

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.

Chapter 3

I had no idea how long I slept. The small window high in the wall let sunlight in along with a glimpse of rich blue sky but no other clue as to time of day. It had been twilight when I went to sleep, so apparently it was a full night plus some, give or take a million years. I sat up, absently rubbing my chest, then scowled as I realized I was doing so. The memory of the pain still haunted me.

The adjoining room was, indeed, a bathroom type place, and though the facilities weren't the usual flush-toilet sort, it wasn't difficult to figure out how it worked. A low table held a basin, a cloth, and a jug of water, though nothing as pedestrian as a toothbrush. Still, I washed my face and used a corner of the cloth to scrub the worst of the fuzz from my teeth. I even stripped and washed the parts of me that were stinky. Putting the damn black shift back on wasn't high on my list of favorite things to do, though. What, prisoners of demonic lords weren't allowed underwear?

As I finished and came back out to the bedchamber, the door opened. Gestamar stepped in, carrying two mugs.

"Drink this quickly," he said, holding one out for me. "You have been summoned by Mzatal."

"Can I have some different clothes?" I asked. "A hairbrush? Anything?"

His lip curled, exposing sharp fangs that gleamed white. Apparently *he* had a toothbrush, or the demon equivalent. "No need for different garb," he told me. "What you have is sufficient for now. And if you do not drink, you will go hungry. Your choice."

Scowling, I took the mug and downed the contents. It wasn't bad, but I definitely wanted solid food sometime soon. This was enough to keep me alive, and that was about it. Then again, my stomach was so queasy from nerves, solid food probably wouldn't stay down for long.

I set the mug aside, and he passed the second one to me, simply saying *chak*, which I assumed to be the name of the beverage. The rich brown liquid steamed with a pleasantly fragrant nutty, earthy scent. I took a sip, then another. It wasn't coffee, but it was hot and pretty damn tasty.

Gestamar pointed toward the door. I took that as my cue to move and, after one last gulp, reluctantly relinquished the mug and its precious contents. Sighing, I dug my fingers through my snarled hair as I exited.

Gestamar directed me to an antechamber, and inside was a set of double doors.

Two life-sized statues of demon-marble flanked the doors. On the left, a woman of mature but indeterminate years stood in tall grace. Though her face was serious, a smile played at the corners of her mouth. A single shoulder strap secured her masterfully carved close-fitting dress, revealing more than it covered. On the right, a young man in a RenFaire outfit stood with his arms folded casually across his chest and a mischievous smile lighting his face.

I peered at them, so exquisitely sculpted I almost swore they were breathing. "Who are they?" I glanced over at the *reyza*, then back to the statues.

"Nefhotep and Giovanni Racchelli," he said. "Favorites of Szerain. Giovanni died young." He shifted his weight from foot to foot and settled into a crouch. "Nefhotep lived here for over two hundred years."

I blinked in surprise. "Humans?"

“Yes.” He adjusted his wings. “From the time long ago when the ways were open,” he said, lifting a claw toward the young man then toward the woman. “And fully open, very long ago.”

The weird déjà vu feeling crept through me again as I looked at the statue of Giovanni. I knew him, it tried to tell me. Even now I could picture his quick smile and infectious laugh, and for just the briefest instant it was as if the statue moved to turn his teasing grin upon me. My breath caught, my stomach fluttered, my heart pounded, and damn it all, my face heated in—a *blush*? What the hell?

I squeezed my eyes shut to dispel the illusion and turned away, mouth dry. The sensations lingered for another few heartbeats before fading.

“Szerain has always had the gift of capturing the very essence of his subjects,” the reyza said, peering at the statues.

“He carved these?” I asked in surprise. Gestamar nodded. Had I ever seen Ryan show any sort of artistic ability? I couldn’t think of a single instance, which sent a weird and sad pang through me.

