

Legacy and Spellbound (Wicked 2)

Nancy Holder & Debbie Viguié

To the holder of our family legacy, Elise Jones, who is a true heroine

--Nancy Holder

To my dad, Richard Reynolds, who has always been there for me and is my truest fan

--Debbie Viguié

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--D.

Part One Yule

When the Yule Log bums bright Witches come out to play at night But once the year has finally turned Witches will drown, and witches will burn

ONE BLACK OBSIDIAN

Seek and destroy, hunt and find
We will kill all their kind
They will beg and they will plead
As we drink their blood with mead
Protect us, Goddess, hear our cry
Cahors call out to the sky
Shelter us beneath thy arms
And help us to escape all harm

The Cathers Coven: London, December

The Coven was on the run.

Holly Cathers, her cousin, Amanda, and their friends were witches of the light trying to hide in the dark, in a land controlled by the Supreme Coven, warlocks who worshiped the horned god. As they trudged through the growing darkness Holly consulted her directions, frequently, desperately hoping they were nearing their destination and safety. If there is any such thing as safety, she thought bitterly. A year and a half ago she had been a happy, normal teenager. In a horrible twist of fate her parents had been killed in an accident, the victims of a curse that all who loved a Cathers witch would die by drowning. She had gone to live with her estranged aunt and her twin cousins. It was then that all hell broke loose.

She had known for only a few short months of her true heritage as the latest in a long line of witches, a descendant of the ancient House of Cahors. Her family was involved in a centuries' old feud with another witchy house, the Deveraux. Now Michael Deveraux was hunting her and hers. Still, they had had to come here, to London, the seat of the Supreme Coven, to find Holly's missing cousin, Nicole.

After that first terrible year, in which Michael had killed Amanda and Nicole's mother, Nicole had left, too freaked out by the magic and the death to stay in Seattle any longer. She had called once, months later, to warn them of danger and to tell them she was going to try to come home. She had never made it, kidnapped instead by the Supreme Coven.

The Coven kept on going, too tired to move at much more than a crawl. Holly's nerves were frayed, worn down by months of endless fighting. The stress was taking its toll on her, and she was beginning to act in ways that would have once been abhorrent to her.

Now, as they raced to put themselves as far from danger as they could, the others moved at a distance from Holly, leaving her alone in the midst of the busy London afternoon. Just as passersby on the street instinctively avoided the cloaked witches, so the rest of the Coven instinctively avoided getting too close to her.

They're afraid of me, Holly Cathers thought as she and the members of her coven hurried down Oxford Street. Afraid of my power, afraid I'll lose my temper again.

They're right to be afraid.

I'm not sure I can control myself anymore. Isabeau is stirring inside, and she's driving me to disobey, and to go to Jer. Because her husband, Jean, can manifest in him, and she wants him wants both to love him and to kill him, so she can rest....Bide your time, kinswoman. Let me do what I said I would.

Holly could almost hear Isabeau reply, Then help me do what I said I would: kill my only love, my only hate.

I must roam through time and space, earthbound, until he is truly dead...."No," she whispered, then clamped her mouth shut and moved on. Isabeau, Holly's ancestress, had died betraying her husband, Jean Deveraux, six centuries before.

And now she lives on in me, Holly thought bitterly. And Jean lives on through Jeraud Deveraux, The two won't let us rest.

Isabeau and Jean had been married, pawns in a deadly game played by their families. It had been their destruction. Now Isabeau and Jean were both cursed to wander the world as spirits until they fulfilled the curse each had laid on the other ... Isabeau, who had sworn to her mother, the fierce Queen Catherine, that she would kill Jean, was doomed to walk the world, earthbound, until she could fulfill her vow and kill her husband.

Jean had sworn vengeance on Isabeau herself, after she had betrayed his family to her mother. Thanks to her duplicity, every man, woman, and child of Deveraux blood had been put to the torch. Infants. Even their livestock had burned alive. Only Jean had escaped, and he had been horribly burned.

Now Jeraud Deveraux had been burned, just as Jean had been. By the woman he loved ...In each succeeding generation, Jean and Isabeau had attempted to possess members of their own families, through whom they would free themselves from love and hate, and sink into the earth for one last time ... hopefully to find peace in the arms of angels, or in each other....Each generation had failed them.

In Holly's time, she was Isabeau's vessel, her unwilling host. Jeraud Deveraux, the son of her terrifying enemy, Michael, was the one Jean used. Passion and hatred boiled inside them both as Jean and Isabeau pursued each other through time and space, loving and hating, willing death, and forbidding it....Now Holly shook her head. Isabeau spoke to her more lately, calling to all that was cold and wild within her. It was getting harder to ignore her, harder to draw the line between them.

She glanced about, wondering how much farther she and her fellow covenates had to go. It was bitterly cold in London; granite-colored snow cascaded from skies the color of gravestones, and the bitter wind could freeze bones. Double-decker buses and old-fashioned black taxicabs slammed around overcrowded traffic circles; pedestrians slogged along, caught in a crush of steamy breath and bad tempers.

Overhead, seven falcons wheeled, minions of the Deveraux, searching for Holly and her coven. Holly had been the first to notice them, scrutinizing the birds perched on the lampposts outside Victoria Station, their beady, glaring eyes ticking as each passenger rushed by.

Back in Paris, the High Priestess of the Mother Coven had woven spells of invisibility around Holly's coven to protect them from the Deveraux--from the entire Supreme Coven, for that matter. Having no desire to test those waters, Holly and the others had darted back into the train station and quickly boarded an Underground train for Essex Square, but somehow the birds were able to sense the presence of witches, and were trailing them.

Now their wings cast deadly silhouettes against the neon signs and streetlights that were winking on, although it was barely four in the afternoon. Winter days in London were short; the night reigned supreme. Camouflaged among the dark umbrellas, the birds swooped and searched, unnoticed by the mundane Londoners because the creatures were magical and only visible to those who walked in that world. So far, the creatures still could not locate their quarry.

Now the Coven hurried along. With Holly and Amanda were the remnants of their coven: Tommy Nagai, Amanda's best friend; Silvana Beaufrere, a friend of Amanda's since childhood; and a very reluctant Kari Hardwicke. Kari had been a member of Jer's coven and Jer's lover before Holly had come along.⁸¹⁷Holly sighed as she looked at her. Kari had never forgiven her for leaving Jer behind in the school gymnasium as it was consumed by the Black Fire conjured by his father and brother. For months they had thought Jer dead and the members of his coven had joined with Holly and her friends. Now, all Jer's coven were dead except for Kari, and she wanted out.

Kari had accompanied them to London only because the High Priestess of the Mother Coven had informed her that she would likely be killed or taken hostage by the Supreme Coven if she left the relative safety of their numbers. She wanted nothing more than to go back to Seattle and, like Nicole Anderson, forget that she had ever learned that magic and witchery were real forces in the world. The new member of their party--if not officially of their coven--was Sasha Deveraux, Eli and Jer's mother, and the estranged wife of Michael. The lovely red-haired, green-eyed woman had asked to come with them, her mission being to save her beloved son, Jer, and to turn him completely away from the worship of the Horned God and all the darkness that entailed ... or so Sasha hoped.

And so Holly hoped too.

But Holly had promised the Mother Coven--and Nicole's sister, Amanda--that they would save Nicole⁹¹⁸first. Once she had been rescued from the Supreme Coven--and how are we going to manage that?--then Holly was free to go after Jer.

I hope it's a promise I can keep.

The Mother Coven had helped ward their passage to London; they had gone by train and then by ferry, Holly remembering all the while that the curse on her family was that those who loved them would die by drowning. For that reason, she had refused to take the Chunnel, the underground tunnel that transported travelers underneath the English Channel. In the end she hadn't been sure that the ferry was any better. She spent the entire trip reliving the nightmare of the ferry attack in Seattle, when they had lost Eddie.

When I lost Eddie, she reminded herself. She was still haunted by his face and by the sure knowledge that he had died because she had chosen to save her cousin, Amanda, instead of him. It was a secret she had kept to herself. Along with so many others lately. She sighed, frustrated. Being a leader meant making the tough choices, the sacrifices. Hey, whatever helps me sleep at night, she thought bitterly. The truth was, she was beginning to scare even herself

For the hundredth time she thought of the great battle waged on and over the Bay against Michael's legions. She remembered the promise she had made to her dead ancestress, the powerful Catherine. The promise that she would be worthy.

She shivered, but it had nothing to do with the biting cold. She wasn't sure what she would have to do, how much more of her soul she would need to sacrifice to be worthy to carry Catherine's mantle. Her visions of Catherine, from her daughter, Isabeau's point of view, had been unbearably gruesome. She shook her head and glanced anxiously at the sky.

Focus; keep your mind on the task.

