

Touch of the Demon  
by  
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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."

## Chapter 2

The reyza shepherded me down the stairs and along the corridor away from the summoning chamber, then down yet more stairs and corridors, and finally into a small bedchamber. From what little I saw in that hurried trek, the place was *gorgeous*. Neglected for sure, but nothing a little cleanup couldn't fix. Glass crunched underfoot near broken windows which had either been patched with a ward or left open to the elements. Dust reigned supreme and minor debris littered most areas. But beyond all that, the absolute beauty of the architecture left me in awe. Spacious and sweeping, stone and wood wound together to form something that felt more like a rugged yet graceful entity than a building. Paintings and statuary lined walls and rested in niches everywhere, and I fretted that I wasn't given the time to stop and look at them.

The reyza continued through the bedchamber and into a room that held a broad stone tub. I would've said it was white marble, but there was a dragonfly-wing iridescence to it that I'd never seen in Earth marble. Demon-marble? Water half-filled the tub and was likely the source of a faint rotten egg smell.

"Time is of the essence," the demon growled. "You must be cleaned and prepared." He reached for me, and I backpedaled to the wall, eyes widening.

"I can do it!" I gasped. "I can wash myself."

His lip curled in a snarl. "You have three hundred heartbeats," he said, flexing clawed hands. He settled into a crouch by the door, eyes never leaving me. "I am counting."

I shucked my nasty clothes off, kicked them aside and slid into the tepid water. Yep. Sulphur. Much of the well water where I lived had the same odor. I kept a running count while I ducked under and scrubbed at my hair with my fingers. I didn't see anything resembling soap, so I figured that the standard for how clean I needed to be was mostly Without Bits of Body Parts Clinging to Me.

I clambered out of the tub when my own count reached two-sixty and stood, naked, dripping and shivering, before the reyza. My own clothes and possessions were nowhere to be seen, and even though I had no desire to put any of them back on, it still bugged me.

The demon tossed me a towel. "Dry yourself." I quickly complied. "And don this." He passed me a garment—a black knee-length shift that turned out to be little more than a sack with neck and arm holes. No bra, no underwear. To say I felt exposed was an enormous understatement.

The demon snorted, rose from the crouch, gestured to the door. We headed back toward the summoning chamber. Scowling, I picked my way through the glass and debris in the corridors. It had been part of the ambience when I had shoes on, but now, barefoot, it was an up close and personal threat. I had no desire to entertain these motherfuckers with bloody feet and, miraculously, managed the walk without incident.

He opened a door in the corridor near the summoning chamber and waited for me to enter.

I paused in the doorway as an odd *déjà vu* swam over me. I'd been in that room before, it told me, dozens of times. In ghostly fragments, I smelled the clean ozone scent of a freshly activated portal, heard snatches of conversation both in demon and what sounded like Italian, felt shivers of excitement, trepidation, and wonder.

A shove in the center of my back dispelled the sensation and reminded me to move.

It wasn't a large room. Maybe five feet by eight, with another door opposite the one I'd

stepped through and a single stone bench along one wall. Maybe the purification involved a massage? Hey, a girl could dream.

A large bas-relief reminiscent of da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, dominated the wall across from the bench. Around it, dozens of tassels, of what looked a lot like human hair, hung from silken cords looped over pegs along the wall. Sigils, only faintly visible to me due to the collar, flickered around the carving.

The reyza squeezed in, and his massive bulk shifted the feel of the room from small to damn near claustrophobic. When he closed the door, pitch black descended. I could still see the faint wards on the wall, but othersight didn't do shit for real darkness, unless the sigils were ignited or specifically traced for light. My hands clenched into fists as I tried to keep from completely freaking out in the utter darkness. I sank to the bench, listening to the breathing of the reyza.

"Come here often?" I said, managing a cheeky grin in case the reyza could see in the dark. I had no idea.

To my utter surprise he spoke. "On rare occasion," he said with a low snort.

I chuckled, relieved at getting a response. "I'm Kara Gillian," I said, even though I knew perfectly well the demon knew who I was. Names held a lot of power since they were an integral part of summoning, so I figured it would be better to offer mine first than to ask for his.

"Greetings, Kara Gillian," he replied. "I am Gestamar."

Holy shit. I knew that name. Gestamar was mentioned in texts dating back hundreds of years, and was one of the more popular high-level demons to be summoned. I'd never summoned him myself, but only because I was fairly new at summoning reyza, and I tended to be more comfortable with Kehlrirk, one of Rhyzkahl's demons and the first twelfth-level demon I'd ever summoned on my own.

