

Chapter 3

Arcane protections rippled over me as I drove up the winding driveway toward my house, and the familiar pine woods soon blocked all view of the gate, road, and outside world. A not-unpleasant background tingle touched my senses from the arcane valve by my pond like a subtle welcome home. It was one outlet of the complex relief valve system between the demon realm and earth, except instead of water or gas the system regulated arcane power.

My spirits lifted more as my lovely blue, single-story Acadian came into sight. My grandparents had built the house, situating it over a confluence of Earth potency flows and atop a low hill. The elevation made it possible to have a basement—a rarity in south Louisiana due to the high water table, yet perfect for a demon summoning chamber. My grandmother had also been a summoner, which meant it had likely been intended as such from the beginning.

To my surprise, I spotted Ryan's Crown Victoria in its usual place in the driveway as though he hadn't been incommunicado since my return. After parking, I hurried up the steps and into the house, more than ready for long overdue answers. No sign of him in the living room or kitchen, but as I turned to check the basement I caught sight of Jill through the kitchen window. She stood in the backyard, arms akimbo and facing away from me while several yards behind her, Ryan paced, head lowered.

The screen door creaked as I stepped out onto the porch,

and the very pregnant Jill glanced my way. “I was about to call you,” she said. “He showed up a couple of minutes ago and went straight there.”

There was a circular concrete slab that I’d paid several nice rednecks to pour for me last week. More importantly, it was the mini-nexus. In the years since my grandparents built the house, the confluence had drifted from beneath the basement to my backyard—similar to the movement of tectonic plates. Several weeks ago, Mzatal and I spent the better part of a day refining and enhancing it to create an arcane focal point much like the nexus in each demonic lord’s realm. Without othersight or arcane talent, it looked like smooth concrete and nothing more. But to those who could *see* or *feel*, it pulsed as a broad circle of pale blue luminescence and radiated potency like heat from asphalt in July. It amped up any arcane rituals, patterns, or processes conducted upon it, and Mzatal had used it as a “potency recharging station” to counter the draining effects of being on Earth. Eilahn took advantage of that feature of our nexus as well, which was how she could remain here without Rhyzkahl’s support. She’d created a nest of pine boughs and leaves on the far side of the nexus, on the grass but flush against the concrete.

At the very center of the slab, stood Ryan. No, *Szerain*. The demonic lord had spent over fifteen years on Earth as Ryan, during which time he’d learned how to diminish his aura of potency and hide in the guise of a human. But he wasn’t fooling me. I had no doubt it was one hundred percent demonic lord Szerain in control out there.

A quick survey of the area revealed Eilahn on the roof of the house, along with Steev, Jill’s bodyguard. Both were syraza in human form, watching the situation unfold and ready to intervene with demon speed at the first indication of danger. Eilahn crouched atop the chimney, her gaze riveted on Szerain. Steev stood on the crest of the roof beside her, dark skinned, beautiful, and utterly motionless.

Szerain knelt and placed his palms flat on the slab. A wave of potency rolled over me, stinging like wind driven

sand and setting the grass a foot around the concrete eerily vertical and vividly chartreuse.

Jill took a step back from the unnerving display as I moved up beside her. In the next instant the grass flattened toward the center, and I felt a tugging tickle as potency flowed toward Szerain. On my torso the eleven sigil scars left by Rhyzkahl prickled and itched while the twelfth—the sigil Szerain had altered and ignited—began to pulse at the small of my back.

Holding back a shudder, I sought a clue of Szerain's purpose as I concentrated on the feel of the potency flow and the reaction of my scars. "He say what he's doing?"

"Not a word," Jill said. "I might as well be a recording of 'Where have you been?' and 'What are you doing?'"

I had no answer to the "where" part, but I knew the "what"—at least vaguely, which was more than I would have had a year ago. Mzatal's training, along with all the intense practical experience of the past year, allowed me to discern that Szerain drew a delicate web of potency toward him, like a fisherman hauling in a net. But what was he trying to catch?

A pins-and-needles sensation prickled over me as I stepped to within a few inches of the outer edge of the nexus. "Ryan—*Szerain*—what are you looking for?"

"Not now," he growled.