My musing came to an abrupt end as Mzatal strode in, passing me without a glance. He still wore the Armani suit and white shirt, but had changed his tie to one of blood red, and the pattern of his braid seemed different. The double doors swung open before he even reached them, and he entered the room beyond, without the slightest hitch in his stride.

Gestamar stood and gestured for me to go in. I did so, jaw tight, hating how grubby and foolish I felt in the damn shift.

With its vaulted ceiling and two huge unbroken windows on the far wall, the room felt spacious despite its small area—not much larger than my living room back home. I couldn’t tell what purpose the room had, though, since it was empty of furnishings. The only object remaining was what appeared to be a statue adjacent one of the windows, covered in a white cloth.

Mzatal stood facing the other window, hands behind his back. I stopped a few feet from him.

“So. Great,” I said, folding my arms over my chest, doing my damndest to marshal something resembling a strong attitude. “You have me. You’ve made sure that Rhyzkahl can’t get me back. I have a comfy cell, and crap food, and no toothbrush. Now what?”

Mzatal slowly turned to face me. His eyes met mine, and I suddenly realized that the absence of a toothbrush really wasn’t so bad after all, considering. My mouth went dry as he approached, and I had to steel myself against a shudder as he moved around and behind me. I felt his hands on my shoulders, and then a heartbeat later he lifted the collar from my neck. The arcane clarified and brightened. The room was well-shielded, though I didn’t really need to look at the patterns and sigils to know that. There was no way he’d take the collar off me in a room that wasn’t, and run the risk that Rhyzkahl could track me.

He remained behind me, unnervingly silent, though I could feel him there, his aura alone near overwhelming. Potency like a wave of nightmare engulfed me as he leaned in closer. “What now, you ask?” he breathed in a quietly menacing voice that sent terror streaking through me. “I decide if you live or die.” He paused. “I decide *how* you live, or how you die.”

My breath caught in a low sob. I hated him more than anyone or anything at that moment. “Okay, I get it,” I managed, nursing what dull anger I could. “You hold full control. You have me scared shitless. You win. Happy now? Whatever this is all about, whether it’s me living or dying, fucking do it already.”

He continued the circle and stopped in front of me, a faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth. Before I could get pissed at his amusement at my expense, he lifted his hand and looped a softly glowing strand of potency around my throat, then turned, drawing me behind him like a dog on a leash as he approached the covered statue. I seethed, but was nevertheless grateful for the over-the-top display of dominance. I could do anger a lot better than terror.

He stopped a few feet from the statue and moved behind me once again, but this time he gripped my head between his hands, as if to make absolutely certain I couldn't look away.

"Elinor." He spoke the word like an invocation piercing my essence as he stripped the cloth from the statue without touching it. And there she was. Elinor. Youthful. Slight of build with a sweet face that radiated innocence. Sudden swirling dizziness put a stop to my observation.

I jerked, and only the lord's grip on my head kept me from staggering as memories flooded in, memories that I absolutely knew weren't my own. Yet as they poured over me and through me, they drove my own existence and identity before them. The room melted and reformed.

"Come, dear one," Lord Rhyzkahl says, holding his hand out to me, broad expanse of cloudless sky beyond him framed by columns. My stomach flutters, and I feel the blush rise in my cheeks. I smile and take his hand. Anything for his gaze, his touch. Will he kiss me? Breathless.

The memory shifted dizzily.

I wring my hands, banished for the moment to the antechamber. Fear. Uncertainty. I hate it when they argue. I listen to the words though do not understand more than that Lord Rhyzkahl dominates this one and Lord Szerain counters. Do not faint. Do not faint. Do not faint.

Shift.

The ritual seethes around me, tearing at me. Pain blossoms in my chest. Please. Pleeeease. I don't understand. I don't understand!

Shift.

Giovanni places the small cakes one at a time before me, counting. His eyes twinkle, and I cannot concentrate on the numbers. He will surely think me a silly little thing if I cannot even learn to count to ten in Italian. Uno. Due. Tre. Quattro. He touches the back of my hand and smiles. I am undone!

