

THE CONVERTIBLE COVEN

By Susan Wade

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I CUT OUT OF MY TRIG class twenty minutes early on Wednesday to make the meeting of the “Powers of Witchcraft” series at the Pagan Church. I hated to leave because Dr. Lufkin was explaining the Hartford algorithm and talking about its development process, which was fascinating. Plus Dr. L. gave me a disappointed look as I left, which made me feel bad. He’s a great prof.

Anyway, I left, and twenty minutes should have been plenty of time to make it to the seminar, except Mr. Brown wouldn’t start. Mr. Brown is my car. He’s a 1969 VW fastback with a sunroof and a dark bronze-brown paint job, which is how he got his name.

My father still hasn’t reconciled himself to me buying Mr. Brown instead of the seven-year-old Toyota he had all picked out for me. But the second I walked onto that used-car lot and saw Mr. Brown, with that dent in his fender that looked just like a dimple in his front-grille smile, I knew he was the car for me. The way I look at it, I worked two summers to save the money, and it was going to be my car, not Dad’s. Mr. Brown may not be as new as that Toyota was, but he’s got character.

On the Wednesday in question, he was displaying more than usual. I got in, flung my backpack in the passenger seat, and prepared myself for the ritual by clearing my mind, taking deep breaths, and opening myself to the inner light. Then, when I was certain my aura was clear, I inserted the key in the ignition, pumped the accelerator three and one-fourth times, and turned the key.

This works every time, if I’ve really found inner stillness. I guess I hadn’t because Mr. Brown gave a long soggy cough and nothing more. I tried again. No dice.

A guy with short kinky black hair and a kind of goofy-looking shy grin stopped next to Mr. Brown. He shifted his books to his left arm and said, “Excuse me, miss. Maybe I can help?”

I was about to explain that conversations distracted me from cleansing my aura, when he added, “Sounds to me like one of your spark-plug wires has worked loose.”

Mr. Brown had sounded funny. I got out. “Hey, you might be right,” I said, opening the trunk and checking the connections. One of the rubber connector caps at the end of a wire was cracked and wasn’t seated tightly. “How’d you guess?”

The guy got a little pink. “I work on cars. It’s how I’m putting myself through

school. VW's are my specialty."

I held out a hand. "I'm Angie," I said. "Thanks for the suggestion."

He shook my hand. "Ray Cooper. This is a really nice little fastback you got here."

"Thanks, Ray," I said. I finished wiggling the connector into place and closed the trunk. "Mr. Brown is one of my favorite people. Hey, I don't mean to be rude, but I'm late for a meeting. Thanks again."

"Sure," he said. He opened the door for me, which surprised me a little. He closed Mr. Brown's door gently, with just the right amount of lift at the end to get it to shut securely. "See you, Angie," he said.

"See you." I didn't go through the whole aura thing with him standing there, but Mr. Brown purred like a big tabby when I turned the key.

I was only fifteen minutes late to the seminar.

Keith was waiting at the back of the church auditorium (they rent the building from a bookstore that went bust, so the auditorium's not very big), tapping his foot. "Angie," he hissed as soon as he saw me, "I told you, twelve sharp."

Keith's the best-looking guy I've ever met: he's got big gray-blue eyes and long dark hair that looks like Dennis Miller's. He's also the one who turned me on to the witchcraft series at the church, which was very nice of him. "Sorry, Keith," I whispered.

We made our way to the seats in the third row he had held with his notebook and sweater. The woman at the end of the aisle gave me an assessing look as we climbed over her — I figured she was wondering how attached Keith was to me and maybe whether she could lay a hex to get rid of me. I dragged my backpack over her knees and smiled apologetically.

Today's topic was "Finding Your Familiar," and Keith already had his notebook out and was scribbling notes. I got mine out of my pack too.

The lecturer stood on a small stage with blue velvet curtains. She was a heavysset woman who had very straight, very long black hair and bangs, and was wearing a loose purple caftan with gold embroidery around the collar and hem.

"— familiar is a very important part of developing your powers as a witch," she was saying. They must have started late, because it didn't sound as if we'd missed much. "Truthfully, in most cases, witches don't really come into their powers until they have three things: a familiar, a personal grimoire, and membership

in a coven.”

I made a note. I'd been working on my book of spells for almost three years, and Keith was going to propose me for membership in his coven when Sharon Silversmith transferred to Omaha next month. It sounded like all I had to do now was find my familiar.