Annoyed, I bit back a tart response. "I don't exactly know what he's doing," I said to Jill, "but disrupting it might not be the best plan since possible worst case scenarios could include the end of the world as we know it."

"Oh, is that all?" She folded her arms over her belly and narrowed her eyes at me. "How do you know he's not *trying* to end the world as we know it?"

Her remark hit too close to the truth for my comfort. Centuries ago, Szerain had triggered a cataclysm in the demon realm—changing that world drastically if not actually ending it. Moreover, for the past fifteen years he'd been imprisoned and exiled to Earth for an offense I had no information about. He'd only been free a short time and surely

wasn't embroiled in anything that intense. Yet. I was *almost* positive. Gah.

I kept my expression confident. "I'm forming a judgment based on what I can sense," I gestured toward Szerain, "along with the fact that he hasn't screwed us over yet," *that we know of*, I silently added, "and my hope that I'm not being an idiot."

That final one was the kicker. My history with Szerain left me with more questions than answers. The last time I'd seen him on the nexus was shortly after the plantation conflict, when the Mraztur's "virus" threatened to strip my identity and transform me into Rhyzkahl's thrall, Rowan. Through drastic actions, Szerain removed the viral imprint in time to save me. However, the process not only allowed him to activate the twelfth sigil on my torso, but also let him reclaim his essence blade, Vsuhl. With the arcane support of the blade, he freed himself from his submersion and imprisonment as Ryan, rendering him fully able to speak and act as Szerain. Since then, to my enormous frustration, he'd given me no answers about the significance of the activated twelfth sigil or what he intended to do now that he was free.

The three essence blades were the wild cards in all of this. Millennia ago, Mzatal created Khatu for himself, Khan for Rhyzkahl, and Vsuhl for Szerain. I knew they were far more than mere knives. I'd possessed Vsuhl for a short time and *felt* its sentience, and only later realized the subtle influence it had exerted over my thoughts and feelings. Perhaps the lords weren't as susceptible to the effect as a mere human was, but they most certainly weren't immune.

Uneasy, I watched as Szerain wound in the last strands of the net. Potency like blood-red lightning and shadow arced from his fingertips to the slab then spread over the circle like crimson fire.

Rakkuhr.

Nausea slammed through me. I clamped my forearm across my belly and fought to keep my knees from buckling. My mind swam with hideous memories of the same vile potency flickering on the blade in Rhyzkahl's grasp. Steev screeched and made an inhuman leap from the roof to the

ground, with Eilahn hot on his heels. The sigil at the small of my back writhed like a living thing, and I pressed my free hand over it in a useless attempt to still it. “Szerain! Stop!”

Eilahn bristled beside me, teeth bared. “*Kiraknikahl*,” she said. The word cut through the air like a weapon. *Oath-breaker*. Growling, Steev pulled Jill back from the nexus. She’d gone pale and had both hands clasped on her belly. The twelfth sigil flared like branding heat, and I sucked in a hissing breath. Jill let out a sharp cry of pain, and Steev swept her into his arms and carried her away.

“Szerain! Stop it!” I screamed, fury rising as he continued to ignore me. How dare he use *rakkuhr* on Earth, on *my* nexus, and right next to a pregnant woman? Screw this. Maybe his intentions were all rainbows and butterflies, but how was I to know since he refused to tell me? All I had were my instincts, which told me this was *wrong* and I needed to stop it.

With Eilahn following me like a lithe shadow, I stalked the perimeter of crimson flame in search of a weak point I could use to disrupt Szerain’s process. I stopped to assess each ripple in the pattern, frustration rising as I reviewed and discarded ideas.

Without thinking, I stepped over a small dip in the grass, then paused. I’d known the shallow depression was there because it was in *my* backyard. I’d lived here most of my life and remembered the tree that fell to make the dip—even knew which hurricane brought it down. And the nexus was mine as well. I’d played a major role in creating this hot spot. My confidence flowed back in, drowning the frustration. Maybe, just maybe, the nexus would listen to its mama.

Going still, I mentally extended— not to the *rakkuhr* or Szerain, but far below, to the lightning-forged heart of the convergence. I called to it, elated as I felt a sluggish re-sponse. “That’s it,” I murmured, weirdly reminded of connecting with the groves in the demon realm. “C’mon, sweetheart. I don’t need much.”