Holly glanced down at the slip of paper in her hand. It was the address of a Mother Covenant safe house, and the owner was putting herself at great risk by opening her doors to the Cathers coven. Again Holly noted the relative weakness of the Mother Coven as compared with the Supreme Coven--and as opposed to the violent and brilliant ghost army she herself had led into Elliott Bay to save Kialish and Silvana ... though only Silvana had survived.

Cahors all, she thought, her heart beating fiercely. Wild and strong and fearless. They called me their queen ... and Catherine said I was the one who could keep the family name alive....But I need Jer to do that. His magic combined with mine will give us the power to defeat the Supreme Coven. I feel that. I know that....
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Oui, ma belle, a voice whispered inside her head. Alors, go to him. Go now. Vite. It was Isabeau.

Torn, Holly gestured to the others, indicating the fish and chips shop across the street. It was a landmark for them. They were supposed to turn right, then go through the second narrow alleyway. Their contact would be watching in the window for them.

Kari looked longingly at the shop--it had been hours since they had eaten--but Holly firmly shook her head. Creature comforts had to be denied until they were out of harm's way ... or at least off the streets.

The Coven obediently turned right, hanging back from Holly. Her face burned; she was ashamed and defensive, still remembering how she had nearly hurled a fireball at them in the Moon Temple, the most sacred ground of the Mother Coven. As it was, she had insulted Hecate, one of the most revered aspects of the Goddess--and the name of Nicole's familiar, whom she had sacrificed for power.

They're shocked at me for doing it... and yet, it's up to me to make sure they survive the attacks from Michael Deveraux. I sacrificed a little part of my soul for them, and all they can think of is how horrible it was of me to drown the cat.

She put her hands in the pockets of her black wool coat and ducked her head, angrily pursing her lips. What's the saying? Heavy hangs the head that wears the crown....Then Amanda hurried up to her and tugged at her coat sleeve. Holly glanced at her; her cousin was jabbing her finger upward, and her face was ashen.

The seven falcons had lined up on a second-story brick ledge on the opposite side of the street; they cocked their heads in the direction of the fugitive coven, their blue-black feathers shining in the street light. Catching the glow, their eyes gleamed; they clacked their beaks together softly, menacingly, and their claws jittered on the balcony as they edged along, matching the particular, quick rhythm of Holly's footsteps.

Amanda stared at her as if to ask, What do we do?

Holly's face prickled with fear; her heart thundered against her chest, and she clenched her gloved fists inside her pockets to keep from crying out.

Can they hear us?

Have they found us?

She didn't know if she should avoid their gaze or study them to see what they might do next. It was then that she realized that the falcon in the middle--three stood on one side of it, and three on the other--was cast in an eerie green glow; it was also larger than the others. There was something about it that differentiated it from the others; it was the leader, and it was unearthly ... unnatural. Could it be Fantasma, the spirit-familiar of House Deveraux, that had survived through the ages partly as symbol, partly as a real, living thing? It had been Fantasma that had saved Jer's brother, Eli, from the Black Fire so many months ago.

The lead falcon screeched once, then swooped from the perch and began to fly across the street.

Holly whirled around to warn the others not to make a sound. Just in time, Tommy clamped his hand over Kari's mouth, shaking his head vigorously. Kari's eyes bulged; Tommy kept his hand over her mouth, and Holly waved both hands to tell her, No! Stop!

Then the whirl of wings above her caught her attention. She looked up to see the falcons aiming themselves directly at them. Their claws were extended, their beaks clacking.

The falcons are attacking!

She thought of Barbara Davis-Chin, who had been attacked by a falcon after Holly's parents' funeral, and who still lay near death in a hospital in San Francisco. Little had Holly realized then that the falcons were minions of Michael Deveraux and his evil son, Eli. She had had no idea that a world of magic existed, and that she was one of the primary players in it.

Still mute, Holly signaled for everyone to run. She didn't look back at the group as she raced down the sidewalk, hoping the others kept up-- expecting them to--and wondering if she should break the edict of the Mother Coven not to use magic on the London streets unless they were in mortal danger. "Once you spellcast, they'll know exactly where you are," the High Priestess had warned Holly. "The only chance you have against them while you rescue Nicole is to remain hidden." And passive. And unarmed, Holly thought now. We're in danger. Should I break the cloak of invisibility to fight?

The lead falcon moved its head in lockstep birdlike fashion, twisting right, left, and then it swooped back up into the lowering sky. The others swooped back up in formation, forming a V behind it, and then skyrocketed toward the moon.

Holly was so surprised that she stumbled over her own foot and fell to the ground. Her ankle throbbed as she dragged herself closer to the wall of the nearest building.

Sasha ran up to her and pointed a finger as if to cast a spell. Holly wildly shook her head, and Sasha immediately stopped, bending over and extending a hand toward Holly, a simple physical gesture to help her up. Holly gripped Sasha's wrist and let her pull her to her feet. She hissed from the pain in her ankle. They both looked up.

The shimmering lead bird seemed almost to disappear against the moon as the others became small, moving lines ... and then they disappeared. Whether they had truly vanished to another place or continued to fly until they were no longer visible, Holly couldn't tell.

They might come back.

Not willing to take any chances, she limped forward, gesturing with her hand that the others should do the same. She could hear their footfalls, heard one of them faltering and turned around to see Kari stop, looking panicked and confused. Tommy grabbed her hand and yanked her forward; she shook her head again and stayed rooted to the spot.

She's freaking out.

Amanda glanced at Holly with something like exasperation, then ran back to Kari and took her other hand. Silvana made encouraging gestures while Tommy kept hold of her and, together, he and Amanda pulled her forward like a horse on a lead line.

Holly glared at Kari, but Sasha gave her a little tap as if to say, Ease up on her. Then she slung Holly's arm over her shoulder and helped her forward.

On their side of the street, about a hundred feet away, a door opened. A man peered around it, saw them, and raised his hand.

Sasha and Holly looked at each other. Holly mouthed, A guy?

They had expected a woman; the only man they had seen attached to the Mother Coven had been Tommy, in the temple for the ceremony to renew them after their battles with Michael Deveraux and the long flight in the Mother Coven's private jet to Paris from Seattle.

The man was young, maybe Holly's age, and he gestured to them to hurry. Sasha wordlessly propelled Holly along; Holly shut her eyes tightly against the pain, and glanced over her shoulder to make sure that the others were following close behind.

They were, and they had caught up with Holly and Sasha by the time the two reached the door.

The moment Holly stepped across the threshold, her ankle healed. She raised her brows in delighted surprise.

After everyone had entered the building, the man dipped a little bow and said to Holly, "Blessed be." He added, "It's safe to talk in here. The place is very heavily warded."

"Thank you," she said gratefully, skipping for the moment the traditional greeting of the Mother Coven. That was rude. It was immature of her, perhaps, but she was angry at the Coven for not providing them better protection for the journey. "And you," she said, wheeling on Kari. "Don't you ever put the rest of the coven in danger again."

"Or what?" Kari demanded, her eyes flashing. "You'll throw another fireball at me?"

"Hey." Amanda stepped between them. Then she said to the man, "Blessed be," enunciating each syllable as if to remind Holly how to say the words. "Blessed be," Silvana and Tommy added.

Silvana extended her hand. "I'm Silvana, and this is Tommy."

"I'm Joel," he said, shaking with her. Holly detected a bit of a Scots burr in his voice. "I'm a male witch."

"As opposed to a warlock?" Holly filled in, a little perplexed. "Aye," he told her. "I worship the Goddess." There was a moment of silence in the Goddess's honor. "We were told to expect a woman," Holly said. Then she realized they hadn't been actually told whom to expect. Maybe she'd just assumed it would be a woman.

He frowned. "That's odd. As you can see, I'm not one."1827Holly and her coven stared edgily at him. He held out his hands; in each palm was incised a moon, symbol of the goddess. Holly remained unconvinced. "Is there some way you're to contact the Mother Coven?" he asked. "You can check my credentials." As with magic use, Holly had been warned that trying to communicate with the Mother Coven would alert her enemies to her presence.

She looked coolly at Joel and said, "We're staying, for the moment. But if you do anything I find the least bit suspicious, I'll kill you. Fair warning?"

"Holly," Kari protested, but Holly made no reply, only gazed levelly at Joel. "Fair warning," he said somberly. "I assure you, we're both on the same side."

"As long as it stays that way, we'll be fine, then," Holly retorted.

He inclined his head, and a small bit of the tension escaped from the room.

Holly looked around the room and realized it was a souvenir shop. English bone china tea services sat in the front window, and the shelves bulged with dolls dressed like Beefeaters and Royal Marines, and piles of scarves in tartans and plaids.

Maybe I can find something to take home, she thought wryly. Though I'd rather it was Michael Deveraux's head. She was a bit shocked to realize that she meant it. "Please, take off your coats and make yourselves comfortable," he urged as he flipped a CLOSED sign in the front window and pulled the drapes, obscuring the view from the street. "I'll get some tea." They began to do as he asked while he bustled off through a curtained doorway, leaving the coven alone. "That was so scary, with the birds," Amanda said as she carried her coat to a coatrack beside the dark wood door. "I guess they couldn't quite figure out where we were."