“What's her name?” I whispered to Keith.

He frowned. “I told you,” he said under his breath. “Karina. She's the priestess of my coven.”

“Oh,” I said.

“In the course of this series,” Karina went on, “we will look at many factors of importance to a witch's power, but few are more important than finding the right familiar. A familiar acts as a guide and protects the witch, and sometimes may perform magic services for her.” She paused, and added with a smile at Keith, “Or him.”

Keith jiggled in his seat a little and smiled back at her.

“The uninitiated often think the familiar is just an animal, but it is actually a spirit which is sometimes embodied in an animal. In other words, the spirit may manifest on this plane as a cat or a salamander, but it is in actuality a denizen of another plane. It just takes a preferred shape in its service to us on this side. Is that clear?”

I leaned over to Keith, who smelled strongly of rosemary oil, which made me wonder what kind of protective spells he'd been doing. “Is a familiar's service voluntary?”

“Hush,” he said.

Karina continued. “Before any of you here attempt to capture and embody a familiar spirit, you should first look around you to see whether one has come to you voluntarily. Given the correct controls, a captured familiar will behave quite well, but a spirit that serves you of its own accord is better. My own familiar, the Spirit Androcles, serves me as a means to bring light to the earthly plane. He feels that I will manifest his message to many, which is why he has chosen to ally himself with me in this lifetime.” She gestured toward one side of the stage.

An enormous Siamese tomcat stalked onto the stage. He paused, surveying the audience contemptuously for a moment before he leaped up to the lecturn and balanced on one side of it. He looked straight at me, and I sneezed. People around us turned to look at me. I have kind of a loud sneeze. The cat blinked, and I sneezed

again. Seeming satisfied with that, he looked down and began licking one paw.

I fished a tissue out of my backpack and blew my nose.

Keith leaned over, the smell of rosemary stronger than ever. I sneezed again. “What’s wrong with you?” Keith asked.

“I’b allergig to cads,” I said.

“Are you?” He frowned. “He’s at least ten feet away.”

“I dow,” I said.

Karina was saying, “—Androcles does many things for me. He warns me of danger from malicious spirits and often helps me select students of exceptional talent for advanced work. For example, it was Androcles who pointed out Keith Henderson as someone with particularly powerful, if untutored, psychic powers. Keith, stand up.”

Keith did. Androcles looked at me again, and I sneezed.

“Why, I believe Androcles is telling me something right now,” Karina said. “What’s your name?” She pointed to me.

“Adgie,” I said. I blew my nose again.

“Well, you must come to a discussion meeting very soon, Angie,” Karina said. “Now, let’s talk about how you’ll know when a familiar spirit has been drawn to you. Let me tell you how I knew that Androcles was more than just a cat.”

Androcles stopped licking his paw and assumed a regal position on the podium, head erect, tail neatly curled around his body.

“Thad cad bust weigh fordy pouds,” I whispered to Keith.

“Shush!” he hissed.

“Almost seven years ago,” Karina said, “a cat came to my back door one day. She wouldn’t leave, so we adopted each other. A few weeks later, she gave birth to three kittens.” She paused dramatically.

“Both the mama and two of the kittens died. Only one kitten survived, and I had to hand-feed him until he was old enough to lap. And as soon as Androcles was born, I began having dreams of a past life in which we were together.”

She folded her hands on the podium and leaned forward confidently.

Androcles flicked his tail, once up, once down, as if he wanted to make sure we were paying attention. “I was an Egyptian princess in a past life,” Karina said, “and Egyptian nobility were guarded by sacred lions. After Androcles was born, I began having dreams of Egypt, where I would walk with my hand on the head of a lion. That lion was Androcles, and he has come to me again in this lifetime to fulfill the same role: that of protector and guide.”

Karina lifted her hand, and I saw a large ruby wink in the light. She laid her hand on Androcles’ head. “If you go to pick out a pet, and the second you see the litter, you say to yourself, ‘That’s the one for me,’ you’ve probably found your familiar.”

She bowed her head and everyone clapped. Several people raised their hands to ask questions, but Androcles jumped down from the podium and exited through the wings. Karina was right behind him.

Keith turned to me, his eyes alight with excitement, which made my heart flutter. “Isn’t she marvelous?” he said.