It didn’t give me much, but it was enough. The ground shuddered, and the arcane light of Szerain’s pattern flickered and dimmed.

Szerain spun to face me, desperation radiating from him as he fought to maintain the integrity of his patterns. Locking my eyes on his, I once again called to the nexus. The air crackled with our combined intensity, but a moment later Szerain let out a strangled cry of frustration and jerked his arms down to his sides. With the abrupt motion, his arcane structures shredded, dissipating both *rakkuhr* and normal potency with a shrieking hiss. The air around it went as well, and I staggered as the brief vacuum sucked my breath away.

An instant later the sigil at the small of my back went cold and quiet. Szerain strode away from the nexus without a glance my way. Off-balance both physically and mentally, I dragged in fresh air then scrambled to follow as he headed around the house.

“Hey!” I hurried to catch up to him, Eilahn in my wake. “Damn it, Szerain. Stop and talk to me!”

“I can’t stop.” He turned brusquely toward me, though he continued to walk backward. For the first time since arriving home I got a good look at his face. Ryan’s ruggedly handsome features, but far more intense and with dark circles under keen, haunted eyes. “Especially not here,” he went on, jaw tight. “Trashing my nexus grid was like sending up a flare.”

I bristled at his arrogance. “You come here without so much as a phone call, flaunt dangerous-as-shit potency like it’s nothing, and expect me to stand by and twiddle my thumbs?”

“*Rakkuhr* saved your life not so long ago.” He pivoted sharply and continued toward the driveway.

“Trust me, I remember! And you haven’t answered any of my questions about that.” I broke into a jog to keep up with his long strides. “What’s the purpose of the twelfth sigil? Why is it active?”

“Not here. Not now,” he said without slowing.

“Why not here? Who or what are you searching for?”

“It doesn’t matter now.” He glanced back, and I saw a flicker of fear in his eyes. “This is bigger than you. Bigger than me.”

Alarm shot through me. “The Mraztur?” Rhyzkahl, Am-

kir, Jesral, and Kadir—demonic lords who wanted unrestricted access to this world and didn't care who got fucked over in the process. "Is one of them on Earth?"

Szerain barked out a laugh, short and humorless. "I'm not afraid of those assholes." He reached his car and pulled the door open. "Stay low, Kara. Stay off the radar."

"Gee, that's so helpful," I said with a sneer, but his alarm had me unsettled. "Give me a hint of what to watch out for?"

He dropped into the seat and shoved keys into the ignition. "I wish I could." Before I managed to snap back at that lame response, his entire body jerked as if he'd seized a live wire. Fear spasmed across his face again. "I *must* go," he gasped, then slammed the door and cranked the engine.

"Are you *kidding* me?" I yelled over the revving of the motor. "Goddammit, Szerain, I need to talk to you!"

But apparently he didn't need to talk to me. Without another glance my way, he threw the car into reverse, sending gravel flying as he backed up, and forcing me to retreat or get nailed by the rocks. I extended my thumb and pinky in a mocking *call me* gesture as he turned and sped down the driveway, then I scooped up the biggest chunk of gravel within reach and hurled it at his cloud of dust. "You *suck!*"

Jill waddled out the front door and onto the porch. "You okay?"

"No!" I took a breath and mentally traced the *pygah* sigil to help me calm and center. "Yes," I said with far less rage-face than before, "other than dealing with more demonic lord bullshit and having a billion unanswered questions." I quickly thanked Eilahn for her help and ordered her back to her nest to recharge, then joined Jill on the porch. Her color was back, I noted with relief. "How about you? Everything all right?"

"I think so." She rested one hand on her belly. "The bean went crazy when the grass went flat, then crazier after you yelled at Ryan to stop. Hurt like hell."

When he ignited the *rakkuhr*. It wasn't easy, but I managed to keep the frown off my face. "Different than normal?" I asked with polite interest and nothing more.

“More kicking and squirming than ever before, that’s for sure,” she said, nose wrinkling. “But since Zack’s been away recovering from the plantation stuff, there’ve been times when it’s felt as if she’s nothing but bony elbows and heels.”

“No need to worry,” I said with as straight a face as possible. “It’s just the wings and claws.”