"They were too close for comfort," Silvana observed, shaking her cornrows to dust the snow from them. "It's not a good sign," Sasha observed. "We're supposed to be completely cloaked. The Supreme Coven must be working overtime to find us."

"Oh, joy," Tommy drawled. "Please, come in," Joel called through the curtain.

Holly went first, feeling apprehensive. She murmured half of a spell to conjure a fireball, then pushed the curtain away.

She stood in the sitting room of what had to be his living quarters. There was an overstuffed settee upholstered in fat cabbage roses, and a dark green lounge set at a right angle beside it. On a coffee table before the settee were a ring of runestones, a burning lavender candle, and a statue of the Goddess in her incarnation as the Blessed Virgin Mary.

A space heater hummed on the other side of the settee, and Holly moved instinctively to its warmth.

Gesturing eagerly, Joel said, "Please, sit down. The High Priestess told me to make you as comfortable as possible." He went into a small kitchen alcove. Silvana sidled over to Holly and said, "I have a good feeling about him. I'm not getting any bad vibes." Holly cocked her head. "I didn't know you could read people." Silvana shrugged. "Not in any mystical way. Just intuition." Joel returned with cups of tea on an oval tray, and all the myriad things the British poured into their tea. Holly liked the richness of the heavy doses of sugar and cream. "Can we do magic in here?" Tommy asked. "Aye. Magic." Joel smiled at him as he set the tray down on the coffee table. Then he blushed and looked away. Tommy grinned as he apparently realized he was being flirted with. "I've got some cots for you too," Joel said, "in my bedroom." To Holly, he added, "You can have my bed, of course."

"Royal treatment," Kari muttered.

Holly didn't react--she didn't bother anymore. Kari's resentment was very old and very boring. But Amanda, loyal to her core, snapped, "Shut up, Kari."

"Let's all stay calm," Sasha suggested, holding out her hands. She had taken off her coat. It was hard to believe she was old enough to have two children, with her soft, almost girlish face and her thin body. She had that coltish appearance many girls had in their early teenage years. Holly also had trouble believing Sasha had actually been married to Michael Deveraux. She was so

nice."We were attacked," Holly said to Joel as she sat down on the settee. Her jeans were damp from the snow, and her boots were completely soaked through. "Did you see the falcons?"

"Aye." His shy smile returned. "I did a spell, tried to keep you cloaked."

"It worked," Tommy told him as he sat beside Holly and accepted a cup of tea from Joel. "Thank you. For the tea, too."

"Now what?" Holly asked. She was exhausted, but she was also totally wired. She lived in a constant state of tension; it was as if fleeing for her life was the only reality she had ever known, and being a girl back in San Francisco with a job at the horse stable and parents who fought a lot was some strange dream she had borrowed, for a time, from someone else.

I wonder if I'll ever be able to relax again? And even if I weren't in danger, would I remember what it's like to not monitor every situation, looking over my shoulder, sleeping lightly and not for long?

Holly sipped her tea and wondered those things. From the expressions on the faces of the others, their thoughts were similar.

Amanda glanced up at her and through the steam of her tea murmured, "Blessed be, Holly."There's nothing blessed about this situation, Holly thought angrily. But she gave her cousin what she wanted, which was a smile--which reached nowhere near Holly's protected, frozen heart.

Nicole: London Headquarters, the Supreme Coven, December

The "honeymoon suite" at the headquarters of the Supreme Coven was decorated in nightmares.

Nicole sat with her back against a headboard carved with grotesque, misshapen human figures--imps--worshipping the Horned God, who had been carved in the center standing atop a pile of human skulls. Lovely. The hangings draped from the ebony canopy bed were bright crimson, sporting the leering face of Pan, forest god of lust. At the sound of the opening door, she had bolted upright and pulled her knees to her chest, murmuring a warding spell. A gossamer rectangle of blue formed around the doorway.

James Moore, Nicole's bridegroom, chuckled as he walked through the rectangle and made a casual gesture with his left hand. The rectangle popped like a soap balloon, and the remnants winked back into the void from which Nicole had summoned them."It'll take more than that to keep me away from you," he laughingly told her. "Just accept it, Nicki. Your magic is no match for ours. You might as well put yourself in thrall to me willingly, because on Yule, I'm going to force you into it if you're not with me already."He had bleached his hair white, and was wearing black jeans, a black T-shirt, and a black leather jacket. His left ear was pierced, and a black loop of metal hung there."I don't know why you want to bother," she said sullenly.

His smile stretched across his face. "Because you're hot."

"You make me sick." He laughed. "No. I don't." He took off his jacket, dropped it carelessly to the floor, and walked toward the bed. "Do I, Mrs. Moore?" I will not cry, Nicole admonished herself I won't do anything. I'll just sit here....James approached her stealthily, jaguar to prey. She clenched her fists around her knees and clamped her mouth shut so that she wouldn't scream. "I know what you did to me," he informed her as he reached down and pulled his T-shirt over his chest. "When we captured you, you put a glamour on me. I knew even then that you did it. It backfired, didn't it, Nicki? You didn't think I would actually marry you. You just thought I'd fall in love with you and free you."

"Yes," she hissed at him, breaking her promise to herself not to respond to him in any way. "I bewitched you. Or tried to. And now you've married me and you ...you're ..." She trailed off helplessly. "Don't you care at all that I don't love you?"

He blinked his deep blue eyes. "No. Why should I? I'm a warlock. We don't believe in love." He chuckled low in his throat and added, "We do, however, believe in lust."

Then he came to the bed, and Nicole willed herself away to another place...."Isabeau, ma vie, ma femme," Jean whispered fiercely. "Comme je t'aimel Commeje t'adore!"

She lay beneath him in their marriage bed, on a mattress that was loaded to overflowing with fertility charms. Roses were strewn all over the chamber-roses in winter, forced to blossom by Deveraux magic.

As I am forced, she thought; but she was lying to herself. She was giving herself to him freely; nay, she wanted him, was taking him even as he took her--I did not dream such passion existed, she thought, as in the candlelight, Jean's eyes lit up with fire. His face was a study in ecstasy, and triumph. And he is the giver of it; he is the center of the fire that burns me.... I burn with him, I bum from him....And in Joel's little London flat, Holly cried out and bolted upright. She was bathed in sweat, and her heart pounded.

From the doorway, Amanda flicked on the light and said, "Holly, what is it? What's wrong?"

"Dream, that's all," Holly assured her as she brushed her dark ringlets away from her damp forehead. "Sorry. Go back to sleep." Amanda hesitated. "Are you sure? My God, you're sopping wet."

"I'm okay," Holly insisted, her voice rising. "Go. It's all right."

"But--"

"Damn it, Amanda! Leave me alone!" Holly shouted.

I want to go back to sleep. So I can be with him again.

Stunned, Amanda stared at Holly as the other witch pointedly shut her eyes and turned on her side.

Something's happened to her, Amanda thought. Ever since she sacrificed Hecate, she's been so mean.

I'm scared. We all are. She's supposed to be our leader, but I'm not sure where she's taking us. Are we really going to try to rescue Nicole, or is Holly going to make us look for Jer instead?

Alas, Amanda could not see the future, and wasn't sure that she would want to even if she could. Time alone would reveal Holly's intentions. As Holly lay still, Amanda left the room and shut the door.

Headquarters of the Supreme Coven, London, Luc stood before the convened Council of Judgment as they peered down on him from a dais. It had been ten years since the Great Fire of London--as it was being called--begun by him and Giselle Cahors, as they had fought in public. Ten years that the Supreme Coven had waited for House Deveraux to provide the secret of the Black Fire in return for being restored to favor. The throne of skulls, once occupied by his family, groaned beneath the weight of Jonathan Moore, who still reigned as High Priest. The red and green of Deveraux, their coat of arms emblazoned with the fierce, proud visage of the Green Man, hung behind the throne, symbolizing their ownership of it. A hooded man stood beside the tasseled hanging with a torch, awaiting word to shame Luc by putting the flame to his family's badge of honor.

Though Luc kept his head raised high, he was terrified. Not only his life, but his soul lay in peril. And for what? An ill-conceived altercation with the Cahors witch. He had been such a fool to attack her in broad daylight, with all of London watching.

It's my hot Deveraux blood, he told himself The sight of a Cahors is enough to send the most stalwart of us into a frenzy of rage. They nearly destroyed us, and we have vowed to obliterate every one of them from this land and all others. We have sworn blood oaths, father to son to son to son, that there shall be no place, anywhere, that they will find safety from us. That oath has bewitched us. We cannot stop ourselves from attacking when we see one of them.