"I'm honored to meet you, Gestamar," I said. "The lord who had me summoned, what's his name?"

The demon shifted with a rustle of wings. "Mzatal."

"Hunh," I said. "Never heard of him." Hell, right now my only weapons were Obnoxious and Snark, and I intended to use them whenever possible. Then again, it was true. The only lords I knew of were Rhyzkahl and Szerain. I had a feeling there were many gaps in my knowledge that would soon be filled, whether I wanted it or not.

I started to ask him what the whole damn purification thing was about, but a deep thrum from the direction of the other door interrupted me.

In the next instant Gestamar's hands were around my throat, claws pressing into my skin but not piercing. I bit back a yelp of shock and clutched at his fingers instinctively, but a heartbeat later he pulled his hands away, taking the collar with him. I let out a shaking breath as the arcane leaped into focus around me. Sigils, like strands of intricately woven colored light, pulsed ever so slightly with the thrum from beyond the door. Gestamar lifted a claw and traced a sigil that hung in the air above us and lit the chamber with a golden glow. There'd been one of those in the summoning chamber when I arrived, and some in the room with the fissures, but with the collar on, I'd completely missed their beauty and radiant power. I stared, fascinated and grateful for the brief distraction from my circumstances. On Earth, I traced wards arcanelly on surfaces like doors, floors, and walls for specific purposes: protection, aversion, warning, and such. With chalk and blood I crafted floor glyphs for summonings, but I'd never seen a sigil *float* like this in three dimensional vibrant, shifting color.

Gestamar saw the look on my face and snorted. "The sigils of our world. Humans call

them floaters.”

I exhaled and nodded, sensing the thing as though my *othersight* had developed *otherfeel*. I finally dragged my eyes away from it to take in the rest of the room.

Now I could really see the bas-relief on the wall in front of me. Despite being totally braced for some weird shit to start, I was drawn to this in a more visceral way than to the floater. The stone looked much like the demon marble of the bath, except that it also had fine veins of gold running through it that picked up the sigil’s light and brought the surface to life. A life-sized naked man—human or lord, I couldn’t tell—faced me in an spread-eagle posture. The full perimeter of the disc writhed with entwined symbols that I couldn’t name, yet felt familiar. A bluish arcane glow ran from the top of his head to the edge of the disc in a widening pattern. The alien eyes were what got me though, sculpted into the background texture with such subtle strokes as to be almost overlooked. But once I saw them, I couldn’t *not* see them. They fixed me in their gaze, eyes shaped like slanted teardrops with eerie dual pupils and a haunting familiarity. What the hell?

I finally managed to drag my eyes away to the dozens and dozens of tassels. They were most definitely hair, and it sure as hell looked like human hair, at that. Was that part of this ritual? Would this lord cut my hair? *Damn it, I just got it to a decent length!* I thought with a grimace. But at the same time I steeled myself for just that possibility. My fate might very well depend on my ability to roll with weird or unpleasant shit like that. *And I’d rather think that ending up with a bad haircut is the worst it could be.*

“So, uh, if you’re going to cut my hair could you comb it out first?” I said, doing my best to keep my tone light and unconcerned, though my heart pounded. “I didn’t get a chance after my bath. No conditioner, and it tangles like a bitch,” I continued, harnessing the Mighty Power of the Snark to help me get through this.

Gestamar snorted. “No hair will be cut. These are of Szerain—treasured summoners and humans of his.”

A weird chill skimmed over me and down my spine. “Is that where we are? Szerain’s palace?” Only recently had I found out that my FBI agent friend Ryan Kristoff was actually the demonic lord Szerain, exiled from the demon realm with his memory stripped. I gazed at the collection of mementos and wondered what the oldest was, wondered what sort of people they came from. The demonic lords had been around for a few thousand years, and I sure as hell had trouble getting my head around it. *Déjà vu* washed over me again, stronger this time, as my eyes rested on one lock of reddish blond hair bound by a green ribbon.

“Yes,” the demon replied, voice seeming to lower an octave. “Szerain’s palace. In the secondary antechamber of the summoning chamber that birthed the cataclysm.”

