. Hunger. Need.

I push the girl against the cold brick wall of the alleyway. Her piercing scream elicits an ominous, baritone growl out of the depths of my throat. My sharp thumbnail grazes across her neck in a slicing motion that draws fresh blood. I feel the blood pumping fast as her heart pounds in her chest.

Staring into her wide eyes, I lick my lips in anticipation and lean in towards her, baring my razor sharp teeth, intent on tasting her blood before ripping the delicate flesh from her bones.

Chapter 1



Though free to think and act, we are held together like the stars in the firmament, with ties inseparable. These ties cannot be seen, but we can feel them. —Nikola Tesla

Dru

One year later.

The narrow, two-lane highway snakes between the bluff's edges, hugging the jagged shelves of timeworn rock rising on my left. Sunlight reflects off the metal post of the guardrail lining the other side of the road, momentarily blinding me. Reaching up, I adjust the visor. A long strip of newer metal hangs between the older sections. Beyond the boundary, whatever had lost control must have barreled through the barrier, knocking trees out of the way, carving a steep craggily path through the wooded hill. Rotten luck.

“Cor blimey!” Usually the tinkling sound of bells, Lo’s melodic voice instead is tinged with worry.

I quick glance to the passenger seat. She’s facing the window; two dainty hands clutch her chest right over her heart, as if it were broken and she could hold it together. Quirking one side of my mouth up, I gently nudge her arm with my elbow.

“I wouldn’t want to put on airs, but I’m a jolly-good driver. And with my powers, I could always use my telekinesis if things go wrong.”

C. J. ANDERSON

Taking hold of her long platinum braid, she drapes it over her shoulder and turns away from the window. Lavender eyes, large and kind, find me, an expression of acquiescence filling her heart-shaped face.

“Of course. That’s why I asked you to drive Zane and me into town today.” She smiles.

I shake my head.

“Somehow, I have a sneaking suspicion it’s your attempt at a ‘family day.’” I make half air quotes with one hand, chuckling.

Lo is my mum and Zane is my dad, but I’ve always addressed them by their first names. Zane has been in the back seat the entire time and has yet to say a word. It’s par for the course for him. Electronics are his speciality and he’s connected twenty-four seven to them. Having electronics for best mates makes him a bit awkward, to say the least. That is, he isn’t exactly what one would call socially adept. I’m quite positive most people who meet him wonder if he could possibly be a robot.

Lo continues to make small talk, but I block her out. Nearly a month ago, we moved for what seems like the millionth time. Of all the places in the bleeding universe, we’ve landed in the smack dab middle-of-nowhere USA. Otherwise known as the Ozarks: quaint little towns nestled in between hills, rivers, lakes and ... nature. Nature every-bloody-where. For fuck’s sake, in order to get to a large city like I’m accustomed to, we have to drive at least three hours!

The words Riverside: Population 2000 are posted in white letters on a green metal sign. After the bend in the road, the town comes into view. Lighter against golden-brown brick, the words feed and store appear where letters used to hang; a weathered brown awning, only just kept together by bare threads, droops limply over an entryway. Main Street stretches the length of four blocks. The Post Office, a hair salon, cafes, and thrift stores line the streets—old two-story brick buildings not unlike in appearance to the abandoned feed store.

Red lights flash and black and white arms descend on either side of the railroad crossing. Slowing to a stop, I shift into neutral. A horn blares as the engine whooshes by, sending vibrations through the track—sound waves continuing to travel through the street. The heart shaped crystal Lo hangs from the rear-view mirror shakes, looking like water in a shallow pool, mimicking my growing agitation. Lo’s brought up the subject of school.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, I ask, “Do we really have to talk about this now?”

“We need to sort this out, Dru.”

AWAKENED PREVIEW

Lo's insistence that we talk about this only makes me more brassed off.

"I've already told both you and Zane, I will not be attending!" I huff.

"Come on. You know as well as I do that once you start something, it always gets better."

Reaching over, Lo places a gentle hand on mine. I push her hand away.

"So, what? I'm supposed to do what?" I yell. "Go to high school, try to fit in, pretend that I'm like everyone else ... graduate so I can go to Uni, only to keep up the charade that I belong here? We all know that I can NEVER have a normal life as long as we're here!"