Now he stood before the Judges. There were thirteen of them, all robed in the black gowns of their estate, heavy gold chains draping their shoulders and chest, their faces for the most part concealed by the hoods they wore. Each sat beside the other in a row of high-backed chairs with pentagrams carved into them. A long table fronted them, and at each place sat a bowl of salt, a goblet of wine, and a burning black tapir.

Behind them, a stained-glass window of the Great Horned God ate demons and humans shrieking for mercy. Flames danced behind him; and from his hollow mouth, a cascade of red splashed into a pool behind the massive ebony chairs in which sat the Judges.

Jonathan Moore smiled evilly down at him as Luc stood all alone facing his inquisitors. He knew very well that if the sentence for his misadventure had been solely Moore's to pass, he would be a writhing tower of flame right now. Satan himself would be feasting on his soul.

But Moore's was only one vote among several, and the Deveraux still had many friends. As House Deveraux rose and fell, so would their own fortunes.

"Luc Deveraux," Moore intoned. The man's smile faded, to be replaced by a scowl, and Luc's heart thudded. It is good news, he thought. If it was the worst, he would deliver it to me with joy in his heart and a smile on his face.

Luc lifted his chin and stood with his legs apart, reminding himself that so long as he lived, he would be able to come back another day to restore the Deveraux to power. All that he need do is survive.

With a flourish, Moore unrolled a vellum scroll and began to read. "You fought in public, displaying the proof of the Black Arts to the eyes of ordinary men," he began. "You brought disaster to London Town, endangering our revered landmark, this headquarters. And to add to your list of offenses, you let the Cahors witch get away."

"That is all true," Luc said boldly.

Moore looked over the top of the scroll. What he had to say next clearly displeased him. "Ten years ago, we informed you that all would be forgiven you, if you would but give us the secret of the conjuring of the Black Fire, a secret your family has kept from this Brotherhood for too long."

"We would willingly share such a secret, were we privy to it," Luc proclaimed. He held out his hands, which were chained together. "Alas, we know it not." Several of the Judges looked at him askance, as if they didn't believe him. He was supremely frustrated. Deveraux had died under torture because others had believed they still retained the secret of the Black Fire. They had been persecuted, courted, and abandoned. For centuries, the belief persisted that the Deveraux kept the secret, waiting for the proper moment to conjure the Black Fire. If only that were true, he thought. "Since you are so recalcitrant," Moore continued, "this is our sentence: that your family be exiled from this coven and from Europe for a period of one hundred years, at which time your House may reapply for Brotherhood. You are to have no contact with us for one hundred years. If during that time you find that you are able to conjure the Black Fire once again, you may contact us. Otherwise, we sever all relations with your House."

He stared at them in disbelief. They are giving me my freedom? Allowing his family to work on counterplots without being held accountable to the Supreme Coven?

Luc almost laughed in their faces. He couldn't believe their idiocy. "Your family will be exiled to the Americas," Moore continued, "for one hundred years. You are to stay there. If a Deveraux, or a Deveraux familiar, so much as places one foot in an ocean, we will annihilate your family." He held up a hand. "And your spirit-familiar, Fantasma, will remain here as hostage, until the one hundred years of exile have been completed. If we discover that you have attempted to leave your prison country, we will kill the bird and scatter its soul to the winds of time." As if to underscore this pronouncement, Moore clapped his hands. Two robed warlocks rested a thick pole across their shoulders; hanging from the pole was a spiked cage. In the cage, the proud bird

was capped and hobbled, huddling miserably and clearly in pain. "What have you done to him?" Luc demanded, taking a step forward.

"Think of him as your whipping boy," Moore said, delighting in Luc's distress. "If any in your family misbehave, Fantasma will pay for it with torture."

Luc clamped his mouth shut. It would do no good to protest, or to ask for mercy on Fantasma's behalf. Besides, Fantasma was a Deveraux. The bird would sooner die a slow, miserable death than hear a fellow Deveraux plead for anything, much less his life. "Very well," Luc said curtly, inclining his head with a regal air. "I accept the sentence of the court."

Moore broke into a smile and gave a curt nod to the robed warlock who held the torch. The man set it to the Deveraux colors. The flames caught the fabric, raging across the face of the Green Man. The smoke reached Fantasma's nostrils, and the bird tried to flap its wings and cry out. But it was tightly bound, and its mouth within the mask stayed silent.

The judges said in unison, "House Deveraux is banished. Woe unto the warlock who gives them succor, who befriends them, who aids them. House Deveraux is to us as dead."

They each took a drink of wine from the goblets before them. Then, as they swallowed, they picked up the black tapirs, turned them upside down, and smashed the flickering wicks against the surface of the table. The only light in the hall emanated from the flames destroying House Deveraux's banner.

"Leave us," Moore said to Luc. "Turn your back and run, for you have until the next moon to be gone from these shores. If we find you among us, we will destroy Fantasma, and then will hack you and all your fellows to pieces and feed them to the Hell Hounds. We will mount your heads on the traitor's gate and we will give your souls to Satan."

Luc turned. He needed no more encouragement to be gone.

His robes flapped around him as the others watched him in silence. His boots rang on the cold stones of the Great Hall. Smoke trailed after him, accompanied by the whoosh of the fire eating up his family's colors.

By my honor, the Cahors shall pay for this, he thought. I will hunt them down and destroy them unceasingly. And in time, we'll take down House Moore as well. This I vow, by my soul. May Satan devour it if I fail. Attend, Cahors: We are in an everlasting vendetta. May death come to any Deveraux who spares any one of you.

TWO MOONSTONE

Casting, seeking, we hunt our prey
By the light of blessed day
We curse the moon as it does rise

With all its subtle female ties
We worship the Goddess divine
Above us, the full moon is a sign
Peace to all, friends and kin
Who hold the Goddess deep within

The Cathers Coven: London

Sasha was worried. Holly was beginning to spin out of control again, as she had in the Moon Temple back in Paris. Holly was the most powerful witch alive, but Sasha feared she was too young to carry such an awesome responsibility. Powerful as she was, though, she would still be no match for the Supreme Coven.

Joel came to sit by her side so silently, so stealthily, that she almost did not hear him. She opened her eyes and saw the concern on his face. "Well, what do you think of Our little coven?"

"Most of them are ... broken," he said, his tongue lingering on the last word.

She nodded agreement. "Holly lost her best friend and her parents, discovered she was a witch, and became head of her own coven all within a year. During that time she's been constantly battling Michael Deveraux. Now we have the whole Supreme Coven on our heels." He raised his brows. "That's too large a burden for anybody to carry alone."

"Holly's not alone," Amanda said defensively from the doorway.

Joel inclined his head, inviting her to join them. "No, she's not, but that's how she feels." Amanda moved toward them, arms crossed over her chest. She looked angry, but more than that, she looked frightened.

Joel and Sasha moved apart so that she could sit between them. She hesitated only a moment before collapsing onto the sofa. "She scares me," she whispered so low, Sasha had to strain to hear her. "She just really let me have it. I got freaked out. I thought, what if I piss her off too much?"

She began to cry softly, and Sasha pulled her close, whispering words of healing over her. Joel joined in, his gentle brogue washing over them. Sasha could feel all Amanda's grief for the loss of her mother, her fear for her father and her sister, and her sense of responsibility for Holly and Holly's actions.

Slowly Amanda stopped crying and sat up. "What did you do to me?" she muttered. "I feel great."

"Joel's a healer," Sasha said, smiling at the male witch. "It's second nature for most Druids." "Druids?" Amanda asked. "Aye. I'm descended from Celts. Druids draw power from the earth and try to find harmony and balance within it and mirror it within themselves."

"And you worship the Goddess?" Amanda asked, starting to sound sleepy.

He nodded. "It's a small step from Mother Earth to Goddess. In fact, many would argue that it's not a step at all."

Amanda nodded. "Thank you. For everything you're doing for us, and me." Her words were starting to slur, and her eyes began blinking shut.

He shrugged. "I do only what I can."

Sasha locked eyes with Joel. "Feeling up to doing some more?" He nodded.

A gentle snore emanated from Amanda. The girl had fallen asleep, her chin on her chest. Sasha and Joel stood and carefully moved her so she was lying down on the sofa.

Together they moved silently to the other room. They moved first to Silvana and moved their hands through the air above the girl's body. Sasha could feel her anxiety, her concern for her mother, who was back in the States protecting the shaman, Dan Carter, and Amanda's father, Richard. They spoke words of calming and strength over her and prayed to the Goddess to protect those left behind.

Next they moved to Tommy. Like Amanda, he was afraid of Holly. His concern, though, was primarily for Amanda, afraid that she might get hurt. His fear for her was matched only by his love for her. They murmured words of strength and peace over him that he might be a rock for her.

When they passed their hands over Kari, her terror was nearly enough to make Sasha scream. She glanced at Joel's face and saw the horror that Kari felt mirrored there. They worked for several minutes, trying to purge her mind and soul and body of the crippling fear. Sasha knew that if they couldn't, sooner or later Kari's inability to take action would get her killed.

