

Touch of the Demon
by Diana Rowland

Chapter 1

I didn't whimper when the demonic lord placed the collar around my neck and sealed it closed. Didn't curse as it dampened my ability to see the arcane and nullified the chances of anyone's being able to locate me. Didn't cry. Didn't scream. Didn't fall to the floor and curl into the fetal position.

I wanted to. Holy shit, did I ever want to. But in all my years of being a summoner and of being a cop, I knew that if ever I had to appear strong, it was now—when face to face with a demonic lord in the demon realm.

"Don't you recognize it?" the lord had asked. *"It's your old summoning chamber."*

My gaze swept the chamber again. Its dark grey marble floor carved with worn glyphs joined matching walls, so numerous that the room felt circular. No windows, no furnishings, and a massive set of charred double doors ahead of me, one ajar, and two smaller doors to the sides. Arcane light cast by shimmering sigils high above bathed everything in an amber glow and eerie sliding shadows. Wisps of smoke rose from glowing coals in a brazier against the wall, likely the source of the pungent skunk-spray-meets-jasmine odor.

I'd appeared here less than two minutes ago, finally summoned to the demon realm after over a month of dodging the attempts; an evasion aided by wearing an arcane-crippling arm cuff similar to the collar I wore now. Already I could tell that this collar wasn't as brute force crude as the cuff. I wasn't nauseated and could actually see the glimmer of sigils and patterns dancing at the edges of my vision, though I knew without even trying that I wouldn't be able to touch or form them.

The demonic lord stood before me, tall and elegant in what looked like a perfectly tailored charcoal grey Armani suit, complete with crisp white shirt and black tie. Keen silver-grey eyes set in a face with an oriental cast left no doubt that he was thoroughly assessing me on all sorts of levels. Inky black hair entwined with gold cord hung to the small of his back in a heavy intricate braid. Power pulsed from him in such controlled undulations that I got the sense I was only getting a hint of his full aura.

The human—otherwise known as the asshole who summoned me—busied himself at the perimeter of the summoning circle, anchoring the flows and sealing the portal. Though he couldn't have been much more than a teenager, I had to give him some credit. Bare-chested, tall, and lean with a crazy halo of curly blond hair, he dispelled and traced sigils with a confidence that told me he was damned skilled.

I straightened my shoulders. "I've never been here before. What sort of game is this?"

The lord's face grew hard, and when he spoke his voice was a lava flow promising to consume all in its path. "No game, summoner." He seized my chin, looked into my face as though determining my worth. "If you do not know, then you have been kept well hooded by your lord." He released me with a slight shove, and I staggered back a step before recovering. Terror coiled in my gut, but I did my best to put on a sneer.

"This is not my summoning chamber," I said, squaring my shoulders and doing my damndest to look like I did this sort of thing every day. "I know that much." I scowled and

brushed myself off. My pants felt sticky, and when I glanced down at my hands, I realized I was still fairly spattered with atomized bits of Tracy Gordon, the very recently deceased summoner whose collapsing gate got me into this mess. *Gross!* I dragged my gaze back up. “Why have you summoned me?”

The lord’s eyes skimmed over me, taking in my general appearance and the spattered bits on my pants and—I knew—in my hair. I had no doubt he knew exactly what it was. But if he thought his summoning of me had disrupted a ritual and shredded a summoner, he sure as shit didn’t show a flicker of dismay or remorse. Instead, he turned away, clasped his hands behind his back, and headed for the doors.

“Bring her,” he ordered.

A soft scrape of sound from behind alerted me—claws on stone. I turned to see the largest *reyza* I’d ever seen moving my way. Manlike, well-muscled, and more than half again as tall as the lord, he approached, teeth bared in a bestial face, and tail flicking behind. His skin shimmered bronze in the amber light as he spread huge leathery wings. The movement wafted a faint musky, spicy scent toward me that made me wonder if Old Spice was a cheap knockoff of Eau de Reyza.

Gulping, I raised my hands, palms out. “There is no need for force, honored one,” I said quickly. “I will offer no resistance.”

The *reyza* growled low in his throat and pointed a clawed hand toward the doors. It was pretty clear what he meant, and I turned quickly to comply. It hadn’t been all that long ago that the *reyza*, Sehkeril, had eviscerated me during the confrontation with the Symbol Man, so I’d pretty much let go of any illusions I might have held about the overall friendliness of demons.

Doing my best impression of a cooperative prisoner, I passed through huge doors of finely carved wood. Twice as tall as me, the heavy doors had definitely been through some shit. Char ate into the wood, in places almost deeply enough to go all the way through the door. A faint acrid odor lingered, though the damage looked smooth, as though from a long time ago, worn down over the years.

I glanced back to see the blond young man following. He pulled on a black silky shirt as he walked, and his expression was an interesting mixture of relief, pride, and delight. I quickly pulled my gaze away before he noticed me looking.

The room beyond the doors mirrored the summoning chamber in size though it had about half as many sides. Two walls opened into corridors, and each of the remaining walls framed alcoves with incredibly lifelike statues of demons and humans.

I kept my cop senses tuned to high alert since information on the people, demons, and layout could be useful later. But mostly I did so because getting into that mindset helped keep me from thinking about how very fucked I was and then melting into a quivering pile of goo. I took in what I could, but with the *reyza* herding me close behind, I didn’t have time to sightsee.