"Perhaps you're just anxious about starting a new school." Although I'm being obnoxious, Lo keeps her calm—words tender, resolve unruffled. I put them through this every single time we move and I start a new school. I honestly don't know how she puts up with me.

My knuckles have turned white from my vice-like grip on the steering wheel. "I am NOT anxious about ANYTHING," I argue. "There is just NO point in me going to school. I'm bleeding tired of this godforsaken rock, that's all."

Sighing, Lo's gaze returns to passenger side window. Looking up and down the sidewalk, she attempts to change the subject.

"I can't believe we are just now going to take a gander in this cute little town."

I throw both hands up in frustration. "What is the bleeding point?" I say. "It's a bore and in case you didn't catch it before, we-don't-belong-here!"

Zane, sitting so quietly in the backseat of our Jeep that I almost forgot he was along for the ride, replies, "The question is not what you look at, but what you see." Of course he would pick one of my favorite quotes by Henry David Thoreau. I'm sure the wanker thinks he's quite clever. What a load of bollocks!

The train clears and I drive across the tracks to the other side of Main Street, turning into an angled parking spot in front of the row of buildings on the right.

"That's it." Zane points exaggeratedly to an old two-story red brick building in front of us. A large picture window features an oversized espresso cup, outlined in dark brown. Swirls of steam curl out of the top of the cup; the stylized words, Espresso Yourself, are scrawled across the inside space of the etched design. Using only my middle and index fingers, I flick a V upwards from my wrist, knuckles facing away from me - a good ol' British two-finger salute, given to nobody in particular. Espresso this!

I turn to Zane, who's now out of the car, and roll down my window. The smell of grilling burgers wafts in from a neighboring pub.

"I think I'll wait in the car and chill."

Zane mutters, "We'll get you something to go." With a thud, his car door shuts.

Hand-in-hand, Lo and Zane walk toward the entrance of the coffee shop. Zane's tall, lithe body, wrinkled button-up shirt, and disheveled hair contrast with Lo's small stature, delicate bone structure, and graceful presence. Chimes tinkle as they enter through the doors.

My eyes wander to the seating area visible through the large picture window. A girl with blonde hair pulled back into a low, long ponytail walks up to a lone table, eyes the laptop sitting there, and scrunches up her face into a questioning expression. She wears a faded gray t-shirt with red lettering spelling out "RHS Running Club." Eyes still on the laptop, she sits down facing the window.

None too soon, I realize that if the girl looks up, she'll see me staring at her like some sort of creeper. The last thing I need is for her to catch me looking at her, or at anyone for that matter. I can imagine the rumors now. You know that new guy in town? I heard he's some sort of sick stalker. Combing my fingers through my hair, I plop my head back against the headrest.

After a moment, the ring on my right ring finger feels hot against my skin—so hot, it threatens to sear the flesh underneath. Impulsively, I bring my hand up in front of my face, and turn my wrist back and forth to examine both sides. The silver band shimmers blue. The star tetrahedron inset on top pulses; the inset pieces grow and shrink several times like a two-dimensional shape transforming into a three-dimensional object, finally materializing into a holographic, star-shaped Merkaba.

At the same time, my lungs are on fire. I'm being pulled under the ocean current—my feet are lead blocks and I'm sinking fast. I can't breathe. That girl, whoever she is—she's the only thing keeping me alive. She is oxygen. She has a hold on me and it's like time is standing still.

Then it's over.

Everything is back to ordinary.

What just happened? Our rings aren't meant to transform, and the physical sensations I experienced ... well that was just completely odd. Had I fallen asleep and begun dreaming?

AWAKENED PREVIEW

In an attempt to clear the static in my mind, I shake my head. Then, shutting my eyes, I inhale a slow, deep breath. Once my lungs have expanded fully, I blow all the air out, measured and calculated, then turn the stereo on, and go to my happy place.

The pop of a door being opened brings me out of my trance and I hear Zane shout, “Bagsy!” He slides into the front seat before Lo gets a chance, and grins as he hands me a plastic beverage cup.

Grasping the cold drink and wobbling it side-to-side, I can hear the ice rattle, mixing up anything that’s settled to the bottom. Relieved to have something normal to draw my focus away from the strange events I’d experienced, I stab a straw through the lid and guzzle. It’s the perfect balance of rich espresso and velvety dark chocolate.