Shift.

Cakes. Cakes. A statue. Birthday cake. Tessa grinning.

Pancakes. Lots of pancakes at Lake o' Butter. Jill eating pancakes across the table. Dear One. Cinque. Sei. Sette. Jill. Jill. Otto. Nove. Dieci. Ryan laughing next to me, and Zack rolling his eyes.

Through the maelstrom of memories I became distantly aware of my own whimpering and an increasing grip on my head. My breath hissed through my teeth, and I struggled to focus on the statue as just that—a statue. These weren't my memories. The dreams, the déjà vu, all this . . . This wasn't from me. I was *not* Elinor.

My hands clenched and unclenched as I called up and galvanized my own memories: My mother and father, growing up with Tessa, learning to summon, graduating from the police academy, my first pursuit on foot, the first time I had sex, crawfish and beer, becoming a detective, the pride of putting bad guys in jail, the first time I got punched by a suspect and how I put him in handcuffs, becoming friends with Jill, giggling over reality TV, Christmases and birthdays, Ryan's quick smile and Zack's laugh, Eilahn and Fuzzykins . . .

My breath slowed as the chaos of intruder memories subsided. I felt the lord behind me, hands still on my head, and I knew in that instant that not only was he deeply reading my thoughts, but also that he was poised to snap my neck depending on his assessment of me.

“Please don’t kill me,” I said, voice calm and quiet.

His grip eased ever so slightly, though he didn’t release me. “Why?”

I didn’t hesitate with my reply. “Because I matter.”

He held the grip for another three heartbeats, then withdrew his hands and dissipated the strand of potency from around my throat. He stepped fully away from me and returned to his former position by the window, looking out, hands behind his back. I closed my eyes for a few seconds as I processed the undeniable fact that I’d been a hair’s breadth from death. I knew without a doubt that if I’d been unable to fight my way out of that storm of memories I’d be a twitching corpse on the floor at this moment.

But why?

I wasn’t out of the woods yet, but I fully intended to take a bit of ease in this tiny victory. I scrubbed a hand over my face. “Who was she? This Elinor chick.”

He surprised me by actually answering the question. “A summoner of adequate aptitude from your seventeenth century, trained by me for a short time, then fostered by Szerain and Rhyzkahl.”

“If she was merely adequate,” I asked, frowning, “then how the hell did she damn near destroy this world?”

“That, Kara Gillian, remains clouded.” He turned back to me, shaking his head. “Something of her nature, of her essence, escalated the ritual beyond recovery, and Szerain remains mute.” His eyes narrowed with a touch of what looked like disapproval. “I know it was not within her skills as a summoner to call such power.”

I put what few pieces I had together. “I’m not this Elinor, so what’s the deal?” I knew I wasn’t some sort of reincarnation of her, but I also assumed she and I had a connection. I just didn’t know what it was.

“No, upon assessment it is clear that you are not a direct essence transfer,” he said, echoing my own thoughts. “Your innate energy signature mirrors hers, but is fully yours.” He narrowed his eyes. “But there is another piece of your essence, one that has the feel of an afterthought. This is the part that holds and generates the memories of Elinor and houses a fragment of who she is. Its encapsulation is unconventional, yet it is somehow integral to you.”

I blinked and tried to make sense of that but gave up. “I have no idea what you just said.”

He leaned toward me a smidge, not seeming at all annoyed by my cluelessness. “An energy signature is much like a fingerprint, though not utterly unique. Close matches are possible. Though, without extraordinary means, the chances of locating a specific signature are infinitesimal given the sheer number of possibilities. I can only speculate at this point. It is as though this fragment of Elinor attached to you, became a part of you, because of the energy signature match. Why or how,” he said with a shake of his head, “I do not yet know.”

The fact that he took the time to explain it obviously meant something. Too bad I had no idea what.

“Like donating a kidney,” I said, folding my arms over my chest.

Mzatal lifted an eyebrow, head tilting a bit. “Perhaps, though with a deeper influence.”

