

# LEGACY OF THE DEMON



DIANA ROWLAND

## CHAPTER 1

*Sneak Peek*

© 2016 Diana Rowland  
*All rights reserved.*

# Chapter 1

*“Volcanoes spew the devil’s flame in our heartland. Fire rains from the sky. Sinkholes suck sinners into the bowels of hell, while rifts vomit a scourge of demons into the streets of our cities. These are the plagues of our times, the signs of God’s fury at our wicked—”*

The bellow of a *reyza* accompanied by the shriek of tearing metal cut off the rest of the protester’s tirade. I threw myself to the asphalt as the demon whizzed a tank hatch cover in my direction. It careened off the Stryker Armored Personnel Carrier behind me and slammed edge first less than a foot from my head into the Piggly Wiggly parking lot.

“Gillian! Status!” That was the squad leader, Sergeant Debbie Roma.

“Five by five!” I shouted as soon as I found my voice—and after I made sure I was still in one piece. The red block letters on the quivering metal hatch seemed to mock me. *DIRT*—Demonic Incursion Retaliation and Tactics. Yeah, we were retaliating. Like kids throwing marshmallows at rabid dogs. “*DIRT*” was supposed to represent our willingness to fight hard and dirty, but ten minutes into the skirmish and we’d already lost one tank.

But no people, to my relief. Petrev and Hines had managed to scramble clear of the tank and take cover behind an abandoned Toyota. Both Strykers and the Light Armored Vehicle were still intact, as were all fifteen members of Alpha Squad—though at the moment we were pinned down while the demon threw chunks of metal and arcane shrapnel at us. A scant meter in front of me, a two-foot-long, frost-rimmed crevice rippled

with magenta flames. So far, the demon had only flown reconnaissance passes over the small dimensional rift, but I knew perfectly well he hadn't made a trip from the main incursion rift a quarter mile away just to sightsee.

Demons had been coming through the rifts ever since the arcane valve explosion at the Beaulac Police Department two months ago, and I—along with every other DIRT arcane advisor—still had no flaming clue *why*. Rifts opened at unpredictable intervals all over the world, destroying anything or anyone in the location. An incursion of demons inevitably followed, during which they harassed and attacked nearby citizens while one or more of their number made enigmatic adjustments to the rifts. If I could figure out what their end goal was, humans could develop a counter strategy.

In the meantime, we fought back with what tools we had: guns and grit and graphene-composite nets.

The demon beat his wings and roared a challenge. He was, hands down, the biggest reyza I'd ever seen in all my years as a demon summoner. At least twelve feet tall, with a wingspan four times that—half again as big as Gestamar or Kehlirik. Needle-sharp black horns thrust from his head on either side of a thick ridge, and yellowed fangs curved from a mouth filled with flesh-rending teeth. Broad nostrils flared within a bestial face, and his thick, sinuous tail thrashed back and forth, a weapon as deadly as his claws. Scars crisscrossed his skin in patterns that spoke of claws and teeth and frequent battles—unlike any reyza I'd known before. And though I'd never heard of a demon wearing jewelry, there was no mistaking the gold that glinted from a half dozen thick hoops in his ears or the heavy bands that circled biceps and wrists.

*“Two months now since Satan and his demons were hurled to Earth. Time is running out for you sinners to beg for salvation, lest you be thrown into the lake of fire with the idolaters, the vile, the unbelievers, the sports fans, the comic book freaks, the hypocrites.”* The protester ranted on from the “safe” distance of the far side of the highway, his voice amplified by speakers mounted in the bed of his pickup and punctuated with random squeals and shrieks from arcane interference. Half a dozen people mingled near him, carrying enormous signs that said, in a variety of ways, that everyone was going to burn in hell except them.

Above the protesters, the morning sky shimmered with orange and magenta, beautiful and hideous, painted by arcane

flames. Two days ago, the Beaulac Country Club tennis courts had crumbled into the maw of a fifty-foot-long dimensional rift, the tenth to form in the area. Small wonder that Beaulac was practically a ghost town now. Everything within a half-mile radius of the valve blast had been quarantined and cordoned off, and anyone who could leave Beaulac did. These days, nowhere was truly safe, but anywhere was safer than here.