“Thanks. This is quite good,” I say.

Zane nods. “No worries, I know you fancy these!”

The few minutes zoning out to the radio had been spent arguing with myself regarding whether or not to go inside to talk to the girl. I couldn’t think of what I would say, so sitting in the car had won out. Besides, I still couldn’t wrap my head around what had happened with my ring.

As I’m backing the Jeep out of the parking spot, I realize what needs to be done. Without giving myself a chance to change my mind, I blurt, “I’ve been thinking about it ... and you two are absolutely right. I do need to attend school.” I must find the girl from the coffee shop and talk to her.

Zane grins. “Crikey Moses! That is well good. Well good, indeed.” He pats me on the shoulder.

Looking in the rearview mirror, I see Lo’s eyes wide and her mouth hanging open, a look of shock painted on her face. In the past it’s taken a lot more arguing and bad attitude on my part before I’ve given in, and I’ve never ever said they were right!

All the way home, I can’t shake it. This feeling I have, it’s more intense than anything I’ve ever experienced, and I have experienced a lot of intensity in my life. I really want to believe it’s intuition and not just my head filling with silly ideas. But doubt creeps in: What if she doesn’t like me? What if I’m not her type? What if it’s like the last time I liked a girl and it turns out to be a literal disaster? Maybe I’ve gone completely mad.



PREOCCUPIED WITH THOUGHTS OF the Coffee Shop Girl, I've hardly slept at all for nearly a week. My mind has replayed the scene at least a thousand times—the transformation of the star on my ring, the sensations of burning, and the feeling of the girl ... like I've known her forever, like I've been waiting for her forever, and the most disturbing thought of all, that she belongs to me.

I decide the best course of action today is simply to be myself. Well, at least to be as much of myself as I can without causing alarm in the human population, that is. Whatever happens, happens. My only hope is that I can deal with whatever the consequences may be.

I have a lot of time to kill, so I head out for an extra-long run. I finally head home to my large bedroom, which takes up the remainder of the space in the basement, after the sizeable mudroom and bathroom. Several windows look out to a beautiful view of hills that go for miles off into the distance. This morning they're tinted purple with the sunrise reflecting off the morning fog. We've lived all over the world and, somehow, I've never seen anything quite as stunning. It's more than the way the landscape looks, though. There's something about it that almost makes me feel like I could belong here.

Almost. I still hate it.

After I shower, I throw my towel into the bin and quickly dress in a pair of jeans. Rummaging through my t-shirts, I find a couple of my favorites. I briefly consider the I Like My Girls Like I Like My Dubstep t-shirt, but I worry that if anyone around here even knows what dubstep is, dirty, filthy & grimy might not make a good first impression. I settle on my Dubstep Revolution t-shirt instead. It's a better fit anyway. I work hard to get abs like these, so I may as well show them off.

The smell of fresh pancakes wafts down the stairs, finding my nose. My mouth waters and I head upstairs to the kitchen. A wooden dining room table sits parallel next to the breakfast bar that divides the kitchen from the living and dining areas, but I prefer sitting on a barstool. Lo slides a plate of pancakes and a "protein" smoothie to me. It tastes good

AWAKENED PREVIEW

as long as I don't think about what's in it. Lo is a complete health freak, and I don't even ask anymore.

I'm about halfway finished eating my breakfast when I see the syringe in Lo's hand. This, unfortunately, is a daily ritual I must go through for the safety of those around me. A ritual that I hate. A ritual that makes me hate myself, because it reminds me of what I really am. Laying my right arm out on the bar counter, I'm ready for my daily injection.

I finish breakfast, and I'm about to head out the door, when I realize that I forgot my mobile downstairs. I concentrate on the place where I left it and it comes floating up. When I see it reach the top landing, I hurtle it faster toward myself, catch it, and stick it in my pocket. I kiss Lo on the cheek, grab my keys, and head out to my motorbike, at the last minute impulsively shoving a spare helmet into my backpack.



ALAYNA

Mom lights her cigarette, takes a drag, then exhales slowly. The toxic smoke fills the car with noxious fumes. It smells like burning tar. I turn my head, holding my breath as I roll the passenger side window down; the old crank sticks, causing the window to open only partway.

“Can't you wait until after you drop me off at school to smoke?” I complain.