My breath quickened as memory rose. *Sigils light the chamber with a soft glow. I lift my hair and allow Lord Szerain to neatly slice a lock. He gives me a kind smile and a kiss on the forehead . . . .*

I tensed, and the memory faded as quickly as it had come, leaving me trembling and unsettled. Looking to Gestamar, I struggled for mental balance. “Cataclysm? You mean the fissures and the blasted landscape? That originated here?”

The demon peered at me, pupils narrowing to slits. “Yes. From the chamber to which you were summoned. A horrific event wrought by Szerain. And Elinor.”

I struggled to work moisture into my mouth. “What happened?”

He growled low and leaned close, breath hot upon me while I fought the urge to cower back. “Elinor lost control of a powerful ritual—an attempt at a permanent gate.” His voice was

rich and slow, with ominous overtones that made my gut clench. “It thrashed out of control and she perished.” He drew out the last word in a way that sent shivers through me. “And our world broke apart, and the skies wept fire, and the seas lashed the high plains.” He tilted his head, eyes on me. “And the ways to Earth slammed shut, trapping humans here to die and severing us from your world for over two hundred years, while this world sought to emulate your vision of hell.”

The words tumbled over each other in my head. I squeezed my eyes shut as I struggled to make sense of it. My breath came in shallow pants as a ragged discord seemed to permeate his telling.

I shook my head to try and clear it. Something was wrong with his version, yet I had no idea what it could be. “How—” My voice cracked, and I tried again. “How did she die?”

Gestamar pulled back from me. “She was slain in the midst of the ritual as the gate spiraled out of control.”

I fixed my gaze upon him. “But how?” I asked, needing the answer beyond all reason. “What killed her? The gate? What?”

The thrum abruptly increased in tempo. Gestamar stood.

“Wait,” I said, pulse pounding. “Do you even know?”

In answer Gestamar bared his teeth, and in a move too swift for me to follow, pulled a thin cloth hood over my head.

My hands balled into fists at my side as he swiftly fastened the hood with arcane bindings. It wasn’t tight by any means, and it wasn’t difficult to breathe through, but the mere concept of being brought, hooded, into a ritual chamber was enough to give me a mild case of the freakouts. Okay, maybe a major case. Which, I realized a heartbeat later, was very likely this Lord Mzatal’s intent.

Anger needled me just enough to counteract the terror, though only a bit. I still had no reason to believe I was going to live through this ritual. I suddenly missed Ryan, even though I knew it had probably been less than half an hour since I’d seen him.

Since we kissed.

We’d worked together for much of the past year and had a good-friends relationship that always seemed to teeter on the edge of something more. In those unnerving seconds when both of us knew we couldn’t stop the summoning, he finally kissed me, and damn it I kissed him back. He told me he loved me, and I told him I loved him. And then I was here.

I smiled very slightly beneath the hood. *Well, if I have to die now, at least we got that shit out of the way.*

Gestamar took my left upper arm. “The floor is smooth,” he murmured as he moved me forward and through the door. “Simply walk.”

I complied. A few heartbeats later he released me, and someone else took my right arm in a firm but not harsh grip. Not the lord, I decided. This had to be the blond summoner.

The young man slowly led me around the outer perimeter of the ritual circle. Thankfully, the hood did nothing to block my othersight. Brilliantly ignited sigils floated from knee to chest height above the floor in a circle of beautifully interlaced patterns. The only kind of ritual diagram I’d ever drawn was with chalk on the floor, but I could feel the power of this and had no doubt it was the diagram. *Looks like they do things in style in the demon realm.*

A golden glow occupied the far side of the circle. Lord Mzatal. I was certain of it. Under any other circumstances I probably would have thought this was some really cool shit. Actually, I did think it was some cool shit. I simply didn’t like the idea that this particular cool shit was about to be used on *me* for who the hell knew what.



The summoner stopped in front of the golden glow, released me and stepped back. Now the lord ran his hands over me in a thorough search that reminded me of a patdown but without steering clear of any areas. Nor did he feel the need to use any “back of the hand” crap. I remained perfectly still, jaw clenched tight.

The lord finally stood from a crouch after running his hands down each of my legs. “To the center,” he said, voice even more intense than before. He said something in demon, and Gestamar gave a rumbled response in kind.

The summoner took my arm again and firmly guided me to the center of the circle, maneuvering between some of the sigils and passing straight through others. Where they touched, my skin tingled, and some tugged at me as if reluctant to let me pass.

“On your back,” he said, voice lofty, though it held the faintest touch of a waver that made me think his entire attitude was an act. More games to keep me off balance? If so, the combined effect was certainly working.