“Why, yes,” I said. “It was a very interesting lecture.” Privately, I considered Dr. L.’s to have been better, but I knew Keith wasn’t interested in algorithms.

“She said you should come to our next discussion meeting,” he said. “I think she was given a message for you.”

“Good,” I said. “Maybe it’ll be about how to find my familiar. I’m doing the other things she talked about — my rituals are working. But I’d really like to find my familiar. And join your coven, of course.”

He nodded seriously. “Yes, a familiar is important — a sign that you’ve opened yourself to the Animate Nature of the All.”

“So when’s the next discussion group?” I asked.

“Tomorrow night, at Karina’s house. Why don’t you pick me up at 6:30, and I’ll show you where she lives?”

“That sounds wonderful, Keith,” I said. I was already wondering what I should wear.

I DECIDED ON a pair of black leggings with a long emerald-green tunic that had black embroidery around the cuffs and collar (taking a leaf from Karina’s book). I wore my black boots and did my hair big. Frankly, I looked pretty hot.

Blowing my hair dry had taken longer than usual, so it was a little after six when I grabbed my bag and my car keys and headed out the door. Mr. Brown sat in

the driveway, the sickle-shaped dimple in his fender looking jauntier than ever. I gave him a loving pat as I went by.

Since I'd just gotten out of the shower, I figured my aura didn't need any more cleansing. I stuck the key in and cranked. Mr. Brown started right up. He'd been humming along real happily ever since I'd jiggled his wires the day before.

We backed out of the driveway and headed north, toward Keith's apartment. I was feeling so good, I started to sing a little, an old tune, "Age of Aquarius." Mr. Brown rattled a bit, adding great percussion. We jammed all the way to Keith's.

It was right at 6:30 so I just pulled up by the curb and gave a little toodle on the horn. Keith came out of the building right away, looking better than ever.

"Hi," he said, smiling at me as he tried to open the passenger door. He gave it a good yank, but it was stuck or something and wouldn't open.

I leaned across and hammered on the doorframe with my fist. "C'mon, Mr. Brown," I said, "open up, or we'll be late." On the third punch, the door gave suddenly. The upper corner caught Keith right above the eye.

"Ow!" He touched his eyebrow gingerly. "That really hurts," he said.

"Gee, I'm sorry, Keith. The door's never gotten stuck like that before. You want to go back in and get some ice for it?"

He got in and sat down. "No, I don't want you to be late to Karina's meeting. This is a big honor for you, to be invited so soon. And it'll be a chance for you to meet the other members of the coven."

"Wonderful! I'm really sorry about your eye."

He robbed it gently. "It'll be O.K. I just hope it doesn't turn black." He gave me directions, and we got to Karina's house right on time.

She had a medium-sized house in a nice neighborhood on the north side of town. Her yard was a little shaggier than the neighbors'. But otherwise it looked like an ordinary house. When I said something to Keith about it, he said, "What did you expect? Gingerbread?"

At first I thought he was talking about Victorian trim. Then I got it and laughed. "Don't be silly. I guess I thought it would look more mysterious, is all."

"Wait till you see inside," he said.

Inside was pretty unusual. Karina's living room was painted midnight blue —

walls, ceiling, and the hardwood floor. Glow-in-the-dark stars glimmered on the ceiling, and a frosted white globe hung from a silver chain in the center. A silver pentagram in a golden circle was painted on the blue floor. No furniture, just large blue cushions piled around the corners outside the pentagram. About a dozen people were sitting around talking. All of them were women, and most were wearing jeans. Great.

Keith nabbed us a couple of cushions and we sat down. His eye was puffing up so much, I was scared to ask how it felt.

A blonde woman with a long pageboy was sitting near where we had staked out floor space. Keith introduced her as Sharon Silversmith.

“Oh, hi,” I said. “You’re the one who’s being transferred to Omaha, right?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’ll miss our community here, but it’s necessary.”

“Is it a job transfer? What do you do?” I asked her.

She smiled. “Well yes, in a way. I’ve been called to start a new coven in that area. You see, this is what I do.” She gestured around the room.

I gulped. “Excuse me. I’ve never known anyone who was a full-time witch before,” I said. “But then, I guess I’ve never known many witches either. That’s one of the reasons I’m so excited about joining the coven -it helps so much to have a community, people who are interested in the same things you are and all.”

Sharon smiled. “How did you get interested in paganism, Angie?”