The rift at the tennis courts was a relatively small one, but it had disgorged a number of vicious demons over the past forty-eight hours. Dozens of *kzak*, *savik*, and *graa*, and less than an hour ago this big ass reyza who was determined to transform the Piggly Wiggly parking lot into his own demon playground. Not that it would hurt business. A good two-thirds of the grocery store had been destroyed last week by a tornado that appeared out of a sunny sky, tracked an arrow-straight line for a hundred yards, then disappeared. Sadly, that wasn't the weirdest disaster to hit the area since the valve explosion. Hell, that didn't even make the top five.

The reyza leaped into flight from the top of the tank.

"The skeeter's aloft!" Roma shouted. "Cover!"

Maroon-fatigued squad members moved, but though I kept my eye on the "skeeter" as he gained altitude, I stayed put. My arcane skills were still a long way from their previous full strength—before I was ambushed and my abilities nearly obliterated—but I'd managed to regain complete use of my *othersight*. That allowed me to assess the little rift and the demon's arcane tactics, and give my squad a snowball's chance of winning. However, there were moments—such as this one—where I felt the loss of my abilities keenly. Even though we had no way to close the rifts, it *was* possible to arcanelly "lock" them to prevent them from expanding. A rift this small would take about ten minutes of uninterrupted focus to lock it, but unfortunately I couldn't shape the potency to do so on my own. Vince Pellini and I usually partnered up to set the locks, but I'd split off with Alpha Squad to chase the big reyza, and only realized the beastie had been heading toward this mini-rift when we damn near fell into it.

The reyza swooped past, and I shielded my head with my hands, expecting the whine of the stinging arcane scattershot he'd peppered us with a dozen times before. Instead, a heavy *thoop thoop thoop* signaled the demon equivalent of an arcane grenade launcher.

*No time to run for cover. Shiiiiit.* Adrenaline spiking, I tucked into a tight ball in the hopes of reducing the size of the demon's target. It was a solid plan except for one tiny detail: the demon wasn't aiming for me. The salvo struck the crevice, sending up flashes of purple and green.

For a heartbeat, nothing changed, then the asphalt heaved and buckled. The ring of frost expanded from the now gaping crevice, raced toward me and past to cover the parking lot. Magenta flames shot high, and the fissure screamed like a tortured soul.

Dismay left me colder than the frosted ground. I pushed up to a crouch and called out to Roma. "Sarge! He's widening the rift!" There was ample room now for demons such as *luhrek* and immature *savik* to come through—no less dangerous despite their smaller size. Not good when our resources were already strained to the breaking point.

"SkeeterCheater!" At Roma's command, Petrev and Wohreich scrambled to deploy the lightweight, graphene-enhanced net over the rift and anchor it deep into the asphalt. DIRT had developed the nets as a counter-incursion measure since the demons were a helluva lot easier to kill before they emerged. The nets weren't a perfect solution, especially for large rifts, but anything that delayed the demons gave us a bit more advantage.

The reyza let out a triumphant bellow as he landed atop a Buick sedan. The roof buckled under his weight, and the side windows cracked, then burst.

Breathing deeply in an effort to settle my racing pulse, I remained crouched as I studied him. He'd already dodged and deflected everything we'd thrown at him, but there were a few tricks left in our bag.

The reyza beat his wings once, then folded them close. He swiveled his head toward me and bared his teeth—his personal promise to give me the extra special painful death—then traced a swooping pattern on his chest with one claw. Potency the color of old blood flickered. Sigils flared on his torso and sent a shimmering web over his head, limbs, and wings. I grimaced. No wonder we hadn't touched him yet.

"*Triple duty,*" I called out to Roma. Her sharp curse told me her opinion of *full* arcane armor on a demon this size. We'd learned the hard way that aiming center mass on any demon was a waste of ammo, but we also knew that limbs and wings usually weren't shielded as well—until this bad boy.

I'd become an expert at adapting tactics in order to defeat demons, and I had no moral dilemma about killing them. *They* were attacking *us*.

It was the brand new orders, handed down this morning, that I had qualms about: *Capture* as many demons as possible, with reyzas the highest priority targets.

"Kowal!" Roma's voice carried across the grocery store parking lot to the Stryker on the far side. "Shimmy that lizard before it finishes getting into its party gown!"

I couldn't help but smile. *Force the demon out of that position before it gets fully armored*. Radio comms were useless so close to a rift, which meant the majority of commands were shouted. But since the demons could hear every word, human soldiers used idioms and code phrases that would be tough for any non-native speaker to understand. It made for a glimmer of humor in an otherwise grim setting.