They straightened and stared at each other for a long moment as they each took deep, cleansing breaths. Then as one they turned toward the bed where Holly lay.

Only, Holly was sitting up staring straight at them. She smiled slowly, and the sight sent a chill down Sasha's spine.

"Please, no," Holly told them in a reasonable voice. "Thanks for helping them and thanks for helping my ankle. But I don't want you in my mind. That's private."

Sasha debated about arguing with her for only the briefest moment. She could feel the rage flowing off of Holly. The girl barely had it under control, and it would do none of them any good to push her. Sasha locked eyes with Holly for one brief moment. In time we will continue this discussion, the older witch thought.

Holly gave Sasha the briefest of nods to acknowledge that she understood her message.

We will never continue the discussion, Holly thought as she plumped up her pillow. She had scented it with lavender, to combat sadness, and rosemary, for remembrance. What's in my heart is private. And I'm getting tired of Sasha trying to second-guess my every move. I said we'd rescue Nicole first, and we will. But if it were up to me ... how could I choose between my cousin and the power of a love that goes beyond me and Jer?

Stonily she closed her eyes. The daytime world would remind her that Nicole was family, blood. Jer was an outsider in more ways than one. He was from another magical House; his brother and father were bent on killing Holly and anyone she met on her path. Of all the time she had known him, she had physically been around him only a few days at most.

But if it were up to me...She was drifting now, as rosy mists washed over her eyelids. Her body gently unwound from all the trials, cares, and worries. She heard the lap of calm seas against wood, a warm, soft sound like a kitten savoring cream. The sky was fresh and clear, the waters smooth and still. She was drifting, yet her little boat glided steadily for the island. The sun glinted off the battlements of an ancient castle; wild roses enclosed it, hands to heart, nature's velvety red Claddagh rings. Each arched window was a stained-glass letter, rippling in the sun as the boat moved closer. They spelled R-E-S-C-U-E. She was not afraid. It was going to be easy.

The island grew as she sailed to it; the shoreline was welcoming, a carpet of moss and ferns greeting the hull as her wooden boat touched land. As she stood, she looked down and saw that she was gowned in Cahors black and silver, lacy long sleeves touching the hem of her straight skirt. There was a circlet around her black curly hair, and earrings that cascaded to her shoulders. A matching belt of silver hung low over her hips.

The boat was upholstered in black velvet; the oarlocks were silver. As she stepped out of the boat, a small figurehead at the bow lifted one hand and saluted her. It was a Greek warrior woman, her helmet pushed back to reveal a serene smile of confidence and pride.

Even in ancient Greece, my line had power, Holly thought. Our blood has ennobled women for centuries. With that knowledge came more certainty that she was going to rescue her one true love.

Her slippered foot touched soft fern, and then she was walking through the gentle forest; birdsong greeted her as she entered a glade washed with sunshine. In the center, an enormous oak rose to the heavens, its lush branches providing a canopy for the man who lounged beneath it.

It was Jer, with his dark hair curling around his ears, and his dark, Deveraux eyes. He was crowned with ivy, and he lay on a bed of oak leaves. His face was angular and slightly weathered, and he was more muscular than she remembered.

He's older. He's matured.

When he caught sight of her, his face lit up. His dark eyes gleamed hungrily, and he rose from the nest of leaves. His head was held proudly, his bearing noble, graceful.

Then he spread his wings and flew to her.

She lifted her own, and they gave flight. "Jer," she murmured as they traveled to the moon, to the stars, to the heart of the sky. "Jeraud Deveraux, I am thine."

"Mine, and none other," he whispered. "Et nul autre." In the night, in the dark, Holly sighed and dreamed. In the hall, watching her, Sasha worried.

She's going to turn against us someday, she thought, terribly troubled. Then she left her High Priestess to her dreams. That was all they were--dreams. There was no truth in them.

None at all.

The Coven of White Magic: London, December

Evil traveled best at night, and so José Lu's coven raced to cover as much ground as they could by day.

Except, it's not José Lu's coven anymore, Philippe thought. It's mine.

The Coven was made up of four male witches of French or Spanish heritage. The four worshiped the Goddess in their own unique way, blending it with the Catholicism practiced by their families. The most solemn of their number, Armand, had even studied for the priesthood before joining the Coven. Alonzo was older, the father figure and benefactor of the group. Pablo was a teenager, the younger brother of José Lu. José Lu's death had left Philippe in charge. The Coven had found Nicole Anderson, descendant of the Cahors witches, and had been trying to protect her from the evil that pursued her. They had failed and the warlocks who had captured Nicole had killed José Lu during their attack. Their coven leader had been their only casualty ... if one could use the term only. Losing José Lu had been like losing a brother.

He was my best friend, my copain. And they killed him. They won't get away with it. The others grouped behind him, as if awaiting his order to move, to breathe. Astarte, the cat Nicole had adopted a few days before her capture, purred as she settled in Armand's arms, kneading his forearm as she gazed intently at Philippe. She was clearly awaiting her orders as well. They had driven their car to the outskirts of Paris and left it there, in case the Supreme Coven had cast finders' spells on them. They had dumped their robes into the waters of the English Channel, and warded one another with protection spells as best they could. At each juncture of their journey, they had turned to José Lu's true little brother, Pablo, whose senses were most acute--and who could often read minds-- for guidance on where to go next. It made sense that he would lead them to London, for the Supreme Coven had claimed that ancient city as their territory for centuries. After the Great Fire of London, the Mother Coven had retreated ... and the citizens of London had paid, and paid dearly, for that act of cowardice-- Jack the Ripper had been one consequence, and the many bombings perpetuated by the IRA had been another. Mad cow disease had run rampant courtesy of the Supreme Coven.

And now they have Nicole, Philippe thought angrily. Goddess, protect her from their savagery. Deliver them into our hands and let us free her.

"Anything?" he asked Pablo. José Lu's strong Spanish features were evident in Pablo's face as he raised his chin and closed his eyes, frowning in concentration. The others remained motionless, watching him, willing him to lead them to their enemies.

They stood at the traffic circle of Piccadilly Circus, a Virgin Megastore on their left, and a huge Grecian-style museum on their right. Directly before them, cars swirled around an obelisk topped by the statue of a war hero. Pablo had guided them here, sensing the strength of the Supreme Coven's dark influence as his compass point. It had become very strong ... but now had disappeared.

They hide well. Just like they kill.

When Pablo said nothing, only exhaled and gazed down at the pavement, a collective sigh went up. They were getting tired, and nerves were fraying, and Philippe knew he had to do something to bolster their spirits, keep their confidence high and their focus strong.

Then Pablo murmured, "Momento. There's someone .. He cocked his head as if listening to sounds Philippe could not detect. Then his eyes widened. "Una bruja," he whispered, and pointed across the street.

At that very moment, a striking young woman half-turned, her glance brushing over the Coven as if by accident. Philippe caught his breath. Nicole!

Astarte's tail flicked wildly as if she, too, recognized her mistress.

The woman's hair tumbled wildly around her face, masses of ringlets and curls; she had very black eyebrows and intense eyes. She was thin, and wiry.

But she was not Nicole.

She was, however, of witchblood.

She appeared to realize that Philippe and the others were too.

Though the crowd surged around her, she remained rooted to the spot, her lips moving, making a discreet gesture with her left hand. She was casting a spell.

Then everything changed; the scene around Philippe stretched and slowed down; people walked past him in slow motion; voices dragged; even the light changed, becoming oddly diffuse and washing the scene with strange off-colors.

The witch glided toward them, although in some portion of his mind, Philippe realized that she was not moving. She was projecting her persona as a confrontation; her eyes crackled with energy. She raised her arms and asked in a strangely echoate voice, De quien eres?

Not, Who are you? but, Whose are you?

He responded to her, reaching into her mind: I am Nicole's.

That shook her; her reflected image wobbled as if it were on TV and the reception was bad. Then the scene shifted again, and she was back in her place across the street, and he was staring at her.

He said to the others, "Bon, allons-nous," his gaze fastened on her as she turned her head to the right, then gazed back at him and began to walk through the crowd. She was moving toward the nearest building, which was a fish and chips shop.

She looked back at him again.

"I feel it too," Pablo murmured. "Ella es familia de Nicole."

She's part of Nicole's family.

Then a shadow crossed above her head like a low-moving cloud. She stumbled backward, glancing up.

Above the noise and tumult of the street, the unmistakable war cry of a falcon jittered across the winter sky. Astarte yowled angrily and swiped with her paw at the air.

Philippe jerked his gaze to the clouds. Sure enough, three enormous falcons hovered there, the largest glaring down at the lone witch. She stood stock-still; the three looped, then tipped beak-first into the air currents and began to make for her.

"Non," Philippe murmured, raising his right hand. A fireball appeared in it; he prepared to lob it, when the falcons swooped directly over the witch's head, then swooped upward again. He extinguished the fireball. Apparently, they had not been able to see her.