“Well, I think I was born pagan, really. I mean, paganism is the belief that all things are animate, right?”

She nodded. “More or less.”

“Well, as far back as I can remember, everything seemed to be alive to me. For instance, when I was little, just learning to count and all, in my head, numbers had color and gender and a kind of — personality. So when I took a comparative-religion class in my freshman year, and learned something about paganism, it just clicked. I did some more reading, and things just kind of grew from there.”

“That’s interesting,” Sharon said. “I’ve never heard the paganist view applied to mathematical concepts before. . . .”

A young woman sitting behind her leaned over and said, “Hi, I’m Barbara Cowdin. Keith told me you were a student too. Are you at U.T.?”

I nodded.

“We have something in common then,” she said. “I’m doing my Master’s in theology right now, but it seems narrow, so I may switch to rhetoric for my doctorate. What’s your major?”

“Computer science,” I said. My voice sounded real loud all of a sudden, because one of those lulls in conversation had just hit. People all over the room were looking at me.

“Computer science?” Barbara said. You could tell that, to her, it was like admitting to using plastic garbage bags.

“It’s because I’m an Aquarius,” I said quickly. “You know, electronics are our thing.” Everybody kind of relaxed, and just about then Karina came in. She was wearing a saffron-yellow caftan this time, with purple embroidery on it. I was pleased to see that my choice of clothes was going to work out after all.

“Welcome, everybody,” Karina said. She opened a cupboard and took out a very large gold cushion, which she carried to the center of the pentagram. She sat down on it and beckoned, “Friends, let’s begin our discussion.”

Everyone picked up their cushions and moved to the perimeter of the circle. Karina saw me and waved me over. I set my cushion down next to Keith’s and stepped a little nervously into the pentagram. I felt a little tingle as I crossed the line, like when you get a low-level electrical shock. A thrill went through me, I have to admit. Magic!

“Angie,” Karina said. Her voice echoed off the walls a little bit, because of there not being any furniture, I guess.

“Hi, Karina,” I said. “Thanks for inviting me to come.”

“Oh, we’re delighted to have you,” she said. “Androcles told me you must join us.”

“Androcles?” I said, looking around. “Uh, is he here right now?”

“No, dear, unfortunately not. He went on a little errand for me. But he gave me a message for you. Sit,” she said, and patted a spot next to her on the floor. I went and got my cushion and sat where she’d indicated.

Karina took my hand, pressed it flat between her palms, and closed her eyes. “Your energy is bright,” she said. “Vivid and strong, the energy of the new age, the Age of Aquarius. Androcles’ message is this: in seeking your familiar, you must not

be deceived by an unfamiliar guise. Nor must you be deceived by the familiarity of the spirit which guides you. Look around you for the spirit, Angie, which you will know by the sign of the crescent moon. Search well, for when you find your familiar, Androcles says you will find your true path in life as well.”

People were nodding very seriously. Apparently a message from Androcles was a big deal. “Thank you for giving me Androcles’ message, Karina. And please thank Androcles for me too.” I wasn’t too sure of the etiquette involved.

Karina laughed. “No need for me to do that. I see he’s returned from his errand.”

I looked up and saw the big cat sitting just inside the circle, holding a twitching green lizard in his mouth. I sneezed. “Thank you, Androcles,” I said.

Karina said, “He says you’re welcome. Androcles, how wonderful that you are so prompt in returning to us. Will you put the blessing in my workroom, please?”

The cat got up and walked off, still carrying the lizard. I sneezed.

“Well,” Karina said. “Any thoughts about the message? Keith, you know Angie best.”

Keith cleared his throat. “Well, Androcles is telling Angie that her familiar may take an unusual form, maybe not a cat or a dog or a bird, as many of us have.” He nodded to the others.

“I’m allergic to all those things,” I said.

“Apparently, finding her familiar will bring her to full power, and give her the guidance to find her destiny in life.” Keith spoke in a deeper voice than usual, almost like it was his message, instead of Androcles’.

“Exactly!” Karina said.

Sharon said, “Angie, do you have any pets, or any wild animals that you take care of?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” I said. “I’ve never had pets because of my allergies. I feed the squirrels at school sometimes, but that’s about it.”

“Odd,” Karina said. “But Androcles’ message will help you find your spirit. He’s never wrong, you know, because he sees into the spirit world. In fact, when I had an out-of-body experience last week and stayed gone from my physical body too long, Androcles came and found me and brought me back.”