Pieces fell into place. “Ah, and that’s why I’m so popular—because I have Elinor’s magic kidney.”

Mzatal's face shifted from the hint of curiosity to the impassive mask. This dude had zero sense of humor. "Yes, it is," he said. "Some seek through speculation, and some through smatterings of knowledge." His eyes were hard upon me. "You are a dangerous unknown, Kara Gillian."

I lifted my chin, mouth tight. "And dangerous things are either used, destroyed, or—" I thought of my bare feet and black shift and obvious prisoner status. "—contained."

"Unless the unknown becomes known," he said. "Then the possibilities shift."

And how the hell was I supposed to make the unknown known in a way that would keep me alive and whole? I sighed inwardly. Right now I wanted coffee and real food, in that order. *Might as well wish for a personal visit from Santa Claus while you're at it*, I chided myself.

He approached me, intense and coiled and calm as he reached and gripped my chin in his hand. His eyes were like ancient pale grey flint shot with silver. A palpable potency radiated from him that sent goosebumps skimming over me. "What is your heart's desire?" he asked, as if my life depended on my answer.

And it most likely did. I returned his gaze as steadily as I could. "To reach my full potential."

He held my chin for several long heartbeats before releasing it, only to seize my left wrist and pull my arm forward. I clenched my teeth as he dropped his eyes to the mark and laid a hand over it. He went utterly still for a moment, then drew a deep breath and brought his gaze up to mine.

When the lord spoke it was as if he forced the words out through gritted teeth, though his face betrayed no tension. "This *mark* does nothing to further that desire. Nor does it serve my purposes for you to bear it." Mzatal released my wrist and clasped his hands behind his back. "I will remove Rhyzkahl's stigma and determine what possibilities unfold," he said with icy conviction.

I shook my head in denial at the thought of having the mark removed, an unnamed dread stilling my breath. "Use, destroy, or contain?"

The lord lowered his head. "Your parameters. Use is preferable. Destruction, if use is impractical or impossible. I choose not to maintain a prisoner," he said with a smile that held no comfort.

My throat tightened, and my mouth felt full of sand. As he'd promised, he made the decisions on how I was to live or how I was to die. "And what sort of use would you make of me?"

Mzatal looked upon me as though seeking to determine some unknown. "The destruction aspect is far simpler. Slay and then disperse the essence." He paused. "Use depends upon what remains of you when I remove the stigma," he said, eyes dropping to the mark.

I fought to control the cold panic that thrashed within me. "What remains"? What the fuck does that mean?"

The skin around his eyes tightened. "Hostile removal of a mark is extremely rare and the process extreme. Madness is a possibility. Removal of this construct of Rhyzkahl's risks essence sheer," he said, with a shake of his head and a touch of a frown. "Nothing of use to either of us would remain."

I stared agape then recovered enough to speak. "Are you fucking kidding me? Then why . . . ?" I shook my head in disbelief that anything could be this convoluted. "You're going to try it anyway, aren't you? You don't give a fuck if I end up broken. It accomplishes the same thing. My destruction. *You* have nothing to lose by trying."

“No, I do not,” he said as though my destruction meant nothing. “And much potential to gain. As do you. The risk is worth the consequences to both.”

I snorted a laugh at the absurdity. “Oh, sure. A little madness or fucked-up essence is a walk in the park for me and totally worth it for some magic tattoo removal.” Sweat trickled down my sides beneath the damn shift.

“Your ignorance in the matter does not change the potentials or the values.” He shifted his attention to Gestamar and spoke in demon. I caught the summoner’s name twice—Idris—but couldn’t get any other sense of what was said. Gestamar grunted and bounded out.

Mzatal drew a deep breath and released it slowly. “Kara Gillian,” he said in a potent melodic tone that drove straight through to my core. “You are a dangerous unknown. I prefer you to become a dangerous known with possibilities other than death.” He paused and regarded me with keen intensity. “But if deep assessment reveals full essence-binding by Rhyzkahl, then I will have no option but to slay you.”