Or else she is their friend.

The members of Jose" Luis's coven crossed themselves. Their Father Confessor, Alonzo, murmured, "The birds couldn't see her."

"Let's go," Philippe said, rushing toward her.

"It might be a trick. Falcons serve the House of Deveraux," Armand commented.

"Perhaps they are trying to draw us out of our cloak of invisibility."

With one more glance his way, the witch darted between two buildings and was lost to Philippe's view.

"Attends!" he cried. He stepped into the street; horns blared. A man on a bicycle slammed on his brakes and began swearing at him in Farsi.

Philippe circled his wrist, creating a bubble of safety around himself as he ran against the traffic. Cars jerked to a stop; the man on the bicycle slowed, then tipped over--just in time, the man steadied himself with his foot--and all the while, Philippe knew he was being foolish. While he and his coven brothers could hide themselves from detection, the effects of his spell were laid bare for all to see--including the watchful falcons, who now grouped as a trio and began to dive toward him.

Now I've done it, he thought. They were perhaps ten meters above him. He saw their flashing eyes, could magically hear the chatter of their beaks as they opened and closed them, watched the-sun glint off their talons.

Then they swooped up and flew over him as they had done with the witch who so resembled Nicole. They wheeled back around, screeching with frustration, then doubled back in the opposite direction.

When his foot reached the curb of the other street, he saw a brief flash of blue light to his right, in a small alleyway. He ran toward it. She was not there.

But a fresh lily lay against old stones, and as he picked it up he glanced left, right... and saw no witch.

As the others caught up to him, he examined the lily, and then he inhaled its scent. "She's a friend," he said aloud, holding out the flower, "and she's in danger."

Astarte stared at him with her big yellow eyes, and plaintively mewed.

Jer Avalon, December

For the third time that day Jeraud Deveraux began counting the stones that made up the walls of his prison. He thought of his life before, at home in Seattle, where he had gone where he wanted, seen whom he desired, and done what he wished. My, how small my life has become.

He didn't know how long he had been on the island. He hadn't even seen more than his small portion of it, which consisted of a cell-like room with a tiny door opening onto a narrow path that led to a lone rock on a sheer cliff. Neither the six-foot path nor the cliff offered any hope of escape. He could not scale sheer rock.

Inside his cell there was only the one door, but he was the only one who used it. The others who came and went did so right through the wall, through some kind of porthole he had been unable

to find or open. He had spent days searching for another way out of the room and days more searching the cliff for a means of escape. He had finally given up.

His time was better spent trying to heal his body and mind and gathering information from the girl who brought him food. He feared he wasn't faring well with the healing part. His flesh was still mangled, and he feared he looked barely human. His mind hadn't fared much better. Every night he dreamed of Holly, wanting her and hating her. He fought himself from calling to her until he was in a fever of torment and then the real agony began. Every night in his dreams he relived the night in the school gymnasium when his father and brother had summoned the Black Fire and Holly had left him to burn in it.

On the plus side he had managed to gather a considerable amount of information. He knew that he was being held prisoner on the mythic island of Avalon. He had also managed to learn that it was the home of Sir William, the leader of the Supreme Coven, and his son, James. He had almost pinpointed the location of the island, even, through a variety of means ranging from the astrological to the magical. If his stars were right, the island was located in the Celtic Sea between Ireland and Britain. If his stars were wrong, he could be on the dark side of the moon for all he knew.

The skin on the back of his neck started to crawl. It was an intensely uncomfortable reaction that he had come to associate with the members of House Moore.

Seconds later he heard footsteps approaching. He turned and stared straight at James and Eli as they materialized inside the room. He blinked hard. He had seen people appear inside the room and it still startled him. A light blue shimmered around them and then faded within a moment. It has to be a portal. It must be opened by magic. If that was true, though, then how did the servant who brought him his food make it through? He had tried to follow her out once but had found himself thrown backward half the length of the room. Maybe it was keyed to certain peoples' auras. Maybe it was keyed to his.

He focused on the two people now occupying the room with him. James was the son and heir of Sir William, head of the Supreme Coven. Eli was Jer's own brother, though it was hard to believe they shared anything in common, much less parents. James strode in as if he owned the place, which, technically, he did. Still, his swagger was decidedly more pronounced. Eli slunk forward like a cur at his side. On his left ring finger James sported a ring. It was a band of gold wrapped around a huge bloodstone. It glistened darkly against his skin. A smile spread across James's face as he saw Jer eyeing it. "Sorry you missed my wedding yesterday," James mocked. "It was a splendid affair. The rites were observed, the wine flowed, and the bride was mute." He chuckled. "I believe you know her--she's from Seattle, after all. A pretty little Cahors witch."

Jer's stomach twisted in knots. Holly! What had happened to her? He was so busy fighting a sudden feeling of nausea that he almost missed James's next words.

"Course, it's Moore now. Nicole Moore." Jer's heart leaped. It wasn't Holly! He breathed a prayer to whatever entity would listen to keep her safe and then another one for her poor cousin now

wed to James. "Why aren't you with her now?" he asked. "Let's just say she's recovering from last night," James chuckled evilly.

Taking in a long scratch that ran from the bridge of his nose to his jaw and the way his left arm hung a little limply Jer wondered if James wasn't the one recovering. "Congratulations," Jer said sarcastically. "Now, leave me alone."

"Sorry, little brother," Eli finally spoke up. "Can't do that. We've got work to do." Jer studied Eli quietly. His brother had dated Nicole for a long time. What does he think of James marrying her? Eli's face was passive, inscrutable, and it struck Jer just how much more like their father Eli looked than last he had seen him. There was something in his eyes, though. A dangerous spark. James had better watch his back.

"What work?" he asked, fearing the answer.

"Black Fire," James answered.

Jer forced himself not to recoil. He forced himself to sit absolutely still as though he had no knowledge, no experience, no deep terror of the fire. "Excuse me?" James gestured as if to show the rising of flames. "Black Fire. You are going to help me conjure it."

Jer laughed in disbelief "I'm not going to help you do anything."

"Oh, I think you will, if you want to live," James drawled.

"Kill me, you'd be doing me a favor," Jer retorted. It was a bluff. Not so long ago it wouldn't have been, but as he had been growing stronger he had begun to hope again. Either that or it's the dreams where Holly comes to me, he thought.

"I will, but not before I kill Holly before your eyes and Nicole's sister, Amanda, as well."

Jer licked what was left of his lips. He had sworn once, it seemed a thousand years ago, to protect them from his father. He had pledged himself to defending the helpless. Staring into James's eyes, he did not doubt that the other could do as he threatened. Something in him gave way a little. "I don't know anything about the fire," he admitted.

"Except that it burns."

The House of Moore: Van Diemen's Land (Australia), 1789

Sir Richard Moore, By the Grace of His Majesty George III, Royal Governor of Botany Bay, stared into the scrying stone that lay on the carved wooden desk before him. In ten days the British ship *Destiny* would arrive with a fresh cargo of convicts to work the lands. Among the one hundred plus men and women were convicted thieves, murderers, buggerers and, most important, six witches. Of course, they hadn't been convicted of witchcraft. Thievery was the

crime they had been accused of. But he knew they worshiped the Goddess and they were on their way.

Sir Richard curled his lip. Followers of the Mother Coven. They think to escape us and spread their filth here, among the dregs of society. But those of us who are loyal to the Supreme Coven are everywhere.

Even though at times it feels as though we had been exiled to Hell itself... as I am in this vast wasteland devoid of culture and refined company... No matter. My House is in ascendance. My father sits upon the throne of skulls in London Town, and I, his eldest son, come to this forsaken land in search of new magics that will add to our armory in the days to come. For while it is true that the Deveraux have been exiled these 113 years for publicly battling during the Great Fire of London, they may come back one day with the secret of the Black Fire. And then the House of Moore will have to fight to retain our crown as High Priest.

I stand much to gain if I can learn new ways of inflicting harm in this vast wasteland.

But before I do, I will take care of the minor inconvenience that these witches present....He closed his eyes and concentrated. He pictured the ship in his mind's eye. The seas were riding high, and the wind was kicking up. A storm was brewing and, with his knowledge of the Black Arts and his power, he helped it along. Then he pushed against a seam in the ship's hull. Slowly a crack began to form. First a drop of water eased its way through, and then a steady trickle. He opened his eyes. Within moments he knew that the trickle would turn to a flood.

He turned back to the scrying stone and watched until the ship had sunk. Every man, woman, and child drowned, and he watched them all, smiling.

When at last it was over he rose, pleased with himself. The papers on his desk relating to the running of the colony could wait. He had a meeting to attend.

The Cathers Coven: London, December

It was late afternoon, almost twenty-four hours since Holly and the others had entered Joel's safe house. Now, seated again before Joel's fire, Holly blinked and stirred from her reverie. She had had a vision: She had seen herself walking down the street near the fish and chips shop, encountering a tall man across the street, trying to communicate with him. There had been others with him. Then the Deveraux falcons had swooped down on them all, harrying them.