Barbara had moved over to the spot next to Keith. Now she said, “Oh, do tell us about it, Karina.”

The discussion went on for a while, ranging over lots of interesting astral adventures Karina’d had. But I had trouble concentrating, because Androcles came back into the room, and I kept sneezing.

I blotted a lot and tried to listen. I was wondering if it would ruin my chances for joining the coven if I went outside for some fresh air, when Karina said, “Well, that’s about it for tonight, friends. Except for one last item. As you all know, Keith is proposing that Angie join our coven. After Sharon leaves for Nebraska, of course, so our numbers remain correct. But Angie must first perform a major ritual for the benefit of the coven. Who will volunteer to work with her on the ritual?”

I sneezed, and Keith said, “I will.”

I liked the sound of that. “Thank you,” I said.

“Wonderful!” Karina said. “Any other business for tonight? No? Good night!” She got up and left the room. Androcles blinked one last time at me, then followed her before the echoes of my sneeze had faded.

Keith came over. I noticed his eye was really discolored. “Barbara’s got an arnica poultice she says will help my eye,” he said. “She’s going to take me home so we can pick it up. Can you find your way home from here O.K.?”

“Sure,” I said. “Do probleb.”

I followed them outside and went over to Mr. Brown and watched Barbara get into a red Celica. I thought Keith might stop to say something to me, but he followed right after her.

Kind of a disappointing evening, in spite of getting a message special delivery from the spirit world.

“I’ll call you about the ritual,” Keith called. He waved and got into Barbara’s car.

I watched them until the red tail lights of the Celica were out of sight, and consoled myself with the thought that at least I had Mr. Brown for company.

I cut my afternoon class the next day to go to the library and look for spells. My grimoire was mostly full of practical spells: rituals designed to bring in money (really handy around scholarship time, let me tell you), to aid memory (exam time), to get your enemies off your back (handy with some of the TA’s), stuff like that. I

didn't think any of my spells would go over too well with Karina's coven. I needed something big, like for world peace or something.

But most of the books I found in the library were pretty coy about listing actual spells. After several hours, I gave up and got permission to go into the rare-book stacks. I found a couple of good grimoires there, but I'd have to photocopy any pages that interested me, because they listed the ingredients for the rituals in code. All those newt's tongues and adder's eyes and stuff — those are just codes for different herbs and roots, because the witches in the olden days didn't want their secrets to get out. I could translate the recipes at home, once I normalized the funky old spelling, because I'd written a PC-based translator program for ritual ingredients awhile back.

But none of the spells seemed like they would be very useful to the coven. There was a spell To Cast Demons from Thy Cow; another To Stop a Bird in Flight. To Bring Forth Water from Ye Dry Well. To Win the Heart of the One You Love.

Hmmmm. I copied that one. You never know when something like that might come in handy.

I kept looking, hoping to find a ritual that would be beneficial to the coven. Finally, I found one that sounded mighty useful to me: To Summon Elementals of the Air. Well, maybe not the height of practicality, but you never know when an air elemental may be able to help out. Just think of the possibilities.

So I copied that spell too, and went home to read them both over. Once I had the ingredients translated, I saw that I could get them at the herb store on Braker without any trouble: it was mostly stuff I already had anyway, like vervain and oils of rosemary and peppermint. The only snag was that the spell to summon an elemental required that I find a place of power where I could conduct the ritual.

A place of power. All I could think of was Stonehenge. How would I go about finding the right kind of place? Maybe Keith would know. I decided to call him.

When he answered the phone, I said, "Hey, Keith. How's the eye?"

"Oh, it's much better," he said. "That arnica poultice really did the trick. Barbara sure knows her herbs."

"That's nice," I said. "Are you feeling up to helping me with my ritual? I've found one I think would be good, but I've got some questions about it."

"O.K.," he said. "What's the spell?"

I explained what it was for.

“Uh,” he said. “That sounds pretty ambitious, Angie.”

I glanced at the spell again. “Well, it’s pretty straightforward-looking except that I’m supposed to find a ‘place of power’ where I’ll conduct the ritual. That’s the only part I need help with.”

“Oh,” he said, sounding relieved. “That’s simple. What you do is get a crystal pendulum that’s attuned to your personal vibrations — you’re an Aquarius, so amethyst is probably best — and wear it around your neck at all times. When you cross a point where the earth meridians connect with your own chakra meridians, you’ll feel something.”