"On it!" A woman with messy red curls peeking from beneath her helmet swiveled the APC's grenade launcher toward the reyza. I tensed as she fired two grenades. With inhuman reflexes, the demon swatted the first in my direction while the other sailed into the vehicle under him. I scuttled away, but to my relief—and horror—the grenade bounced across the pavement, danced on the SkeeterCheater, then tumbled through and into the rift.

The ground shuddered, and a gout of magenta fire erupted from the rift even as a blast rocked the Buick. Flames leaped through the windows, and the reyza roared and took flight.

Roma barked orders, and squad members scrambled to new tactical positions. I took the opportunity to belly crawl behind an upthrust of asphalt then resumed my search for the demon's weak spots.

Roma remained crouched behind a pile of concrete rubble, skimming her gaze over the area as she checked on her people and considered options. At fifty-something, she wasn't quite as fast as the youngsters, but she had nerves of steel and a serious knack for close quarter tactics. Yet she and I both knew that, even with the new weapons and materials that had been developed in the past two months, it would be a stone bitch to take this demon out, much less capture it.

"Morons," I muttered, which was the kindest thing I could say about DIRT HQ at the moment. The order to capture demons was perfectly logical, especially when it came to reyzas. They did the most damage and were the hardest to kill. HQ and their

researchers wanted to find out what made these creatures tick, what their strengths and vulnerabilities were. I understood it. I really did.

And I hated it. The demons were sentient, resourceful beings. I didn't have to stretch my brain very hard to come up with *how* the researchers would find the demons' weaknesses. It wouldn't involve a pleasant conversation, that much I knew. Yet . . . we were at war. And we sure as hell weren't winning.

It sucked from every possible direction.

The reyza settled in the bed of a big pickup truck near the shopping cart corral, amber eyes blazing with keen intelligence as it assessed us and the rift. It spread its wings as if taking a stretch, then threw its head back and sounded a deep note that shook the air and lifted the hair on my arms. Across the highway, the protesters' speakers crackled to life.

*"These demons have been sent to test us and punish the sinful and the wicked. Fornicators and masturbators, drunks and porno freaks—"*

"Hey, that's me!" Scott Glassman—my former coworker—called out with a laugh from the Stryker behind me.

*"—you false soldiers defy God's law and embrace sin by employing evil witches and sorcerers to battle these demons."*

"And that's me," I said with a snort. Yeah, well, the preacher could rant all he wanted about my evil nature but, as an Arcane Specialist, my "sorcery" was part of the reason the DIRT forces could mount any defense at all.

Like right now, as my othersight revealed a nasty orange glow forming on the demon's clawed left hand.

*"—demons to punish the sinners and—"*

"Yek ziy!" the demon bellowed. *To punish all.*

"Double-M left," I yelled, scrambling up to dive behind the thick tires of the Stryker. Hatches clanged shut, and "umbrellas" made of an arcane-resistant polymer *snicked* open as the troops without cover deployed shields.

The ground heaved with a concussion that set my ears ringing, followed an instant later by a blast of heat and shriek of metal. My pulse slammed in reaction. A reyza cast that? I'd only ever felt an arcane detonation that powerful from a demonic lord.

Fear seized me. "Oh no . . ." I surged out from behind the Stryker. The umbrella shields were arcane *resistant*, meant to deflect a typical demon strike—not a blitzkrieg.

My heart dropped to my toes. I barely registered that the SkeeterCheater lay intact but unanchored over a widened rift. My focus was locked a dozen yards beyond it, where two squad members crouched motionless, fatigues seared and smoking while around them the asphalt popped and boiled. Nothing remained of their shields but the twisted metal of the frames.

The reyza let out a roar of triumph and sprang into the air with powerful strokes of his wings.

“Glassman and Chu, keep eyes on that demon!” Roma shouted with just the barest hitch in her voice. “Landon and Abercrombie, status!”

For an endless second nothing happened. Then Landon lifted his head, working his jaw as if to pop his ears. A second later Abercrombie looked up, blinking, then patted out a patch of flame on Landon’s shoulder. “Five by five,” Landon croaked, echoed by Abercrombie.

“Stay put until the medics can extract you,” I ordered, wobbly with relief. “Arcane injuries aren’t always immediately apparent,” I added to Roma to explain why I’d stepped on her authority. Technically speaking, I outranked her, but I wasn’t stupid enough to override her on tactical or military matters. And her nod told me she wasn’t stupid enough to dig her heels in on arcane matters. Then again, one of the reasons I’d requested her for my squad was because she cared more about her people and the mission than her ego.