Mom ignores me. I sigh. Typical.

I stare out the window at nothing in particular. Wind whooshes by, blowing my hair back from my face, but failing to dispel the smoke from the interior of the car.

Today is the first day of school and it's a Thursday, which is ridiculous considering that Monday is a holiday. I'm really not ready for summer break to end. There are too many books to read and ideas to contemplate and people to avoid. If only school could start next Tuesday, then I could have five more uninterrupted days of unstructured downtime. Well, mostly uninterrupted anyway. I still have two shifts to cover this weekend at Espresso Yourself, the coffee shop where I work.

“I can’t believe my baby is a senior in high school.” Mom’s distinct hillbilly twang stresses the words baby and high. “It seems like just yesterday I was a droppin’ ya off for your first day-a kindergarten,” she says.

I roll my eyes. Every year, on the first day of school, Mom always insists on taking us to school. Lex, my fifteen-year-old brother, is supposed to be with us. Lex and I, we’re about as opposite as you can get. Where I have light skin and blonde hair, he has dark skin, the color of caramel, and dark-brown hair. Where I’m short, he’s tall. Our personalities are completely opposite, me being the more responsible, on-top-of-things type and him being, well ... not the responsible type. Hence why he snuck away this morning, presumably hitching a ride with a friend, leaving me stuck at home with no other option except to experience the perennial first-day-of-school ride from Mom all by myself. Thanks a lot, Lex!

“Mom?” I ask. “Remind me again why this first day of school ritual exists in the first place?”

“Well, sugar,” she starts, “it was one of the things your daddy and I would do, before he ... ” Her voice drifts off. She crushes the butt of her cigarette hard in the ashtray and grips the steering wheel.

My dad, Ron, was technically my step-dad, but he’d been in my life from my earliest memories. He’s Lex’s dad. I don’t know who my biological father is. I always called Ron Dad and accepted him as such.

When I was eight and Lex was five, Ron’s motorcycle was discovered mangled in the river. His body was never found—he was presumed dead. There was a memorial service and a gravestone was even set in the cemetery.

Nevertheless, I’ve always held out hope that by some miracle he was still alive. I think Mom did at first too, but eventually she let go.

Either way, our lives were changed forever by his absence. Mom avoids the subject of Ron at all costs ... so I’m surprised she has offered me up this piece of information. Her smile disappears, replaced by a look of contemplation and sadness.

“Mom. I’m sorry.” I look at her, feeling terrible.

“For what, sweetie?” Her million-dollar smile is back, as if we’d never had this conversation.

“Never mind,” I say. The high school comes into view, already abuzz with first day of school energy.

AWAKENED PREVIEW

Riverside High is located off the main highway, about two miles outside of the county seat. All the schools in the county feed into it. The school itself is a large two-story, U-shaped brick and glass building. The short side is the front of the school and stretches out straight to the highway.

The 1980s' Oldsmobile turns into the busy school parking lot, the engine spits, and the brakes squeak to a stop. Hopping out of the old clunker as fast as I can, I sling my backpack over my shoulder. I haven't taken two steps before I hear Mom in her high-pitched voice call, "Bye baby girl! This is gonna be the best year of your life!"

Glancing back over my shoulder, I see her standing outside the rusting blue car, daisy dukes, tank top, bleach-bottle-blond pigtailed, and all. She's smiling from ear to ear as she stands up on her tippy toes, waving with her whole arm outstretched and blowing me kisses. Kill me now!

Looking down, cell phone in hand, I let my long blonde hair fall forward to cover my cheeks, red-hot and no doubt flushed. I walk briskly to the hill at the back of the high school. Rounding the corner, I expect to see my best friend, J, in our usual spot. J has been visiting her dad and just arrived back into town yesterday. I haven't seen her all summer! Seeing J is one of the only good things about school starting today, but she's nowhere in sight.

I send her a quick text and plop down under the oak tree - our oak tree.

Alayna: Where are you?

It's where we always meet before school. I kick off my flip-flops and bury my toes in the soft grass. From this vantage point, the familiar scene of high school unfolds, right in front of my eyes. J always refers to this as our own personal reality show. It's strange being here without her. Where is she?