“Kind of like a mild electric shock?” I said. “I felt that when I crossed into Karina’s pentagram last night.”

“Exactly! Androcles was right about you, Angie. You’re really actualizing your personal powers.”

“Why, thank you, Keith. That’s one of the nicest things you’ve ever said to me.”

“Uh —”

“So, when do you want to get together to work on the ritual?” I asked.

“Well, I’ve got plans for this weekend,” he said. “There’s a psychic fair in San Antonio. But once you think you’ve found the right place, give me a call.”

Well, I couldn’t exactly invite myself along to the fair, so I agreed. After we hung up, I decided that I needed to find that power spot A.S.A.P. I made a list of the things I’d need and went to the herb shop, which was open until six on Fridays. They carried crystals there, too.

MR. BROWN was in a good mood, I could tell. He was shaking out some seriously good percussion on the way to the shop. “We’re going to be in business for real, pretty soon,” I said to him as we pulled into the parking lot, giving his dashboard a little pat. “And, who knows? Maybe Keith and I will be setting up a little partnership of our own.”

I turned off the key, and he gagged and dиеseled for at least a minute before shutting down. It made me wonder if something was wrong, or if he just was feeling so good he didn’t want to stop yet. I decided to see how he sounded later, and got out.

Just then a white Karmann Ghia convertible pulled up next to us. “Hey, dude,” I whispered to Mr. B., “check out this classy chassis.”

A guy got out of the Ghia, looked at me and said, “Hi, Angie! What are you doing here?”

I did a double take, not recognizing him right off. Then I saw it was the guy I’d met at school the other day — what was his name? “Hiya,” I said. “The mechanic, right? Roy?”

“Ray,” he said, giving me that goofy grin again. He was tall, a pretty big guy to be driving a Ghia.

“Sharp car,” I said. “She looks like a restoration job.”

He got a little pink around the ears. “Did all the work on her myself,” he said. “Classic cars are kind of a hobby of mine. But not the fancy kind, you know, the Mustangs and that sort of thing. I like a car with some character.”

“Me too,” I said. “Hey, you come here often?”

“Uh, no,” he said. “This is the first time. But I need some herbs for something, and a friend told me this was the place to get them.”

“Your friend was right. C’mon, I’ll show you the ropes.” We went in, and I showed him how to find the right herbs in the apothecary jars and how to bag them and stuff. I noticed he was getting a lot of the same things I was, but I didn’t say anything. No point in being nosy.

After a little bit, I left him talking to the woman at the herb counter, found myself an amethyst pendulum and checked out. The clerk gave me a silk cord for the pendulum, and I put it around my neck right away. Ray was still talking to the herb lady, so I waved at him and left. I was ready to rock and roll

Mr. Brown started up smooth and purred like a cat, although he reversed a little slower than usual. “Been flirting with that Ghia, have you, Mr. B.? Come on now, time to go. Spirits of the Air, here we come, right?”

And the best thing was, I found a place of power right on my way home —the interchange at Braker and Loop 1.

It was really mystical. Evening had come by then. The first stars were beginning to show, with a three-quarter moon hanging overhead like a silver coin dropping through a slot in the deep-blue bowl of the sky. Mr. Brown and I buzzed along the access road, smooth pavement humming under our wheels, and when I came onto the wide curving entrance ramp, I got the feeling we were about to soar

off into the sky, into another dimension. And then I got a hundred-watt jolt from the amethyst lying on my chest.

The place — it felt incredible — the huge white columns, the arching ramps of the exchange — they looked like Grecian rains in the moonlight, like the awesome stones of a truly sacred place.

And then we were past the exchange, spiraling down to the regular highway, and the feeling faded.

“But we found it, Mr. Brown!” I said. “And so quick! Are we actualized or what?”

I had meant to memorize the spell, but didn’t get a chance because it had to be done at midnight “on the full of the moon.” That was only a couple of days away, and I still had to gather some things up: some frankincense and blue ribbons, blue candles, rock salt, and a flagon of springwater. Plus I had to dress in a blue robe with a blue cord around my waist — I was running around a lot that weekend getting all the stuff together. I called Keith and left a message on his answering machine about doing the ritual at midnight on Monday.