I dragged my hand across my forehead. “Whew! And I thought today wasn’t going to be shittier than yesterday!” I said.

“It is in truth a most fortunate day for you,” he said as he raked a gaze over me. “Wait here,” he ordered, then turned and exited, closing the doors with a flick of his fingers.

Silence descended, broken only by my unsteady breathing. *Dispersal, essence sheer, madness.* Right now the available options were all pretty fucking heinous. Even if I survived the removal fairly whole, I’d be nothing more than a slave. He’d stated quite clearly his desire to use me.

My fear settled into a weird acceptance. There was one other possible out. Mzatal had told me there was less chance of making it through the void a second time. Less chance. Not “no chance.” And why would he need to disperse my essence after slaying me if there truly was no chance? *In other words, the available options are “shitty” and “shittier.”*

I heard two demons conversing outside the door, and cold slammed through me again. Gestamar back from having Idris prepare some new, horrific ritual? No way was I just going to stand here twiddling my thumbs.

Oddly calm, my gaze swept the room, even though I knew damn well there was no convenient knife or noose. Only the damn statue, and broad thick windows covered in wards. I moved to the window near the statue and put my hand toward it. A tingle of pain shot through it, along with a surge of queasiness. *But I’ve gone through wards before, I reminded myself grimly. I’m wearing the collar. It’ll suck, but dying for good or having my essence ripped apart will suck worse.* What choice did I have?

None.

I couldn’t let myself think about it anymore. If I did I might lose my nerve and would probably never have another chance to take the plunge. Literally. My heart beat triple time, as if counting off my remaining seconds.

I set my shoulder against Elinor’s hip, dug my bare feet into the floor and pushed. She was a heavy bitch, but no match for my desperation. With a creak of stone, the statue slowly tipped, then toppled into the broad window with a satisfying *crash*, creating a sufficiently large hole.

Her head and shoulders protruded from the window into the open air. I clambered onto the statue, hissing as the first wards stung like a thousand bees. I pushed against them, feeling as if I was slogging through goo. A headache spiked as I forced my way forward. Only about a foot more and I could fall. Holy shit, it would suck, but staying here would suck worse. I dimly heard

a bellow and the crash of the door being thrown open. Pain and nausea spiraled higher, and I gasped raggedly. I was on her shoulders now. Another inch and—

A different pain speared through my head as a clawed hand tangled in my hair. I let out a cry of pain and scrambled to grab at the statue's head. So damn close! Gestamar bellowed, pulling at me with a hard grip in my hair and on my thigh. Desperate, I tried to slash my forearm across a shard of glass. Oddly it didn't break the skin any more than a piece of wood might, but the movement caused me to lose my grip on Elinor's head. Pain from the wards seared through me again as the growling demon dragged me bodily back into the room and away from the window.

My knees buckled as the throbbing headache tripled in intensity, but Gestamar shifted his grip to my upper arms and kept me from completely collapsing. Maybe my head would explode and take care of the whole thing. That'd be convenient. Nausea rose, and I tasted bile. I'd almost made it through the wards. Another few seconds . . .

Mzatal entered and stopped before me. I dragged my gaze up to him, but the headache pounded so fiercely there seemed to be three of him. All three Mzatal lowered their heads and regarded me while Gestamar held me firmly before him. "Loss to wandering is a near certainty for death and a second passage through the void," Mzatal told me, mouth pursing in a frown. "A poor choice. A poor option."

Wandering. *Like Tessa*, I realized numbly. Not dispersed but lost in the void. Just as bad. Perhaps even worse.

I opened my mouth to tell him that he hadn't presented any better options, but the nausea rose instead, and I spewed what little was in my gut onto the floor between us. Mzatal took a smooth half-step back to avoid the splatter, more of which ended up on me than him.