Impossible to ignore, the Populars cluster in groups at the edge of the lawn, shrieking and hugging, enthusiastically comparing trendy new outfits, and undoubtedly talking about pricey vacations and shopping trips over summer break. The Queen Bee, Gretchen, is the center of attention, of course, and is no doubt gossiping about anything and everyone in sight.

Out front, Skaters flip their hair. Across the lawn, the Geeks play video games and the Nobodies - ever comfortable, never fashionable - hang out by themselves. The Druggies slump in a huddle in the parking lot, sneaking drags from joints, and the Goth crowd stands silent, statues of death in the sunshine.

Finally, there are the Jocks. J, forever boy crazy, likes ... no, loves to watch them on the lawn, passing footballs and horsing around in their jerseys and sports shorts. As I scan the lawn, one of them passes a football and his t-shirt rises in the front. I get a shot of what J refers to as “belly porn”—I see perfectly sculpted abs, and I’m starting to get why J likes to watch them.

It was never our intention to be voyeurs. J likes watching people; me, I just feel more comfortable on the outside looking in than the other way around. We’ve met in this very spot every day before school since our freshman year. We always start off watching the others, then we talk. We call it “stalk and talk,” although, mostly, we just talk. She should have been here by now. This is no fun without her and I miss her. I text her again. No reply.

After what feels like a lifetime, a text alert finally sounds. I feel the phone vibrate in my hand before I hear it. Looking down, I click the message. It’s J. Thank God! I breathe, a sigh of relief.

J: Sorry, forgot my phone at home. Almost there.

Looking around the campus, I notice how many students have arrived and think it must be almost time for the bell. Glancing at my phone, I see it’s five minutes ‘til.

Sorry to have missed my morning stalk and talk with J, I slip my flip-flops back on, grab my backpack and make my way down the hill.

I’m about halfway to the side entrance of the school when I finally hear a familiar and animated voice.

“Alayna!”

My best friend waves enthusiastically then bolts up the steps leading from the student parking lot.

“J!”

Squealing, I run toward her while trying not to trip over my own feet. I’ve never been so glad to see her!

“Hey girl,” she says as we collide, embracing each other so tightly that J squeaks.

“Help! Can’t ... breathe.”

I step back, taking in the sight of her. She’s wearing tiny little denim shorts, a black-and-white striped tank top, braided white bracelets, white gladiator sandals, and sunglasses.

AWAKENED PREVIEW

Her long, chestnut hair, smooth and wavy, frames her ever-beautiful, golden-brown face. I smile, my face bursting with excitement.

“You look amazing and your hair, Oh-My-God, J, your hair is un-freaking believable!”

She flips her hair. “I know—right!” she says, in classic J fashion.

The bell rings and as we turn toward the school, J elbows me.

“OMG! Hottie alert at two o’clock.”

Trying to act casual, I chance a furtive glance just to the right of the sidewalk in front of us. Leaning against the low brick wall that borders the lawn area is the most gorgeous guy I’ve ever seen in my entire life. He’s tall and wears charcoal colored Vans, distressed, faded, dark-blue, jeans, and a fitted graphic t-shirt shows off his six pack and his tan, muscular arms.

I tell myself to look away, but I can’t. My eyes are glued to him. A sort of beauty radiates from him. He has a faultless nose and perfect lips. This perfection is framed by styled, yet slightly messy, chocolate-brown hair. I’m relieved he’s busy looking down at his phone, because I seriously can’t take my eyes off of him. I’m mesmerized—dazed.

A pinching sensation brings me out of my trance.

“Ouch!” I yelp, jerking my arm away. “That hurt!”

J grabs my arm and pulls me along.

“Girl, you be trippin’!” She smiles at me.

We amble past the mega-hottie; the hair stands up on the back of my neck and I painfully avert my eyes. I can’t help it. He doesn’t look familiar, but he feels familiar. It’s like when you’re lying in bed with your eyes shut and your mom comes into your room to check on you and you know it’s not your brother or anyone else—it’s your mom. But it’s more than just a knowing feeling. I feel pulled, as if by a magnet, to him.

Riverside High is alive with the chatter of a million teenagers as we make our way through the crowded hallway and up the first flight of stairs to find J’s locker. She haphazardly throws all her supplies in, then hangs up a magnetic mirror. Glancing quickly at her reflection, she touches up her bubble gum scented lip gloss, then slams the metal door.