Classes on Monday dragged, even my Advanced Design Theory which I usually love. But I was pretty excited. For one thing, I’d never seen an air elemental, much less bound one to service. And I was pretty sure the ritual would impress the coven. Not just anybody can summon up elementals.

When I got home there was a message on my machine from Keith saying he’d be ready at 11:30, but he hoped we wouldn’t be out all night because he was scheduled to have a reading the next day and didn’t want his aura depleted.

It was a really nice evening — cool and clear. A good omen. I put all my paraphernalia in my backpack. Then I set my alarm for eleven and took a nap. Aura depleting and like that.

When I got up, I felt sparked, like I’d had a full night’s sleep. Mr. Brown was in a terrific mood, too, I could tell. I opened the sunroof to let in the night air, put the spell stuff in the backseat, and took off for Keith’s house. For some reason, I missed the exit and had to double back, so it was about 11:40 when we got there. He was waiting out front, shivering a little.

“Hi,” I said. “Sorry we’re late.”

“We?” He peered into the car’s backseat. “Is someone else with you?” “Just Mr. Brown,” I said, giving the dashboard a pat.

“You’re weird about this car, Angie,” he said. He grabbed the door handle

and gave it a good yank. The door flew open, and Keith fell down. I heard his shoes clunk on the curb as he bounced.

“You O.K.?” I asked him.

He stood up, brushing at his jeans. “I guess so. Damn it, I just washed these.” He got in and closed the door very carefully, then fastened his seat belt. “I’ve been doing protective rituals, but they just don’t seem to be working right.”

I started to apologize again, but he said, “Forget it, let’s just go.”

“O.K.,” I said. “This should be quite an adventure. I’ve never summoned an elemental before.”

“You havent?” Keith eyed me. “Are you sure you can handle it?”

“Of course, I said. “I found a place of enormous personal power right after I got the stuff for the spell, and the way I see it, things are falling into place for a reason.”

“If you say so.”

We zipped along Loop 1 at about sixty-five, because there was no traffic. Keith complained he was cold with the sunroof open, but we were at the Braker exchange in less than ten minutes, so I didn’t bother closing it. I exited and pulled off on the left side, just under the first big ramp.

The jolt from my pendulum was even bigger this time. Then it settled down to a continuous tingle. I could feel the energy humming along my skin and inside my bones. “Wow,” I said. “This place makes me feel like I could fly.”

The ramps and columns were even more beautiful in full moonlight, gleaming white and mysterious overhead, weaving complex patterns of energy against the sky.

I got out of the car. “Isn’t it gorgeous?”

Keith just sat there for a second. I leaned in to get my backpack from the backseat, and he said, “You’re kidding, right?”

“About what?” I said. I set my pack in the driver’s seat and opened it. The robe was on top. I pulled it on over my jeans and tied the cord at my waist.

Keith leaned across and put his arm over the top of my pack. “About conducting a ritual here,” he said. “All this concrete.”

“What about it?”

“It’s as far from a celebration of the natural world as — as an oil derrick,” he said.

“Oil derricks are neat,” I said. “There’s one down near Corpus that’s lit by those pinkish-golden halogen lamps, you know the kind I mean? At night it looks like a fairy palace. Stinks, though.”

“Angie,” Keith said. “No elemental is going to come here. This is a travesty, a corruption, of everything paganism means.”

I yanked the backpack out from under his arm and set it on the hood. “I disagree,” I said. “Isn’t Stonehenge a sacred place?”

“Of course.” He sounded patronizing.

“Well, how is this any different from Stonehenge? People built that too. It’s a pattern built from stone and so is this. I can feel the energy here, even if you can’t.” I touched two fingers to his hand, and he jumped.

“People built Stonehenge as a place of worship,” he said. “It’s the astrological arrangement of the stones and the accumulated energy from worship that makes it sacred.”

“You don’t know why they built it. It could have just been a picnic spot. And for all you know, the engineer who built this interchange was given divine guidance.”

“That’s nuts,” he said, crossing his arms.

“Oh, yeah? Any nuttier than believing you’re one of the lost princes of Atlantis?” I said. “You aren’t a real pagan at all. If you believe in the spirit that resides in everything, that means everything. Not just the stuff that appeals to you as ‘natural.’”

“You’re twisting things,” he said.

