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The Summoning: Protector of the Flight

Chapter 1

Colorado Mountains, Summer, Morning

Since her fall in the National Finals Rodeo, pain had been a daily enemy. Calli Torcher hesitated at the top of the steep stairs from her attic bedroom to the first floor, took a breath, braced a hand against the wall and gritted her teeth at the prospect of pain. No matter how carefully she set her feet, she'd jar herself, then stop and pant through the agony. Or she might fall and end up in the hospital. Again.

Recovering from a broken pelvis took time. The bad dreams that peppered her sleep didn't help matters. She'd dreamt of people lost in a winter blizzard. Cries for help. Short notes of doom from a clock gong or the ranch's iron triangle or a siren....

She shook her head to clear her mind and concentrate on navigating the stairs. It happened the third stair from the top, just a tiny mis-step and she was leaning against the wall, trying to shut out waves of pain. When she recovered, she went on and made it to the ground floor with no other problems.

As she rested against the wall at the bottom landing, she wondered if she should ask her dad if she could use the downstairs storeroom as a bedroom until she fully healed. But things hadn't been right between her and her father for months, ever since she'd fallen and lost the barrel-racing championship, ending her career at twenty-five.

That was the past. She could -- and would -- still train horses, take a more active role in the ranch now that she wasn't on the road all the time, traveling the rodeo circuit.

Her nose twitched at the smell of strong coffee and frying bacon. Dad was up and fixing his own breakfast. Since he'd started without her, she decided she'd get some air, clear the images and sounds of the dream -- the string of bad dreams -- from her head and replace them with the beauty of the Rocking Bar T ranch in their mountain valley.

Calli limped to the corral, breathing deeply, feeling the tingle of the breeze on her face, the softness of worn flannel and denim from her shirt and jeans on her skin. The ball of the sun shot yellow streaks of light into the sky.

She reached the corral fence and leaned against it, breathing fast, but in another month or two she'd be able to start training horses.

No whicker of greeting came from her gelding. Calli whistled. Nothing. He always greeted her. A twinge of alarm ruptured her calm. "Spark! Spark, here!" She called as if her horse was a young, heedless colt.

Her Dad strode up, a lean tough man with a weathered face and hard lines carved from the rigors of cattle ranching. He leaned on the fence to her right. "The gelding ain't here."

She looked at him from the corner of her eye. Bristly gray whiskers sprouted from his jaw. He could speak well if he wanted, if he respected the person he was talking to.

She wet her lips. "What do you mean, Spark isn't here?"

His hat shadowed the eyes as blue as her own, but he squinted down at her all the same. Hard as the distant mountains. "He's a highly trained rodeo horse, worth a lot of money. Couldn't expect me to keep him

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around when you can't ride him anymore and a profit can be made. Your last doctor's appointment made me realize that."

Calli pivoted so quickly it wrenched her hip. She ignored the pain in her body, so much less than the anguish in her heart. She spoke through the shock. "Spark is my horse. I gave you the money for him."

Her dad shrugged. "I bought the gelding from the race track. The horse was registered in my name. I'm the owner of Rocking Bar T and everything on it."

"Except for Spark. I paid for him," Calli said through clenched teeth.

His stance was still casual. "Huh. My name is on the papers. And who paid for that horse's keep when it was young? I did."

Money wasn't the issue. Love was. Giving and receiving love was everything. She'd needed something to love and return that love in her life. "How could you do this? I love him."

He faced her now, as impassive as always, as if nothing touched him, not even a hint of irritation in his eyes. He looked her up and down as if judging a heifer, not as if he saw his daughter. "You should know better than that. Stupid to love an animal. Stupid to love at all. Love ain't nothin' that gets a return. A profit could be made, and Spark warn't no use to me. I sold him to Bill Morse."

Usefulness had ever been Dad's bottom line.

Her insides clenched, the pressure of hard tears backed behind her eyes. She couldn't stop the question. "What about me? What about my usefulness?"

He grunted. "You can do your chores and stay. Do the cookin' and cleanin.' But I'll tell you that I went to town and since the ranch is paid for, I set up a reverse mortgage. The money will last as long as I do, then you'll have to find another place."

Shock and nausea rolled through her. "I'd planned on training horses."

"This is a cattle ranch."

"We could build up a fine reputation--"

"No. We run cattle."

She went to the bottom line. "You aren't leaving the ranch to me?" Ever since she'd gone on the circuit, she'd always thought of the ranch. Working hard, she'd sent money back for ranch expenses. She'd thought they were partners.

His gaze fastened on her middle as if he could see her abdominal scars. "No reason to. Ain't as if you can give me a grandson, even." Without another word he sauntered back to the house, leaving Calli's world broken.

A noise tore from her, some animalistic cry of pain. Blindly she gripped the top fence-rail, splinters lanced her hand.

All her life she'd shut out the knowledge of what her father was, instead she'd woven illusions that he cared about her. False, lying illusions that had been so comforting and that she'd held so long that she couldn't see reality.

Her mother had abandoned them, then died. If her father had loved Calli before, he'd shut off his emotions afterwards. As long as she proved useful she was tolerated.