She didn't know what it meant, but she had a sense that the wards of the souvenir shop had been penetrated. That, combined with the unease she felt in not having known Joel was a male witch--a Druid, whatever he called himself--prompted her decision to leave.

They left Joel's home in the morning after having been given directions to another safe house in London, and a backup in another city should London become too dangerous. The city was Coventry. The irony was not overlooked by Holly, who was equally certain that it had not been overlooked by the Supreme Coven. They twisted through endless streets until they had left Joel

and his safe house far behind. A shadow brushed across Holly's mind and she turned, expecting to see something behind them. There was nothing there. She changed course, and they began moving south. With each step she took the feeling of being followed lessened. They turned another corner and took another street, which slowly began to wind its way north.

The feeling intensified, and Holly stopped in her tracks. The others exchanged looks but spoke not a word. The sensation stayed at the same level of intensity. "Does anyone else feel that?"

Sasha nodded silently, but the others just looked at her with blank faces. Holly took a step forward and the tingling along her spine increased. She took a step backward, and it lessened. Another step back and it lessened even more.

"North, I think the Supreme Coven's headquarters is north of here."

Sasha nodded agreement.

Slowly the group started forward. A half dozen more steps and Amanda spoke.

"I feel it now too." Another dozen steps and the others felt it as well. Another dozen steps and all hell broke loose.

THREE AMETRINE

Death and destruction spread our fame
Till all others tremble at the Deveraux name
We will rule them in the end
King and serf, foe and friend
And now we claim for our own
All the power that we've sown
Goddess answer us in our need
Cause our foes to scream and bleed

"Goddess, protect us!" Holly cried as directly above the Coven, about twenty feet in the air, immense, scaly demons dressed in ancient battle armor burst from round portals shimmering with blue. Their heads were horned, their eyes red, glowing slits, and their mouths glistened with multiple rows of fangs. Their bodies were the sickly color of a bruise, purple and blue-black.

They began to drop to the ground. It's raining fiends, she thought, feeling an overwhelming urge to laugh hysterically. Then one of the demons landed mere feet from Holly, and the urge to laugh vanished. She leaped backward, stumbling and falling, yet she managed to release a fireball at the monster. It raised its taloned hand, grasped the fireball, and extinguished it, flinging the embers to the ground. With a roar, it advanced on Holly. Its fangs glistened with green saliva as it lumbered forward on thick, well-muscled legs. Reaching into its armor, it withdrew what looked to be the hilt of a sword. Then it raised the hilt into the air.

A black falcon shrieked as it burst from the portal. Between its clawed feet it carried a gleaming blade. With another cry, it released the blade, which whistled through the air like a bomb and then magically connected with the hilt.

As the demon swiped it at Holly, crackles of green magical energy trailed. The weapon sizzled and danced with magic, and as Holly launched another fireball, the sword sliced it into dancing shards of heat and light.

She conjured and flung more fireballs, feeling herself almost a machine, some kind of animated fighting automaton such as warring clans had possessed back in the Middle Ages. She wondered where everyone else was, aware only of chaos whirling all around her.

The demon sliced her projectiles apart with ease. Then it hacked at the air itself, and the gray, snowy sky seemed to shatter. Solid nickel-colored shards exploded outward, leaving a churning hole of fluorescent green about ten feet in diameter.

From the magical rent crawled more demons clambering over the broken pieces of sky, these much smaller and completely black, with deep, bloodred eyes and mouths that wrapped halfway around their snakelike heads. Seeing Holly, three of them leaped at her. She moved her hands and uttered an incantation, forming and sending a magical bolt of energy in their direction.

Her aim was true; she took out two of the three, and they exploded in a shower of body parts. The survivor sailed through the flying carnage and attacked her knee, clamping down hard with incisor-like teeth.

Holly screamed from the pain; it distracted her, but she managed to conjure another bolt. She flung it at the demon, and it disintegrated. She conjured more, sending them flying without aiming them, trying to wound the larger demon as it shambled toward her. The sword was no longer glowing, as if it had lost its magical charge, but the sharpness of the blade looked deadly.

"Goddess from the depths of night, banish them all from my sight," she murmured. She looked up, expecting to see the demons vanish. Instead, the demons kept coming but her vision began to blur and fade. "No!" she sobbed, frustration overwhelming her. "Goddess, now restore my sight, and kill this beast with whom I fight." Her vision was partially restored, but she was beginning to lose consciousness because of her injury. I'm the strongest witch alive, she thought, but I don't know how to use my power to save myself.

Then the monster froze, threw up its hands, and roared in agony. Slowly it began to tip forward ... directly on top of Holly. Her fingers twitched as she whispered, "Desino!" Her vision blurred again as gray splotches danced before her eyes. I'm losing it .. Goddess, I demand protection!

The monster froze in mid-fall. With a twitch of her finger, Holly threw it to one side, where it collapsed in a heap on the ground. Behind it stood the tall, dark-haired man in her vision. She didn't know if her magic or his had killed the demon.

"Look out," Holly rasped as another demon rose up behind him.

He wheeled around and moved his hands in clockwise motions; the demon staggered backward, then came at him again. It stuck its hand into its armor and brought out a wicked-looking short sword, glowing and crackling with magic.

Holly launched a fireball at the sword, and the weapon burst into flame. Startled, the demon dropped it. Then it slashed at the space between it and the man, and Holly raised her hand to help him again.

But this time, more of the smaller demons pounced on her, pushing her onto her back. They began to bite.... "Non, I will not die this day!" a voice shouted inside Holly's head. It was Isabeau. Latin words mixed with French poured through Holly's mind as her witchly ancestress conjured. The demons held her down, slashing at her with their teeth, gnawing on her.... "Non!" Isabeau protested. "Live, girl!"

From somewhere deep within herself, Holly traveled to a place free of panic and pain. Everything around her was black and icy, but she herself was a light. It was as if her consciousness had been somehow crystallized, as if it were some kind of glowing entity. It flickered; then, as if ghostly lips had blown gently on it, it grew brighter.

"Speak words of magic. I will teach you. Ecoutes ..." Isabeau urged her.

Holly listened carefully, but the words slipped away before she could make them out. They were like luminescent bubbles, each one bobbing away, then popping as she mentally reached out to grasp it. At first she was frustrated, and tried harder. Time passed; she grew languorous, realizing there was a kind of cold comfort in the black ice surrounding her. It was peaceful there, and there was no fear.... "Non! You will not die!" Isabeau railed at her.

But I am dying, Holly thought. And it's all right. It's better than all this running, and being afraid.... A man was running toward her, his arms outstretched. He wore a robe of green ivy and red holly. On his right arm rested a magnificent falcon, hooded and belled. In his left hand he held a warrior's sword.

Her heartbeat echoed his footfalls, which were slowed, each foot lifting up, then moving gradually downward; it was as if he were floating in the unending landscape. "It is my Jean. Thus he has come," Isabeau said to her, "through vast echoes of time, over long stretches of time apart, moons and years and centuries...."

He was coming for her now, to claim her. Surrounded by darkness, coming out of darkness, to bring her into darkness.

To rend my spirit, and send my soul to Hell... Jean ... non, ah, Jean ... have mercy on me.... Holly sensed Isabeau's confusion, her longing, and her fear. Jean de Deveraux was Isabeau de Cahors's only love, sprung from her only hate. She had sworn a vow to kill him, and had not; for that, she must walk the earth. Rather, she had died, and he had never forgiven her for either of her treacheries--the massacre of his entire family, or for dying herself ... On he came, in the strange,

floating gait; he was tall and dark-haired; his eyes were set deep, and his brows were fierce. There was such a look of ferocity on his face that Holly had no idea how to read it. Anger? Joy?

Through the muffled thunder of her heartbeats he came closer. By the glow of her own light his features became more visible, and her lips parted in surprise. This was no stranger; this was Jer Deveraux.

Jer! I'm here!

The man's expression changed; he looked very confused. Then he shook his head--his hair floated in slow motion, his eyes caught the light and flashed-- and his voice slid toward her as if it were rolling toward her inside a crystal ball: Holly, no! Don't make contact with me! They will find you!

Inside her head, Isabeau cried, "Jean!"

Still conscious of herself as a light, Holly moved toward Jer. His face shifted, took on a slightly wicked cast, and he murmured, "Isabeau, ma femme."

He was Jean once more. "I did not kill you, I did not," Isabeau pleaded. "Je vous en prie, monsieur!" Jean ripped the hood off the falcon's head and raised his right elbow, urging the massive bird to take flight. The creature hefted into the darkness and shot toward Holly. Its sharp beak aimed for her face; its eyes gazed evilly into hers.

Holly gave a cry of despair.

The bird soared toward her.

She tried to back away, to make herself move in any direction, but she couldn't.