Sweat stung my armpits and lower back as I obediently lay supine in the middle of the diagram. The lord approached and crouched, pulled the hood off. I blinked and looked up at him as I tried my damndest to hide how very fucking scared I was.

He lifted a hand and with a casual flick toward each of my limbs, arcanelly bound me spread-eagled, much like the bas-relief. My fear spiked with the sudden restraint, and I bit back a noise of dismay. At least I wasn’t naked.

Mzatal looked down at me for a few more heartbeats, then stood and moved to the perimeter of the circle above my head and out of my sight, unless I wanted to do some serious neck-craning. Which I really didn’t. I lightly tested the bonds and confirmed that I wasn’t getting free of this until the lord released me. Instead, I focused on regulating my breathing and tried, unsuccessfully, to *not* wonder what the fuck was about to happen.

The patterns of the diagram brightened even as an intense white light flared into existence above my head. I squeezed my eyes shut as the light seemed to permeate every cell of my being, pulsing with the thrum of the room. It didn’t hurt, but it was definitely odd.

After what felt like a few minutes, Mzatal crouched beside me again. His hand trailed from my throat down my torso, in a light probing touch so clinical that it left zero impression of sexual intent. His hand paused at my belly. A slow warmth formed just beneath my skin, almost pleasant at first, but soon progressing to distinctly uncomfortable. I swallowed hard, felt his hand tighten into a fist on my stomach as the warmth shifted to a sensation not unlike a side-stitch, though about three times worse. I tensed as the stitch increased, clenching my teeth against making any sort of *shit that hurts* noise. Right when I was ready to give up on the whole being stoic thing, a flash of heat went through my abdomen and the cramping sensation vanished.

Fear coiled in my gut to replace the cramp-from-hell, and I took several ragged breaths. I badly wanted to ask what the fuck was going on, but I knew he wouldn’t answer. Mzatal’s hand slid back up to the center of my chest. Once again warmth formed under my skin, followed by a sharp cramp, but this felt much worse than the first. A whimper slid from me despite my best intentions. I kept my hands clenched into fists, shaking as the cramp deepened.

“Hold the flows as they are *without wavering*,” Mzatal said to the summoner. I heard the snarl beneath his words and had zero doubt that the blond man paled a bit. I knew I would have.

He splayed his hand hard upon my chest. I opened my eyes to look up at him, nearly regretting it as I saw the dark expression on his face. He flicked his gaze toward Gestamar, said something in demon, lip curled. I heard the name “Rhyzkahl” as he increased the pressure on my chest, and I fought back panic.

“Idris, prepare,” he said, voice uncompromising and intense. He lifted his open hand to about six inches above my sternum.

Searing heat ripped through my chest. I screamed, arching my back as I pulled against the arcane bindings. Memory flared of another searing pain driving through my chest, and I screamed again as I fought to get free so I could scrabble at whatever had caused it and save myself.

And then pain and memory were both gone, leaving only echoes behind. I collapsed back, biting my lips against sobs. Tears trickled down the side of my face, and I tried to focus on how annoying it was that I couldn’t wipe them away. Anger was better than terror and, at the moment, it wasn’t that hard to be pissed off. Except for the part where I got to kiss Ryan, this had been a colossally shitty day from start to finish, and it wasn’t even over.

Mzatal’s eyes swept over me before they returned to mine. “Now your Lord is stripped of the means to retrieve you,” he said, voice dark with a deep vehemence. He slipped the collar back onto my neck before I had time to even flinch. An ache went through me as the arcane faded to a fraction of its fullness.

He stood smoothly, and with an efficient sweep of his arm erased all the patterns and released my bindings. I pulled my limbs in and struggled to sit up, clutching at my chest even though the pain was long gone. I hadn’t known that Rhyzkahl had a way to rescue me, but somehow, taking that hope away, even without my previous knowledge of it, cut even more cruelly. I wasn’t at all accustomed to feeling helpless and vulnerable, and I deeply despised it.

The lord stepped away from me, looked to Gestamar. “Take her.”