He might have enjoyed the reflected glory of her rodeo wins and liked the big bucks of the prizes. He'd taken care of her in the hospital and later when she was healing. But now that it was obvious she wouldn't return to the rodeo she was nothing more than a woman to cook and clean.

She glanced around but refused to see past the surface beauty of the day. This place wasn't her home anymore. She couldn't afford the wrenching sense of loss.

Blood pounded in her ears and with it came the sounds of chimes and singing. Tintinitis, ringing in the

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ears, the doctors had said, and that it should go away soon. But this loss would always shadow her.

Her white-knuckled hand on the wooden rail hurt from splinters, rough wood impressed hard on her palm, the ache of her stretched tendons. She let go.

She had to escape, let the emotions surge through her – her grief for the loss of Spark, the destruction of her dreams. She'd plan later. This heartache she'd brought on herself for not letting herself see what the man who fathered her was -- hard and bitter, guarding his heart from everyone, including her.

She limped, stumbled, caught herself, limped a few more steps -- and found that she did so in the rhythm to the reverberating rise and fall of melodic voices. Her foot brushed a fallen branch and she picked it up and used it as a walking staff.

By the time her eyes cleared, she'd passed the edge of the ranch yard and was on her way to the sandstone rocks and the wide ledge on a hill that had always been her refuge. She needed air to breathe.

When she reached the ledge, her pelvis ached all the way up to her teeth. She hobbled past the huge sheered off crystal face of the hill to solid rock and gingerly lowered herself to sit. She leaned against the hillside, her legs straight, and set the stick beside her. Then she wiped the sweat from her face, wrinkling her nose at the brown and red dirt smears on her bandana.

Her breath came fast with exertion. Her teeth hurt from gritting them when she'd negotiated her way up the rocky path. Up here, the wind blew and she heard a tinkle of chimes rushing around her.

She closed her eyes and whirls of bright colors streaked inside of her eyelids. The spots would fade as she rested.

Her heartbeat decreased to normal. Too much emotion and exertion in such a short amount of time had drained her.

Time seemed to slow until one moment was everything. The scent of rock and pine, the faint tumble of a distant stream, the cool wind, all etched on her memory.

She looked out over the ranch, the kitchen gardens, the sprawling house, the land that stretched to the mountains – higher than this backyard hill. So beautiful. The stream was full – no drought this year.

For a while, Calli just sat and enjoyed the calm of her emotions. Too many problems had pressed down on her lately, flattening her spirits. For this one moment she could be quiet and enjoy life, let thoughts drift through her mind without jabbing at her heart.

Did she love the ranch?

No. It had always reflected what her Dad wanted, not the kind of ranch she wanted, a horse ranch.

But she loved the land. And she loved the potential she could sense just beyond her vision of a horse ranch. She wanted the land, wanted to shape that potential.

The rock was cold and hard against her back as her head throbbed with equally hard thoughts. She'd been a fool.

Well, that was the past. Maybe only the recent past, but time to wake up and fix her mistakes.

Spark was gone. Her heart twinged, jerking her body. She could barely stand that thought. Bill Morsey was a good horseman, and his daughter would be thrilled to have Spark. Calli's lips turned down. Her father had probably done the best thing for Spark. The horse loved to run, delighted in an audience. Calli gulped and blew her nose on the corner of her bandana.

Now that she knew she'd have to fight dad for her vision of the ranch, or walk away, she must make some decisions.

Should she fight for the ranch or get a check for her share and leave? She had a chance of winning – never dad's respect or love, she finally realized that, but she might be able to prove her contribution to the ranch, her vision was more profitable than his. In any event, she'd go to the bank and straighten them out

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about the equity she had in this place. She had records. There would be deposits, bills paid, after she'd sent money back, and everyone in town knew of her triumphs.

Fighting would take a lot of energy – physical and emotional, and that was a rare commodity for her during her recovery. And it would be bitter, turn her father against her forever.

But she loved the land and he already had no affection for her. How much did he love the ranch, the land? Would he hate her for fighting?

She didn't think so. She loved. He didn't.

He could take his share of the ranch money and walk away. It would be tough on her own at first, but she was confident she could make a name for the ranch, for herself, by horse training.

Calli glanced at the smooth plane of crystal that was the face of the hillside beside her. Milky white with tints of green, the sheer face of the glassy rock stood taller and wider than herself. A small rim framed it, protecting it from the weather.

She hadn't been able to look at the faint image of herself in the crystal for a long time.

A while back, she'd done a little research and discovered it was a fine piece of microcline. Devil's Hole wasn't too far away, and it had had even bigger crystals.

When she'd first found the path and the crystal at six years old, she'd been a little afraid of it. The green had tinged into dark shadows inside that reminded her of the tiny, dark bedroom her mom had locked her in when she'd left the ranch as evening fell – walked away from the land and her husband and her daughter forever. A memory Calli suppressed as much as possible.