As the medics hurried up, Roma turned away to marshal the rest of the squad to re-secure the SkeeterCheater and track the reyza. Alpha Squad was one of a dozen special units deployed around the world to areas with high rift activity, its members hand-picked and carefully screened. Most of the men and women in DIRT had police or military backgrounds—such as Roma, who’d been a retired Marine Master Sergeant. But there were plenty who’d earned spots by being excellent marksmen or just plain hard as nails, relentless, and unflinching. Slackers weren’t tolerated, not with the world at stake.

I kept one eye on the circling demon as I harangued the medics into moving faster. Due to the weak potency on Earth, it usually took a reyza at least a minute to ready an arcane strike—or “magic missile,” as the first DIRT fighters had dubbed them, hence the “Double-M”—but it was obvious this was no ordinary reyza.

*“Only God’s power can truly defeat these spawn of Satan.*



*The gates of hell have opened, and the righteous shall endure for all eternity.”*

A familiar ache tightened my chest. No, the gates were closed. Within a day of the PD valve explosion that started this whole nightmare, contact with the demon realm was cut off. No valve travel, no summonings. The rifts were the last remaining conduits between Earth and the demon realm, but the invading demons were the only ones who understood how to use them.

Then again, the incursions were how I knew the demon realm still existed at all.

*“You false prophets and so-called soldiers hide in the shadows like the craven cowards that you are, cringing from the face of evil.”*

Outrage boiled through me. The courts had ruled that the picketers and protesters had the right to say their piece as long as they didn't get in our way. I agreed wholeheartedly with the country maintaining its freedoms no matter what disasters befell it, but I was also relieved and pleased when the courts decreed that if any of them got hurt while demonstrating near rifts, it was their own stinkin' fault.

To my twisted delight, the reyza swooped low over the picketers, obviously not giving a shit that they were supposedly at a safe distance. The lead protester dropped his mic and dove out of the truck. A few others broke and ran, but the rest hunched behind their eight-foot-tall signs as if cardboard and plastic would protect them.

But hey, for all I knew the protesters and preachers were right. Maybe this whole nightmare started because some god looked down and thought, “Ew, what a mess! Time to wipe the slate and start fresh.” Made as much sense as anything else at the moment.

The medics carted Landon and Abercrombie off. The demon circled the protesters. “Yek ziy,” he roared.

My twisted delight turned to horror as orange light blossomed in the demon's hand. I needed to distract him, break his concentration, or the protesters would get fried. I didn't like their “helpful” messages—or their foolishness for setting up so close to a rift—but they were human, and no way would I sit on my ass and let them die. But what to do? Shooting at him was a lousy option. The demon had arcane shielding, plus the distance increased the chance that we'd hit the civilians with friendly fire. The Light Armored Vehicle was closest to the highway, but even they couldn't—

“Chu!” I yelled at the top of my lungs. “Crowd control the demon. Now!” I wasn’t concerned about the protesters getting accidentally tear-gassed. Helluva lot less lethal than an arcane strike, and maybe they’d be smart and run away.

Chu immediately swung the grenade launcher around, loaded up the needed grenades, then sighted and fired four times in quick succession. I held my breath as the grenades sailed toward their target, then watched in relief as the demon wheeled toward the incoming threats, the orange glow vanishing from his hand. He batted a tear gas grenade into the midst of the protesters, but the second and third bathed him in gas and smoke, and the fourth peppered him with rubber pellets. While the demon pivoted in an aerial dance of gas and pellet avoidance, the protesters—including Microphone Man—made their own escape, scuttling like roaches into the woods behind them.

But they were still far from safe, especially if the reyza decided to blast the woods where they were hiding. Drawing my Glock from my thigh holster, I marched to the rift and began firing into its depths. As I’d hoped, the reyza let out a cry of outrage, then he turned on a wing and headed toward us. Yet instead of going straight to the rift, he flew high and circled twice before descending to land atop what was left of the Piggly Wiggly.

He crouched and settled, a pose a reyza could hold for hours on end. It was clear he was waiting for something. Reinforcements? The puny humans to give up? Screw that.

I jogged to the Stryker and pounded a fist on the side. “I need the wizard staff,” I said after Scott poked his head out of the hatch.

He chuckled and passed down a six-foot-long black pole. “Don’t step on any hobbits.”