“Lookin’ good as always,” says a guy’s voice I recognize immediately.

“I know.” J winks, flashing a flirtatious grin his way.

Luke leans against the next locker smiling at J. He's tall, probably almost six feet. He's wearing ripped knee-length jean shorts, a faded black tank top, black Toms, and he's still wearing his sunglasses, even though we're inside.

"Hey, Luke! How's it goin'?" I say in greeting.

Brown, flippy hair sticks out the front and sides of his knitted, lime-green beanie. "Sup!" he says, as he flicks his head.

Luke is friends with Lex and spends a lot of time hanging out at our house. J is practically all he's been talking about all summer long. Of course, he's been crushing on J for over a year, anyway! I wonder when she's going to finally admit that she likes him back. I know she's playin' hard to get, and I'm hoping she finally gives in, because this game is driving-me-crazy!

Pretending to look at my schedule, I say, "I just realized my locker is downstairs. I'll see you guys later."

J scrunches up her forehead skeptically. "You sure you don't want me to go with? I know how you get on the first day of school." Concern echoes in her voice.

"J, I'm fine!" I lie. This whole situation is starting to smell like a whole lot of third-wheel awkwardness, and I want to get the H-E-double hockey sticks out of here.

"I'll see you in Spanish class, J."

"'K! See ya, baby!" She blows me a kiss.

I blow her a kiss back before heading toward the stairway, hoping this will be the shortest route. At the bottom of the steps, I discover a mass of people crowding the hallway between my locker and me. As always, when in the middle of a crowd, my heart races and my palms sweat. The first day of school is always the worst.

In an attempt to defer the inevitable, I take several deep breaths. Very carefully, I squeeze my way down the hallway, wedging in between students the best I can. Fiery hot saffron-colored waves roll off students, careen through the air, and nudge at my lungs.

I know it sounds crazy, but when I'm in the midst of so many people, especially excited people, their energy wafts off of them and it's like I have some sort of sensor that can detect emotional energy. The scary thing is, I don't know how to process this information, so when their emotions mix with my own, I overload and crash, like the hard drive of a computer. Crashing, for me, though, comes in the form of a panic attack.

Different emotions create different kinds of waves—unfortunately, excited first-day-of-school energy is one of the most volatile kinds. Right behind anger, that is.

AWAKENED PREVIEW

So far, today's extrasensory experience is nearly as bad as past years, but not quite. I'm making progress. I think.

Continuing to squeeze myself through the crowd, I try and hold my breath. The smell of scented bodies ... gamey, musky, drenched in colognes and perfumes ... are making it worse. Just a few more steps. I can do this.

After trudging through what feels like miles of thick molasses, I finally reach my locker and quickly rotate the combination lock. As I open the door, I hear a deep, sort of pleasant-sounding voice behind me.

"Pardon me, but I think you must have dropped this." He has an accent. Australian? No, that's not quite it. British?

I feel the electricity and immediately there is recognition. It's the mega-hottie from the rock wall. My heart skips a beat. I'm lousy when it comes to talking to guys, especially hot guys. Is he really talking to me?

I spin around and stare. There he is, all six-foot-two of him, just standing there looking like an angel sent from heaven above!

"This is yours, right?" he asks, staring right into my eyes, as he hands over my cell phone.

Before I can speak, three things happen:

1: As I reach out to take my phone from his hand, I spot a ring on his finger. It's silver with a polyhedron etched to give the impression of a 3D shape. I gasp in surprise because I've seen this ring before ... but, to my knowledge, there has only ever been one—Ron's—so why does this guy have it?

2: Waves pour off of him. Beautiful cerulean-blue waves, the color of the sky on a crystal clear day. Calming waves, unlike any I've ever seen or felt before. He really must be an angel! Which is why—

3: I'm completely taken off guard when my hand grazes his ring and all of a sudden I feel like I'm spinning around and around on a merry-go-round. I whirl faster and faster and at each revolution, pictures of unfamiliar faces and events flash, like scenes from a fast-forward movie. The images are going so fast, I can't differentiate between them. Only a few stand out—a face here, a face there—but they're going too quickly to make sense of any of them. Round and round I spin, each snippet only lasting a split-second, for what seems like a thousand years.

Suddenly, everything goes black.

C. J. ANDERSON



click book cover to continue reading.