A few steps down the corridor and to the right, we turned and climbed a curving staircase, eventually coming to a room that, judging from distance and direction traveled, was likely directly above the summoning chamber.

A multisided obelisk of polished black stone rose from the center of the chamber, its tip near the high ceiling sputtering a shower of arcane sparks. Ragged fissures radiated from the base in a spoke pattern—eleven of them—each running along the floor toward one of the walls. I was sure there was a name for an eleven-sided figure but had no clue what it might be. Who the hell ever needed to know that?

The whole thing hummed with potency, palpable to me even with the collar on. Odd glyphs sketched in colored chalk marked the tapered tip of each fissure like physical mirrors of the flickering sigils above them. I focused on one of the glyphs and tried to make sense of it. Immediately my heart started pounding inexplicably as if I was waking from a nightmare I couldn't remember. Going back down the stairs seemed like a much better plan than going forward. Except for the big hulking reyza that blocked the way.

On the far side of the chamber, the lord stood on a balcony, facing away, hands clasped behind his back. From where I stood, all I could see of the landscape beyond him were the tops of barren hills, jagged mountains beyond, and an expanse of cloudless sky. Oddly, it was that sky—a rich and deep blue beyond anything seen on Earth—that finally drove it home that I wasn't in Louisiana anymore, Toto. Demons and lords? Pshaw. Those were a dime a dozen back home. Yeah, I was a slow learner sometimes.

I took a couple of steps toward the lord, hugging the wall and putting as much space as I could between me and the Cracks of Doom. Scintillating and raw potency flared from them like angry azure flames, and I froze. The power crackled over me in twisted, disorienting pulses for a few seconds then subsided, leaving my ears ringing and the world tilting. I staggered and set my back against the wall, barely managing to stay upright. In another couple of seconds, it was as if it had never happened, except for me standing drunkenly with my mouth near impossibly dry, as though all of the moisture had been sucked from me. It was small comfort to see that the blond summoner took a step back as well, haughty demeanor gone in a flash, though he recovered within a few heartbeats and regained his stance. He lifted a hand and traced sigils in the air, though, due to the collar, I couldn't see clearly what he was shaping.

I worked spit back into my mouth and shot a look at the lord's back. "What the hell is this place?" I managed, pissed that my voice had a slight quaver.

His only response was to extend his right arm to his side and gesture me to him with a slight movement of index and middle finger, not turning even a millimeter toward me. Clenching my jaw, I moved forward.

When I reached his side he spoke, voice low and disturbingly melodious. "The summoning chamber believes it is yours, whether you do or not."

I flicked my eyes to the fissures. "And how is that even possible?" I asked. "I'm pretty damn sure I've never performed a summoning here."

The lord lifted his chin a fraction. "Idris," he said. I saw the blond summoner straighten. "Go prepare a purification diagram." His voice resonated with intensity. "We will require it shortly."

Yeah, that wasn't ominous or anything. I gulped, working damn hard to maintain a demeanor other than *freaked out*.

He turned to me, face cold and hard, yet with molten, living heat behind his eyes. "Many believe that this grossly apocalyptic landscape—" He gestured toward a jagged range of fractured mountains and a line of hills disturbingly devoid of any hint of vegetation. "—and this—" He gestured to the cracked floor. "—are your doing."

I threw my hands up, utterly frustrated and exasperated. "How?" I demanded. "For fuck's sake, I've never performed a goddamn summoning here! This is only my second time in the fucking demon realm, and the last time I was busy *dying*!" That was after the aforementioned evisceration. Rhyzkahl brought me back to the demon realm to die, allowing me to pass through the void and reform whole and untouched in my own world. But the demonic lord before me

now had told me that it might not work a second time. And I wasn't desperate enough to risk suicide. Yet.

He had no reaction to my outburst, unless, perhaps, an even more scary depth to his calm, like a serpent coiled motionless, able to strike in an instant with deadly speed and accuracy.

The lord locked his eyes on mine and spoke a single word.

"Elinor."

I jerked as the name hit me like a spear through my essence. My knees buckled for an instant, and I grabbed for the wall, bizarre and unexpected terror rising through me.

And then it was gone, leaving me gasping raggedly and clutching at the wall. "I don't understand," I said in a hoarse voice, staring at the dark-haired lord.

Did he reach to steady me or anything like that? Fuck, no. His eyes remained hard upon mine. "No. I can clearly see that you do not. Rhyzkahl has not told you why he values you."

My balance slowly returned, though I kept my hand on the wall. "I suppose you intend to enlighten me?" I asked, voice still unsteady, to my annoyance.

"No. You bear *his* mark." His eyes dropped to my left forearm where Rhyzkahl had marked me as his sworn summoner. A slight smile touched his mouth. "I simply hold you from him."

I went cold, wondering how far he'd go to keep me from Rhyzkahl. "Then why all this?" I said, gesturing to the room and the landscape. "If your whole intent is to keep me from Rhyzkahl, then why the theatrics and the grand reveal of—" I didn't want to say the name. "—whatever that was?"

He inclined his head toward me, smile increasing a touch, though it only served to make his expression colder. "Because I gleaned *precisely* what I wanted from it." He turned and strode toward the stairs in long smooth strides. "And now, we purify you."