“They’re going to have to stay out of my way.” I curled my hands around the smooth metal and thumbed the button. Electricity arced from the tip of the staff—which was little more than a cattle prod on steroids. Scott had dubbed it the “wizard staff” after the first time I used it to stun a demon, and the name had stuck.

Staff in hand, I jogged over to where Roma was making notations and drawing arrows on a sketched map of the Piggly Wiggly and surroundings.

“God, what I wouldn’t give for internet,” Roma muttered. “And radio comms.” I made a sympathetic noise. The folks in R&D had worked up shielding that reduced the arcane interfer-

ence on electronic devices, but we were too close to the rift for it to have any worthwhile effect.

I peered at the map and took careful note of her plan for netting this giant beastie. "This is good. I can lure him off the roof." I jerked my head toward the reyza. Wouldn't be the first time I'd played bait.

Roma gave a brisk nod and tapped the map. "Get it on the ground in that clear area by the handicapped spots. We'll net it there." She gave me a hard look. "And try not to get et."

"No chance of that," I said. "I'm too tough and stringy."

She let out a dry laugh. "Ready when you are."

With unhurried strides, I made my way up the raggedly striped rows toward the shattered Piggly Wiggly storefront. Atop the grocery store, sunlight sparkled on the reyza's gold jewelry as he tracked his gaze over the parking lot. His pose was casual, indolent even. I knew better. A demon this big was old, smart, and tough. And he wasn't going to give up.

On the other hand, I was young, moderately clever, and sick of this bullshit.

"APCs, move into fishing position," Roma shouted behind me. "LAV, cork the hole. Blauser and Hurley, Metallica that son of a bitch as soon as it lands! Ahmed, Petrev, Hines, grate the cheese the instant the plastic's off!"

In my periphery, I noted people and vehicles shifting position in a clever dance of subterfuge. No point making it obvious where we wanted the demon to go.

When I reached the handicapped spots, I planted the butt of my staff on the head of the wheelchair-bound stick figure, stood with my feet apart and my chin lifted, and challenged the reyza with a glare.

"Lahnk hremtehl si bahzat bukkai imhritak!" I shouted, which loosely translated as *Your mother is an asswipe*. Or it could have been *Your breath smells like fairy farts*. A good chunk of the demon language relied on telepathic signals to clarify the meaning beyond words, but I figured I was close enough.

The reyza ignored me. Hell, maybe he agreed with the sentiment. I tried another insult that mocked his prowess as a fighter, then one that belittled his tail as thin and weak. Those earned me a chunk of rubble slung in my direction, but otherwise he didn't budge. Crap. Though my time on the nexus in my back yard had improved my grasp of the demon language, it wasn't going to take long for me to run out of clever abuse.

“Lah zhet unkh sutiva!” I hollered. *You have shit wings.*

The demon curled his lip in a sneer, then focused his attention on the rift.

“Lahnk vahl mumfir nurat!” *Your head looks like cheese.* I mentally riffled through the vocabulary I knew. Yeah, I was scraping the barrel now.

“Grahk ptur . . . uh, ptur unkh qaztahl!” *You serve a shitty lord.*

The reyza leaped up with a bellow of fury, wings snapping open with a *crack*.

I blinked in surprise at the sudden vehemence. He had some serious fanatic devotion to his lord if *that* pathetic insult set him off. But which lord? The sly and devious Jesral? Hot-headed Amkir?

With an ear-splitting roar, the demon leaped off the building and toward me. I clamped down on a yelp and fled. *Okay, lured him off the roof. Now to get him on the ground.* My inner survivalist screamed for me to sprint like hell, but I stuck to the plan. I couldn't risk drawing him too far from the target zone. So what if I was one hundred percent certain he'd rip me to tiny pieces if he got hold of me.

Gripping the staff in both hands, I slid under the cart corral then rolled to a low crouch, facing the demon. He was more than strong enough to shred the aluminum bars that sheltered me, but he'd need to land first. I hoped. He might decide to tear the corral from the parking lot mid-swoop, but then he'd have to make a second pass to grab me. I crossed fingers and toes that he'd favor the more efficient route.

To my right, Blausner and Hurley ran up with a device that looked like a pregnant rocket launcher. *Sonic weapons, yeah!* The throaty growl of diesel engines sang a wicked harmony that told me the Strykers were maneuvering into position.