"The removal will take place in two days, after we return to my realm," he told me, completely unperturbed, as if I hadn't just tried to jump out of a window and then puked on the floor. "Until then, Safar is your guard and guardian."

My head pounded as I shakily wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. Holy fuck, but I'd never hated anyone as much as I hated this fucking lord at this moment. Misery coiled in my empty stomach as if taunting me that it was there instead of food.

Mzatal regarded me. "It serves your purpose and mine for the unknown to become known, and Szerain's realm holds many keys to unlocking your value. Do not waste the opportunity, Kara Gillian," he said, tone rich and intense. His eyes remained on me for a moment more, then he turned and departed, hands behind his back.

Gestamar released me as another reyza entered, smaller and sharper in features than Gestamar. I swayed and rubbed at my temples, trying hard not to whimper as the two had a brief conversation in demon. I'd never had a migraine before, but I could only imagine this was what one was like.

Safar took hold of my arm in a careful grip, steadying me. "I am Safar, summoner."

"I'm Kara Gillian," I managed.

"Fair greetings, Kara Gillian," he rumbled as he gently moved me toward the door.

"Come."

I didn't resist and moved where he directed. A numbness descended on me as he led me through corridors, and my headache receded somewhat as we moved further away from the room and broken window. It still hurt, but now it was more like bad-hangover than alien-about-to-burst-from-my-forehead. Even my nausea retreated. Now I was mostly starving.

“Gestamar is having a draught prepared for your headache,” the reyza told me as he maneuvered me through a debris-strewn hallway.

“Oh. Thanks,” I said. Not Mzatal. Gestamar. Maybe Mzatal didn’t give a fuck how miserable I was. Hell, there was no maybe about it.

My heel came down on a shard of glass as we walked but, to my surprise and relief, no slicing pain came with it. Remembering, I lifted my arm and peered at the long scratch from the window. It was an owie and little more.

“What is this stuff?” I said, nudging a piece with my big toe. “It’s not real glass, is it?”

Safar snorted. “It is very real, though not made like the glass of Earth. It is closer to a resin. Stronger, insulates against heat and cold more effectively, and does not cut like your glass.”

Without Gestamar breathing down my neck I could slow down enough to take in more of Szerain’s palace. I had to wonder how much of a hand he had in its actual creation since the whole thing was like a work of art, mostly curves and graceful arcs—even the doors, with sharp angles kept to a minimum. Portraits, paintings, and statues were ubiquitous—humans, demons, and some—well, I didn’t have a clue. Déjà vu integrated like an extra sense. At first it freaked me out; little things like knowing how many windows would be in the next room or which hallway might lead outside. It wasn’t always right, but enough for me to have no doubt Elinor had spent some time here.

Safar finally entered a chamber that wasn’t my cell. A big window draped in dust-free emerald silk dominated the far wall of a room about the size of my bedroom at home. In other words, not very big. A comfy looking chair of golden velvety stuff nestled by the window. A larger table and matching chair of heavy oak or similar wood dominated the center of the room. Déjà vu reigned supreme in here, and I knew without doubt that a bedchamber was beyond the closed door on the wall to the right.

Safar guided me into the chair at the table and then released me. I sat gratefully, rested my elbows on the table and rubbed at my head, grimacing. He stepped back into the corridor for a brief moment then returned with a mug that he placed before me. “From Gestamar,” he stated.

I took the mug and peered briefly at the contents. Couldn’t tell a damn thing about it except that it was liquid and it had a weird and tangy scent. Fuck it. It wasn’t as if this day could get any worse if the stuff turned out to be foul.

I slugged it down with only a slight grimace. It wasn’t vile, though I doubted I’d be asking for seconds.

“Your chambers here,” Safar said as I placed the empty mug on the table. “Bed and bath there.” He gestured toward the door with a claw.

“My chambers?” I said. “You’re not taking me back to that other room?” My spirits dared to rise a few millimeters.

He crouched and shook his head. “*Dahn*.”