To my shock the demon simply scooped me up in his arms. I clung to him, weirdly relieved since I wasn’t sure I’d be able to walk. Beyond all the other stresses of this gloriously shitty day, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d eaten, and my body was intent on reminding me of that fact. I leaned my head on Gestamar’s chest and allowed myself to wallow in misery for awhile, as he passed out of the chamber and down several corridors. He carried me through a musty common area with tables and sofa-like seating and into a small sparse room, maybe eight foot square, furnished with only a narrow bed and a side table with a mug on it. A single tiny window high on the far wall framed a patch of dusk-blue sky and a single winking star. Unlike the room just outside, this one was completely dust-free and the blanket was clean and freshly laid on the bed. A door to the right appeared to lead to a bathroom type of place.

The demon set me down, far more gently than I expected, and guided me to sit on the edge of the bed.

“What happens now?” I asked, too exhausted to hide the quaver in my voice.

He plucked the mug from the table and pressed it into my hands. “You drink,” he rumbled.

I didn’t know squat about antiques, but I was pretty sure the mug was the real thing. Silver, lined with gold, a vertical ribbed pattern around it and leaves etched on its gracefully curved handle. It sure looked like something from Earth. The murky brown contents weren’t nearly as appealing. I lifted the mug dubiously and took a careful sip. It reminded me of liquefied unsalted stew, but with a hint of bitterness that I couldn’t identify. My starving body probably wouldn’t have cared what it tasted like, but I had to appreciate that it didn’t completely suck. I finished the contents, then placed the mug back on the table, hand shaking only slightly. “And now?”

“You sleep,” the demon replied.

“And then what?” I asked, meeting his eyes. “What’s going to happen to me? Why am I

here?”

He snorted. “Because Mzatal wants you here.”

I scowled at the non-answer, turned away from him, and curled up on the bed.

“You are not dead,” he said. “Consider that, Kara Gillian.” I heard him exit and close the door.

And I did. Every moment I continued to draw breath was a moment more to figure out how to get myself out of this shit. I listened carefully but heard no sound of a bolt or lock. I didn’t figure it could be that easy, but I had to try. I sat up, padded over to the door and laid my hands flat against it. A faint buzzing sensation cued me that it was likely warded, meaning arcanelly locked. I pushed the handle down slowly so as not to make noise, then gave it a tug. It didn’t budge. Damn.

I poked around the room for anything of interest or of use, but found nothing pointy, sharp, or weaponizable. I looked up at the high window with its patch of darkening sky and a few stars. I shoved the bed under it, and lifted the table onto the bed, bracing it against the wall. Yep that did it. I climbed up my makeshift scaffold and got to nose level with the sill, high enough to at least to check it out.

I pressed my hand against the glass and found only the barest whisper of arcane. Since it had a latch begging to be tried, I lifted it and pulled. *Holy shit!* The window swung inward with a creak of hinges and a shower of dust. My heart pounded with the possibilities. Judging by what I could see from my position of barely peering over the sill—which was pretty much sky—I figured I was on at least the second story.

*Okay, Jill, I’m going to use those muscles you’ve been trying to get me to build.* Exercise and I didn’t get along, but somehow Jill—the crime scene technician who’d become my best friend—could get me going. Sometimes. I hauled myself up in a klutzy thrash and wiggle and managed to get a grip on the outside lip with my arms supported on the wide sill, and the rest of me dangling inside. Great. Now what.

I got an answer I didn’t want. The stars winked out to pitch black, and a pair of blood red eyes hovered a couple of feet in front of me. The faint scent of sulphur drifted in, and I had no doubt I was face to face with a *zhurn*, a tenth-level demon that was like shadow and night. Crapsticks.

“Greetings, honored one,” I said, voice strained as I struggled to maintain the awkward hold. “Nice night.” Obviously escape this way wasn’t happening tonight.

The *zhurn*’s voice crackled like flames on wet kindling. “No egress this way, summoner.”

“Yeah,” I said, easing back down to the tabletop. “I kinda get that.”

“Sleep,” it said, reaching with a shadowy extension to pull the window closed. The red eyes disappeared, but the stars didn’t come back. Damn *zhurn* had closed its eyes and camped over my window.

I climbed down and dragged the table off the bed. Weariness crashed in. It had been a long and particularly shitty day. Sleep wasn’t a bad idea. I needed rest to be sharp tomorrow and ready for whatever Lord Asstard had to throw at me. I curled up under the blanket and drifted immediately, thoughts of Tessa, Jill, Zack . . . and Ryan, swirling.

“I’m coming back, guys, don’t worry,” I murmured. Even with all the uncertainty and misery, I knew I’d have no trouble getting to sleep. Thankfully, I was right.