The demon hit the parking lot with a *thump* that I felt as much as heard. *Score one for efficiency!* I jammed the butt of the staff into the asphalt and pointed the nasty end toward him, praying that everyone had made it to where they needed to be. The demon's eyes blazed, legs coiled beneath him for another leap—one that would end with me impaled on his claws. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Blausner snap open a tripod mount on the sonic cannon, holding it steady while Hurley took aim and pulled the trigger.

A low throb of sound shook the air, and the reyza staggered as if an actual cannonball had plowed into his chest. I allowed

myself a quick mental fist pump. The air throbbed again, sending the reyza to his knees. Elation sang through me as his arcane protections flickered.

“Wings and tail!” I hollered then scrambled for cover behind the mangled tank. The plastic was off. Now it was time to grate the cheese. Ahmed popped up from the other side of the tank, rifle at his shoulder. I hurried to shove earplugs into place as automatic gunfire sliced through the air. The reyza howled as the rounds ripped through the membranes of his wings and took chunks out of his tail. Hines, Roma, and Petrev joined in the shooting—all positioned so that no squad member could be caught in crossfire. Ahmed dropped an empty clip and slammed a fresh one into place with barely a pause in his firing. Behind the demon, chips of concrete flew from the rubble.

A dark arrow launched in a lazy arc from Kowal’s Stryker: the new demon-snaring SkeeterCheater net, spreading as it flew to settle over the demon. Roma held up her fist, and the firing stopped.

“Crank it!” I yelled. If the reyza had been three feet shorter, it would have been perfect. But with the net only covering him from his horns to his knees, we had to take him down fast. The winch on the front of the Stryker screamed, winding in the cable to close the net around the thrashing reyza. I pulled the earplugs out and ran forward as he toppled. Razor sharp claws tore at the net, but his incredible strength wasn’t enough to defeat the graphene strands.

A triumphant whoop went up from Alpha Squad. Mission accomplished. Our squad had scored the first demon capture, and a big ass one at that.

I was in no mood to cheer. DIRT HQ would swoop in and cart the demon off—for the good of Earth—and would then refuse to let me anywhere near him. After all, my job was complete, and there were too many agencies wanting a crack at him to waste time letting me keep a hand in. Maybe they’d find better ways to kill demons, but they’d never break him and learn the reason for the incursions—info that could give us a real edge and help end this nightmare.

Anger burned in my chest—at myself and HQ and the demons and the lords.

The winch went silent, cable taut and net tight. Breath hissed between fangs as the reyza struggled. Blood dripped from his shredded wings, staining the asphalt beneath him.

“Kho lahn ettik ai vihr?” I demanded. “What are you doing to the rifts?” At his glare, I jammed the business end of the staff against his side and thumbed the button, held it for the count of five as his body jerked. I pulled the staff away and repeated my question.

His breath rasped, but the hatred in his eyes merely shone hotter. “Our blood. Our breath.” He let out a rage-filled bellow that made me wish I’d left the earplugs in. “Our world!”

Huh? What did that even mean? “What do the lords want?”

His pupils thinned to slits. “Mraz gah qaztahl.” The growl turned into a roar. “Mraz. Gah. Qaztahl!”

*Fuck the lords.* The hell? My knowledge of the demon language was far from perfect, but I knew the important things—like how to curse. “Why?” I blurted.

“Assssssk Xharbek.” His lips pulled back to expose wicked teeth.

The name thundered through me. Xharbek—demahnk counselor and ptarl to the exiled demonic lord, Szerain. Xharbek, who’d masqueraded as Carl the morgue tech and my Aunt Tessa’s boyfriend. I’d last seen him minutes after the valve explosion when he was gunning for Szerain and Zakaar—a.k.a Ryan Kristoff and Zack Garner. Even more unsettling was my suspicion that Xharbek was after Jill and Zack’s newborn daughter, Ashava, as well.

The reyza continued to twist within the net, reaching toward his head with one clawed hand. My instant of distraction over Xharbek was all he needed. “Jontari!” he roared then sank sharp claws into his neck.

“No!” I drove the spear into his side and jammed my thumb onto the button, but it made no difference. While I watched in helpless disbelief, he jerked his hand closed and ripped out his own throat.

Blood sprayed, and his body spasmed. I stumbled back, dimly aware of shouts and curses from the squad. A nauseating gurgle came from what remained of the demon’s neck as he thrashed. Then he went still, clawed fingers loosely curled around the chunk of gore.