I peered at him. “How hard is it to learn y’all’s language?” I asked, pretty sure it was hard as hell given the gutturals, stops, and sounds that were just plain weird. *Kri* meant “yes” and *dahn* meant “no.” I’d picked that up from my dealings with demons through the years but not a lot else, since the demons I summoned all spoke or at least understood some English.

Safar spread his wings in a bone-popping stretch then settled them again. “Difficult for humans. Most who spend time here learn some words and phrases. Few become conversant. Only three have gained fluency.”

Most Who Spend Time Here. *Well, let's just hope I'm not here long enough to learn more than a few phrases.* I grimaced and amended my mental statement. *And not because some asshole lord decides to kill me because he thinks I'm a threat to his world.*

"So, what do I do now?" I asked.

He peered at me. "Eat, bathe, rest, whatever you choose short of killing yourself or leaving the grounds."

"Eat?" I asked as my stomach gave an accompanying growl. "Real food?"

He bared his teeth. "Kri . . . yes. It will be here soon."

I eyed him dubiously. "Not that broth stuff, right? Real, solid food?"

Safar rumbled in what might have been amusement. "Real, solid food."

My spirits rose a couple of inches this time. "Any chance I can get clothing? Underwear? Nifty shit like that?"

"In the bedchamber, awaiting."

Now for the money question. I pursed my lips. "What about a toothbrush?"

"You will find the basics in either the bedchamber or the bath chamber."

Hot damn. I pushed up from the table and headed for the bedroom, along the way realizing that my headache had vanished in the past couple of minutes.

Relief wound through me when I found my own clothing and shoes on the bed, obviously clean. I checked out the bath chamber next and stopped dead in my tracks, eyes fixed on the graceful gold-stone bath tastefully adorned with a pattern of leaves.

"You carved this for me?" I hear myself say, barely able to contain my delight.

Szerain sits on the edge of the tub, fingers idly tracing patterns of light on the surface of the water. He looks over at me, smiles. "Finished only yesterday. You will abide for some time to come. Rhyzkahl and I came to agreement."

"And what of Giovanni?" I ask, barely daring to breathe or hope. He looks away, and my heart sinks. "My Lord?"

And there I was alone in the bath chamber staring at a tub already full of steaming water and no clue what happened to Giovanni. Like a fucking cliffhanger. Gah! I tried to get the image back but no luck.

Well, there was no doubt that Elinor had a thing for this Giovanni. *How did all that turn out?* I wondered. Elinor died. I knew that much. Murdered? Was that it? I couldn't shake the utter certainty that there was something more to her death than simply being consumed in a gate. Not that there was anything simple about that, but still. And then the biggest mystery of them all: How had a slip of a girl with only adequate summoning skills come so close to destroying the world? There was a missing piece to all of this. *I knew* that. Even if no one else knew what had really happened, surely I could figure it out, right? After all, I had the best eyewitness camped out in my head.

And then there was Szerain. I took a step forward and touched the carvings on the lip of the bath where the memory-vision had been. He didn't look anything like Ryan in the face, but his build, green gold eyes and hair were right. Well, Szerain's hair was longer than Ryan's FBI-regulation cut, but the color and texture were a match. What else about him was different? Elinor hadn't been afraid of him. That was some consolation at least.

Every answer seemed to raise two more questions. I gave a mental shrug and dipped my hand in the water. Plush towels, basic toiletry items—including the much-desired toothbrush—and a full hot bath. Looked like just what I needed. Yeah, a nice long soak could make up for a lot.

I stuck my head out of the bedchamber. “I’m going to bathe, okay?”

Safar snorted and crouched, which I took for acknowledgment.

I returned to the bath, stripped quickly, and sank to my neck in the water. For a moment I wondered who the hell filled the damn thing since there was nothing resembling a faucet, but then decided I really didn’t care. It was completely awesome. Would’ve been better if I didn’t have a death-or-madness sentence coming up in two days, but what the hell. All the more reason to enjoy the shit while I could.