“Don’t you dare tease me like that! I have ultrasounds that prove she’s free of wings or any other weird appendages.” Her smile eased into a frown. “Ryan was a dick, huh?”

“A-number-one,” I said with a scowl. “I got nothing from him except attitude and a vague generic warning to stay low. Whatever that means.”

“Maybe you need to stake out his office.”

“It might come to that if this crap goes on much longer.” I blew out a gusty breath. “I’m summoning Mzatal in a few days. If nothing shakes loose by then, I’ll see if he has any bright ideas.”

“If you two even bother with talking,” she said with a mischievous grin.

I forced a laugh. “We’ll manage to get a few words of conversation in between episodes of wild monkey sex.” Except that there probably wouldn’t be any wild monkey sex, not given his calculated emotional withdrawal. But no point in being mopey or making Jill feel bad for bringing it up.

Jill hooked her arm through mine. “If you’re really nice I’ll let you go to birthing class with me day after tomorrow.”

“Let me, huh?” I smiled. “I’m not so sure about this deal.” I’d go with her, of course. Though she hadn’t said so, I knew she was asking me because Zack wasn’t around.

“You’ll love it!” she said as we headed inside. “Multimedia and everything.”

“I don’t want to see *everything*.” Eilahn’s cat Fuzzykins curled around her litter of kittens at one end of the sofa, but I managed to get Jill settled on the other end with only a single warning hiss from the aggravating feline. “I want to see the bean when she arrives. *After* she’s all cleaned up and free of weird baby goo.”

“Pretty sure babies are never free of weird goo,” she said then sighed. “I wish we’d moved beyond ‘the bean’ as a name before Zack . . .” Her shoulders slumped.

Damn it, this was a sucky time for him to be an absentee dad. Despite Jill’s prodding, Zack had flat out refused to even toy with names, saying only that it was too soon to name her. We knew it was a “her” at least, but neither of us could get more than that out of Zack.

“We’ll show him,” I said. “By the time he gets home, we’ll have her name picked out. Juliana Sidney Faciane.”

Jill quirked a smile. “Yeah. Hannah Nicole Faciane.”

“Tabitha Angelina.”

“Athena Woodstock.”

I held up my hand. “We’d better stop before we end up scarring Parsley Green Faciane for life,” I said, grinning. “How much longer until we have a baby?”

Jill chucked a sofa pillow at me. “Three weeks. I’m ready for her to be *out*.”

“When do you plan to stop working?” Jill was a crime scene tech for the Beaulac Police Department, though she was currently relegated to non-field duties until after she had the baby.

“I’m not planning on it,” she said with a firm lift of her chin. “I’ll take time after she’s born.”

“I knew you’d be stubborn like that,” I said with a smile. “What does Steev think about that?”

“He’s overprotective and proud of it.” Jill laughed. “I’m sure he’d prefer I hang out here all day and knit. Zack would too for that matter.”

“You’ve talked to him recently?”

Her face fell, and I immediately regretted asking. “Early this morning. He sounded better though. Told me not to worry.” She snorted. “Like that’s going to happen.”

“I can take pictures of you at the birthing class,” I said in a valiant effort to deflect the conversation away from Zack’s true state. “He’d love to see those.” My phone rang with Pellini’s name on the caller ID. “Sorry, I need to take this call. I won’t be long.”

Jill pushed awkwardly up from the sofa. “It’s cool. I need

to be going anyway. Steev's mixing up an herbal concoction he says will be good for you-know-who." She pointed at her belly. "Better not be vile or he'll be wearing it. I'll catch you later."

I gave her a thumbs up and answered the phone. "Hey, Pellini."

"Thought you weren't going to answer," he said in an oh-so-Pellini abrasive tone. "Wouldn't be the first fucking time."

"I almost didn't," I said, "but then I realized I'd miss your friendly banter." I added "asshole" under my breath and didn't really give a crap whether or not he heard it. Obviously a full day of Pellini being civil was too much for the universe to handle.

A sensation like static electricity on steroids crackled from my feet through my head followed an instant later by a wave of dizziness. *The valve!* "Shit. Gotta go. I'll talk to you later." I dropped the phone onto the coffee table and ran for the back door.