Years later, sunlight had danced on the face of the crystal and lit the angles deep inside. Then she pretended she saw a different world dimly through the crystal, a place with flying horses and those who rode them lifting flashing swords. Later still, she just saw herself in the shadows.

She'd faced disillusionment today, maybe it was time to face herself again -- then she'd know she was strong and able to deal with the future on her own. She'd never ride the rodeo circuit again, but she'd come to terms with that. She'd never have her father's love, and that left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Levering herself up the wall slowly, she rose from the ledge and balanced on the stick.

She stared into the crystal and the shadows beyond the smooth outside plane. Her image was wavery, her blonde hair a shade of yellow on the milkiness. She made out the curve of breast and hip.

But besides herself, she once again saw an imaginary vision of elsewhere. This time a section of a great, circular stone wall, and flickers of colorfully robed figures. Once again the strange sounds the doctors had called tintinitis plagued her. Chimes. A gong. The chanting of many voices in words she couldn't seem to grasp. Gregorian chants, maybe.

BONG!

The sound came next to her ear, louder and more vibrant than ever. She pivoted, lost her balance and fell. Ah, shit, she was going to hit her head on the damn crystal.

But she fell through it, into a blank whiteness so pervasive she couldn't tell if her eyes were open. She choked on a scream. All her emotions that had calmed as she sat on the ledge jammed into her. Fear. Despair. Most of all, a great longing for someone to love. Someone to love her back. A partner.

It lasted instants. It lasted an eternity. Then bright colors whirled in her sight – patterns, stained glass! She glimpsed pillars around the curved walls of a circular room, and rafters with huge crystal ends.

Pain shot up her hip, stealing breath. Calli didn't believe this. Her throat closed with fear. She must have hit her head on the rock and was dreaming. She rubbed her head, but didn't feel any bumps. Dazed, she examined her surroundings. A big round stone room with an altar and colored goblets. A gong. A circle of people.

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Calli sucked in air. It didn't smell anything like a hill in Colorado. It smelled like incense in a church. She gulped and shivering seized her.

A small woman with white hair and young face, green eyes, and a long scar along her cheek met Calli's eyes. The lady wore a long velvet robe with silver threaded designs. "Hi, I'm Alexa Fitzwalter, welcome to Lladrana," she said.

This couldn't be happening! But she wouldn't take it lying down. When Calli awkwardly sat up, pain lancing low in her torso, the singing stopped.

Alexa stepped forward into the center of the star, compassion in her eyes. "It's a rough trip." She held out her hands.

Calli stared at her, touched her fingers. They felt solid and warm! Another moment passed and Calli realized that Alexa wouldn't push. The dream woman was courteous. Alexa would let Calli make her own choices. A hard knot in her chest loosened, she was in charge of the dream. She put her hands in Alexa's and was drawn to her feet with surprising ease and strength.

Alexa kept an arm around Calli as if to steady her and Calli was grateful for the physical and emotional support. Her gaze swept the circle of people, pausing at the men and women who were dressed more roughly than those in velvet robes.

When Alexa looked up at Calli, her expression was haunted. "We need you really, really bad." Alexa licked her lips. "Do you know anything about horses?"

CLANG! An alarm shrilled. Everyone in the room tensed.

Alexa cocked her head, her hands fisting. "We have no volarans," her voice broke. "We can't fly to battle."

Stranger and stranger. Calli shot glances around the room, wanted to run, didn't think she could hobble fast enough to escape – what?

"How good are you with horses?" Alexa demanded again. Her arm squeezed painfully.

Calli knew she flushed but shot up her chin. "Excellent. I'm an excellent horse trainer and one of the top barrel racers—"

People ran to the great door, flung it open, sending in bright summer morning sunlight. A whirl of wings rushed into the room.

Cheers rose outside. A young man shouted something.

"They came back," Alexa whispered. Tears ran down her face. "The volarans have returned." She looked up at Calli, sniffed. "I knew it was right to continue with the Summoning."

Hooves hit the stone courtyard. The next moment people were spreading out in the room, making way for . . . for a winged horse.

Calli blinked. Blinked again. The pegasus didn't vanish. In fact, more swept into the room. Ten. With dozens outside. Chestnuts, roans, piebalds, even a palomino or two. She caught her breath in sheer wonder and thought the top of her head would explode with this huge wave of horse-thoughts and horse-love feeling radiating from them, inundating her.

A gray clopped up, stretched his wings, forcing people aside.

Her mind spun. Her mouth dropped open.

The stallion's large dark gaze fixed on her. We love you. You are the Volaran Exotique. She heard the words in her head.

Then chimes clashed and she felt them storm through her, plucking at muscle and bone and nerve. She cried out, arching away from Alexa, escaping the woman's grip. Reached for the winged horse, missed. Calli landed on the floor again on her butt and shrieked with pain radiating through her pelvis.

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Protector of the Flight

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Only agony existed. Everything else around her dimmed – light diminished so she couldn't see. Again and again the chimes rippled, but they sounded muffled as she grimly fought through the pain and hung on to the edge of consciousness.

Then someone struck the gong. Once. Twice.

She only heard a part of the third beat. Sweet darkness descended.