

Unleashed

...

My conception came about as a result of pain and cruelty, blood shed with the intension to destroy rather than to create. Death sparked my existence, yet love brought me into this world. Strange to think of yourself as a product of both hate and love, the capricious nature of fate dictating that where one kills to survive, another comes into being without intention or desire. I guess that dichotomy between extremes explains some of my more alarming quirks.

Jillian had a strange power that few understood. In an age where science explained so much, where religion took a back seat and knowledge of the past centred on studying what remained rather than discovering what we lost, she had a hard time finding anyone who could explain the abilities she possessed. So she learned what she could on her own.

When she turned seventeen, Jilly finally learned something she craved to hear. Others had similar powers, people who could teach her how to use her magic. For magic she had, and no amount of science could help her. She knew; she had tried.

Although the lost art of magic had recently resurfaced in the world, most folk still thought it a joke, not something they needed to take seriously. Those who knew better had, in part, accommodated that kind of thinking. They set up their learning centres in the mountains, as resorts. Special resorts for those like Jillian.

The bus dropped Jilly off at a log building with the cursive script above the door reading only: "Information." Although the mountains loomed overhead with awe-inspiring majesty and a small pond lent tranquility to the small cabin, no one else got off at this stop. Indeed, had Jilly not known of the resort the Information building led to, she wouldn't have thought to get off the bus either.

A pleasant-faced woman in her mid-forties smiled at her from behind a large desk as Jilly walked through the front door. The usual rows of brochures lined the walls in neat shelves made of the same dark wood as the building, and a grand window behind the desk showed a fabulous view of the snow-capped mountains. A smaller window to the right revealed the pond and a picnic table that Jillian had missed from the road.

"Welcome to the 'Gateway to the Stars'," the woman said, the smile never leaving her face. "Is there something I can help you with? A map of the region, a list of tours or trails in the area? Accommodations or dining?"

"Um, no thank you," Jilly answered, wondering if she had gotten off at the wrong stop after all. "I'm looking for the Discovery Resort?"

The woman's smile warmed from merely professional to understanding and true welcome.

"And you are?" she asked, glancing down at a book Jilly would have sworn just appeared on the desk.

"Jillian Leider," Jilly said, her voice rising at the end, making her name sound like a question rather than fact. She hefted her backpack more firmly onto her shoulder.

"Ah, yes," the woman said, her finger running down a list until it lit upon Jillian's name. She looked up with a triumphant grin, closing the book, which then promptly disappeared. Jilly blinked in surprise. It seemed she had the right place after all.

"The path will take about an hour. Through that door." The woman pointed to a spot in the wall beside the large window and the outline of a door appeared. "Blythe and Daniel will meet you at the end."

Jilly stared at the door, glanced at the beaming woman once more, then nodded her thanks. She settled her backpack again before taking the path into the mountains.

And that's where Tornak found her twenty minutes later, alone in the middle of nowhere.

"Well, well, fresh meat," said a voice that grated like boulders under stress. Jilly stopped, scanning the rocks and trees lining the path. Her grip on the backpack's strap tightened until her knuckles showed white.

She heard a deep inhale of breath before the voice spoke again.

"And a fine specimen at that."

Jilly took a hesitant step backward.

"Strongest I've smelled in a long time." Hot breath tickled Jilly's neck and she whirled, eyes wide in fright and jaw clenched until her head ached.

Behind her stood . . . something. Though it had a man's shape, Jilly knew a man did not confront her now. No man had ever stood so tall, nor had such long fingers that curved into claws. His black-rimmed red eyes had slits rather than pupils bisecting them, and the bones around his brow and cheeks protruded in stark ridges, a duskier rust-colour than the rest of his angular face. Midnight-streaked hair drifted lazily in a breeze Jilly didn't feel, and a long, sinuous neck with glittering black scales down the back continued the illusion of a long mane. Though the creature had clothed itself in tight black jeans and a blood-red pirate's shirt, the coverings could not disguise the elongated limbs, the overly broad shoulders and slim waist, or the way its skin hinted more at scale than human flesh. Unshod elongated feet ended in talons that looked even more wicked than his hands.

"What are you?" Jilly breathed, afraid to speak above a whisper.

The creature smiled to show needle-sharp teeth glistening with saliva. Jilly shuddered.

"Your last date, little wizard," it said, gripping her shoulders.

Jilly spared a brief thought for her destination, wondering if this might constitute some kind of test, but the creature's foul breath and callous intent as its claws drew blood told her she endured no test, but a fight for her life.

And so she fought. Not with fists and nails, but with the very ability she had come here to learn how to control. She fought with magic.

And quickly learned how little she knew. Flame didn't hurt the creature, save to scorch his clothing away, at which its broad grin nearly split its face.

"You make it all the easier," it hissed in delight.

Sheets of ice gave it pause, but an open-handed slap across Jilly's face broke her concentration, and the cold vanished.

"Not a smart move, wizard," it growled, though the gleam in its eyes seemed more like amusement than wrath. Nevertheless, Jilly tried the extreme cold again as soon as she could think straight. Whereupon, the creature grew so hot that it burned Jilly where they touched. She screamed and stopped her feeble attack.

"Born in flames, neither fire nor ice can harm me, child," it warned.