“Oh? Hand-hewed rocks are O.K., but a gravel-silica aggregate isn’t? A mountain filled with iron ore can have a spirit, but steel reinforcing rods that are the distilled essence of that same mountain can’t? Sounds pretty inconsistent to me, Keith.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” he said. “Highways and —and constructed things — are anathema to everything a pagan loves!”

“Why, you’re nothing but a narrow-minded zealot!” I said.

Keith got out of the car and slammed the door. On his fingers. He howled and yanked the door back open, cussing as he cradled the injured fingers with his other hand.

I walked around to his side of the car to see if he was O.K.

“Damn it,” he said after a minute. “This stupid piece of junk bites me every time I get near it.” He reared back and kicked Mr. Brown’s fender just as hard as he could.

I would’ve killed him, except it wasn’t necessary. I think he broke his toe, but I didn’t pay much attention to him, for all his hollering and flailing around. I just hunkered down next to Mr. B. and stroked the new chip in his paint.

“Poor thing,” I said. “I’ll never let him near you again, I swear.” I turned around then and said, “Keith, I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want anything to do with you. Someone who mistreats another entity just because he’s too blind to recognize spirit in an unexpected place isn’t worth my time.”

Keith was scowling. “Fine,” he said. “And you can forget about joining our coven. But how am I supposed to get home?”

I shrugged. “There’s a gas station about a mile up the access road. You can always call a cab.”

He cussed some more, but I ignored him, and after a while he limped off. Slowly.

“You O.K., Mr. B.?” I whispered. “I’m real sorry about that.”

His engine ticked over with a small sigh, so I figured I was forgiven. But something was nagging at me. I sat down on Mr. Brown’s hood. What had I said to Keith? That he was too blind to recognize spirit in an unexpected place? It reminded me of Androcles’ message — Karina had said not to be deceived by spirit in an unfamiliar guise.

And she said I would know my familiar by the sign of the crescent moon. I reached down and touched the crescent-shaped dent in Mr. Brown’s fender.

“I guess I’ve been blind too, Mr. B.” I said. “But you stuck by me just the same. Thanks for getting rid of that turkey.”

It was getting chilly, I noticed, even with the ritual robe over my blue jeans. I looked around the mystical beauty of the interchange and wondered whether anyone else in the world would see it the way I did. So much for finding a community that shared my interests. Didn’t look like pagans had any use for a witch who was also a

computer nut.

Just then a car came along the access road and pulled off right behind us. I thought for a minute it might be the cops, but it was a graceful white ghost of a car, a Karmann Ghia convertible. I hopped down from Mr. Brown's hood and walked over. "Hey there, Ray," I said. "What are you doing out here?"

He got out of the Ghia. "The spirit calls me sometimes," he said. "This is a special place, you know? Actually," he added as a powder-blue drop-top Corvair coasted to a stop next to us, "some of my friends are getting together here tonight."

A little red Midget with its top down came next, and its bearded driver waved to Ray. These cars weren't show pieces. Just by looking at them, I could see they had character.

"Way cool," I said to Ray. "Are all these folks into witchcraft too? I didn't know anybody else had a car for a familiar. I figured I was just weird."

"Weird in the right way, if you ask me," Ray said, giving me one of his sweet goofy grins. "I'm glad to see you finally figured things out, Angie. I was starting to wonder if you'd ever realize about Mr. B."

"You knew?"

"I thought he had a lot of personality the first time I saw him." His voice dropped to a whisper, and he patted the Ghia. "And then Miranda agreed. I think she's got a little bit of a crush on him."

I took his hand. "I'm not surprised," I said. I could feel my face getting hot, but I said it anyway.

The bearded guy from the MG came up. "Hey, Angie. Ray thought you might turn up here tonight. Welcome to the convertible coven."

"Do sunroofs count?" I said, suddenly nervous.

They laughed. "Of course," Ray said. He tugged on the blue cord of my robe. "And you're dressed just right for the ritual we've got planned tonight — we're going to summon an air elemental to heal the ozone layer."

And we did, and things have been great ever since. Ray's even interested in algorithms. Which isn't surprising, really. After all, this is the Age of Aquarius.

* * * *

Susan Wade has just sold her first novel, *Walking Rain*, to Bantam Books.

Her short fiction has appeared in *Starshore*, *Amazing Stories*, and the anthology *Snow White, Blood Red*. Although “The Convertible Coven” marks her first appearance in *F&SF*, she has several more stories in our inventory.