Jilly thought frantically, fearing she didn't know enough to best the creature, but determined that she would fight till the end. She changed the air pressure about the beast, focussed upon its head. It hesitated, pain suddenly filling its face. Its eyes narrowed in anger and it backhanded Jilly again. She fell to her knees, and grey stars dappled her vision. The metallic tang of blood filled her mouth.

"Don't do that again," it growled and hit her once more, flinging her to crash into a rock hard enough to crack a rib. She cried out and clutched her middle, her thoughts a desperate rush. The

changed pressure had obviously hurt it, but Jilly didn't think she'd remain conscious if the thing hit her like that again, and unconscious meant defenceless. Unless she could do enough damage with air pressure . . .

As though reading her thoughts, the creature advanced on her, hauling her up by the hair.

"The slightest change, little wizard, and I kill you quick," it rasped, its smile chilling in its malevolence. "I want a little fun before you die, but I won't hesitate if you do that again."

Tears tracking her cheeks, Jilly stared up at the creature.

"Why?" she demanded, proud that her voice barely shook. "Why do you want to kill me?"

"Brave, little wizard, I'll give you that. And bold," it replied. "But your kind could stop the plans of my kind, and that, I will not allow."

"What plans?" Jilly asked. "What are you?"

"Ah, ah," it waved a clawed finger back and forth as though admonishing a child. "Let's not spoil things with details."

It threw Jilly into a tree, following so close behind that Jilly only had time to gasp before it reached to take her again. Terrified, she thought of a wall between her and the creature, and amazingly, it stopped an inch away, halted by an invisible barrier. It frowned, claws raking across the shield. Jilly took a trembling breath. She felt a build-up of energy and tendrils of red licked at her protection.

Without rising from her prone position, Jilly riveted her attention upon her attacker. She thought one word at it: *truth*. It blinked, suddenly wary, but this piece of magic Jilly knew well, being the first she had mastered.

"What are you and what are your plans?" She could feel power in her voice, but Jilly knew that as soon as it broke through her shield, truth would avail her nothing. She bought time with her questions, not realising the import of her actions.

The creature snarled, leaning into the barrier. Where its hands pressed against the invisible wall, streaks of red spread forth. But it could not ignore the compulsion of Jilly's magic.

"I am Tornak, Demon of the First Order."

Jilly cringed. Not just any creature, but a demon, a beast of hell. A being belonging to myth. *As much as magic belongs to myth*, she thought in despair. *Magic exists; why not demons?*

"Our armies stand nearly ready," it continued, each word squeezed out through gritted teeth. "Where magic once held us captive, kept us at bay, it weakened and failed, allowing us to regroup. Now it walks the earth again, the only deterrent to our conquest. You and yours must die for us to succeed."

With that, Jilly's shield broke with a snap and the sound of a thousand shards of glass striking pavement. Tornak grinned, its eyes flashing as it grabbed Jilly and tore her clothes. She flung torrents of pressure at it, anything to fend off its attack. To no avail.

Her screams didn't slow it, nor her fists, teeth or nails. Whatever magic she threw its way, it ignored as it beat her. Jilly's blood arced across the mountainside where it didn't pool beneath her. Bones snapped and pain blinded her. Even her shrieks broke to strained rattles before it slowed its assault. When Jilly's vision began to clear, she saw that Tornak had not tired. Rather, the exertion in doling out so much torture had excited it.

"One more gift before you die, little wizard," it sneered, and Jilly found she could still scream after all as it thrust deep inside her, nearly ripping her apart. Unable to move, hardly capable of even taking a breath and barely aware of her actions, Jilly salvaged what little she could. She wrapped her core in a bundle of light and thrust it deep within.

...

Darkness, and the horrifying scent of blood and pain. Jilly didn't even know pain had a smell. With that thought, she jerked into full awareness and sobbed in absolute agony. Her whole body burned as though afire. She turned just her head, but even that hurt too much. The hot flood of vomit burst forth to mix with congealing blood and her abused body convulsed, stealing consciousness once more.

When she awoke the second time, gentle moonlight kissed her face, but painted her surroundings in a harsh lack of colour. She blinked gummy eyelids, knowing the black pools around her would glare dull red in the light. She gagged at the stench and swallowed bile, then determined that she couldn't lie in the filth any longer. Jilly managed to force her shattered body to crawl about five feet before she collapsed into blissful oblivion.

The third time, Jilly woke to the scent of a fire, the warmth of a blanket, and the soft light of a covered lamp. Two faces peered at her, one male the other female.

"Thank God," the woman whispered.

Blythe and Daniel had found Jillian and brought her back to the Discovery Resort.

"Don't move, Jillian," Daniel said. "We're doing what we can to heal you."

When the pain became too much, Jilly let herself fall back into nothingness again. Warmth and safety wrapped her in kind fingers and held her close. Tornak couldn't hurt her anymore and she clutched at the possibility of survival.

It took several weeks before Jillian learned the full consequences of Tornak's final assault upon her body. By then, she had determined to live, and with her incredible will came a fierce devotion to protect the gift Tornak had given.

She prayed that this gift would not become as monstrous as its father.

And that's how I came into existence.

My name is Marta and I'm half demon. It's not a fact that I advertise to all and sundry; it's not even something I knew about until recently. I had a strange enough childhood without adding supernatural DNA into the equation.

...