Behind the bird, Jer Deveraux--not Jean--- shouted, "No!"

And in that moment, Holly woke up.

Her eyes flew open. The tall man stood with his back to her, battling two of the larger demons with bolts of magic, while, beside him, another, older man held aloft a large cross. Snow was falling; soon it concealed the two men from her view; everything was a blur of snow streaked with something slimy and green, and what looked like human blood.

"Take it easy," said a voice. She recognized it as Joel's. What was he doing here? "I'm healing you."

"Jer," she whispered.

Then everything faded to black.

"Oh, God!" Kari shouted as she and Silvana fought to repel the charging demon. It was headed straight for them, and their combined magic spells had done nothing to slow it down. Above its head it whipped a morning star, a sphere of metal covered with spikes.

The demon's purple-black skin steamed in the snow; its breath reeked of death. From its glowing eyes tendrils of flame escaped, and when it opened its mouth, ash poured out. Kari screamed and started to bolt. Beside her, Silvana tried to stand her ground, murmuring one of the protection spells Holly and Amanda had taught them over the summer, but she was so terrified, she kept forgetting the words. Silvana's tante--Aunt-- Cecile had taught her the ways of voodoo, not of black and white magics, and combat was still new to her.

"Kari, don't run! It'll get you!" Silvana shouted, then realized she had interrupted her own spell.

Kari did run, shrieking as she turned on her heel and raced in the opposite direction. The demon roared and flung the morning star at her. It went wide, leaving Kari unhurt as she kept going.

Silvana shouted out, "Concreasco mums!" and to her relief--and astonishment--a barrier of glowing blue energy formed between her and the spiked ball. The morning star crashed into the barrier and was caught there. Enraged, the demon flung itself against the barrier, but it was deflected, bouncing backward and slamming to the icy ground on its back.

Silvana turned to the right and repeated the spell, then to the left, forming a three-sided wall of protection. The smaller demons scrambled up against it, pounding at it with their claws and trying to rip at it with their teeth. Two of the larger ones advanced, one with a battle-ax, another with a curved scimitar. Both of them were repulsed and both of them kept trying to break through. All any one of them has to figure out is that the fourth side is unprotected, Silvana thought, and we're dead.

She caught up with Kari, grabbed her arm, and said, "Move it!" As she tried to put as much distance between them and the demons, she uttered the spell again, pointing to the space directly behind them. Then she hazarded a glance over her shoulder--sure enough, she had created another barrier.

"Get me out of here, get me out of here!" Kari screamed hysterically. "What's going on?"

"I'm guessing guards," Silvana told her, wasting precious energy. "We must be near the headquarters."

"Then they probably know it!" Kari cried. "They'll be sending out reinforcements!" As if on cue--or by magic spell--the area directly in front of Kari and Silvana burst open with a flash of blue light. Dozens of tiny bony creatures poured out, chittering and gabbling as they darted toward the two girls. They were imps, all mouth and fury, and they were coming after Kari and Silvana. Kari started screaming again.

"Will you shut up!" Silvana yelled at her.

They both made U-turns, running back in the same direction they had come ... until they hit the fourth barrier Silvana had created. Unable to slow down in time, Kari smacked into it, while Silvana managed to avoid a collision. Kari ricocheted backward, disoriented, while Silvana lunged forward and grabbed her, pulling the other girl against her as she held out her left hand and tried to conjure a fireball.

Her spell failed.

The imps kept coming.

Sasha stood beside a male witch whose name she didn't know--he wasn't Joel, who had silently followed them here--and together they created a thick, brilliant wall of light. The creatures of darkness that tore themselves into it were instantly consumed. It lasted perhaps ten seconds, then faded.

"Another?" Sasha queried, and the man nodded.

They extended their arms, murmured their invocations and incantations in Latin, and created a second wall. But by then, the oncoming demons and imps steered clear of it, and it faded without taking out a single adversary.

The man shouted, "La-bas!" and Sasha, who lived at the Mother Temple in Paris and spoke French, pointed her fingers at the ground. She willed her energy to become subject to him, to give strength to his spell, and together they incised a ravine into the snow.

The first demon to step into it plummeted downward as if into a bottomless chasm. At the man's urging, Sasha walked backward, allowing him to use her energy once more to create a second ravine, and then a third. By then she was utterly depleted and trembling like a leaf. Her knees buckled, and he caught her up in his arms, holding her as he whirled around. She knew they had kept their backs undefended for too long, and so she wasn't too surprised to see a new kind of demon--this one snakelike, with several arms and an elongated head-- whipping toward them. It extended its black, forked tongue and it snapped at the man's arm like a whip. Sasha heard a sharp hiss of burned flesh, and the man flinched but did not drop her. The tongue retracted as the demon rushed at them.

Then the creature extended it again.

Tommy bellowed as he fought in hand-to-hand combat. He was fighting with a sword Amanda had grabbed from one of the dead demons. His opponent had just appeared, bursting through one of the portals--a skeletal warrior with green glowing eyes.

As Amanda bombarded it with waves of magical energy, it continued to attack. Miraculously, Tommy was holding his own, fighting with uncommon skill-- it can't be because of that one

semester we had of fencing--he looked as surprised as she felt. Then she realized that someone must be augmenting his skill with magic.

With an athletic lunge, he shoved the sword into the rib cage of the skeleton as if to pierce its heart, and the figure exploded in a shower of bones.

There was no time to so much as cheer. Another skeleton burst through the same portal and took up position. Before Amanda could register its arrival, a third one appeared.

Something rushed through her like an electric current, making the fillings in her teeth tingle. Her muscles jumped, her heart skipped a beat; she felt renewed and strengthened.

I've been charmed, she thought. Someone did to me what they did to Tommy.

With no time to take that in, she raced over to another dead demon and picked up a sword for herself. She took a practice swing, confirming her guess that she had been magically enhanced, and raced back to Tommy's side.

He was battling the second and third skeletons, and they were beating him back. Amanda jumped in, her sword flashing, her movements so fast, she couldn't even tell what she was doing. Bones flew everywhere as the two skeletons exploded.

We did it! she exulted.

But then a fourth sprung up inside the portal. A fifth. A sixth.

She quickly glanced at Tommy, who anxiously shook his head. "I'm tired," he confessed.

She took a deep breath.

So am I.

The skeleton warriors leaped through.

There was screaming and fighting all around her, and Holly knew by the tremor in Joel's voice that their side was losing. "Be well, heal," Joel pleaded with Holly. "You're our only hope."

I can't be, she wanted to tell him. Please. Not me. She was in agony. She had been ripped and bitten in so many places, she had no idea how she was still in one piece. Before Joel had started performing magic on her, she had been so near death, she'd been numb; but with each renewal of his healing spell, her awareness of the pain intensified. She could hardly stand it. She tried to fight it, to let herself die, but he gritted his teeth and said, "Damn it, save us."

"There's not much time," the dark-haired man shouted, flinging magic at an oncoming demon. The demon screamed and fell. The man ticked his gaze down at her, then returned to his magic battle.

Joel doggedly continued, "Bi tarbhach, bi fallain, bi beò cath. Rack am feabhas creutar agus inntinn."

And Holly felt herself being pulled back inside herself, to the dark, cold place. Shadows hung like frozen curtains. As before, she was the only source of light. Was it her imagination, or was that light dimmer?

A figure appeared on the landscape, and Holly shrank away. Was it Jean again? Or Jer?

It was neither.

Wearing black and silver, and holding a large spray of lilies, Isabeau floated toward her. Her hair tumbled loosely over her shoulders, and she looked wild and untamed. "Mafille, I have brought someone to help you."

She extended her arm, and another figure drifted slowly toward Holly, in the same slow-motion manner. This figure was dressed all in black, and heavily veiled. But her hands were visible; they held a gleaming dagger across her chest. Its hilt was brass-colored and encrusted with jewels. The dagger glowed. There was something very beautiful, very hypnotic, about it. The point shimmered. "You are going to die. But that does not trouble you. You wish it," the figure said. Her voice was deep and heavily accented, like Isabeau's. "You are a coward." Holly swallowed. "Your friends are going to die. Think of that, soft young woman. In the next few moments, they will be dead."

"No," Holly whispered.

'All will be lost. And my bloodline will die out. Forever."

"You're Catherine," Holly said, realizing. "Isabeau's mother."

The figure raised its veiled head. "The strongest witch who ever lived. Until you."

She raised the dagger and pointed it at Holly. "You can save everything. But you must be willing to become the witch you were born to be."

"I... I..."

"Don't stammer, girl! It humiliates me so! The battle is being lost. They are dying."

"Then stop it!" Holly cried. "I'll do anything! I--I will!"

"Swear." Catherine held out the dagger. "Swear by your own blood, which is mine, Holly of the Cahors Coven."

Holly reached forward and touched the dagger; it pricked the tip of her forefinger with a sharp slice. Three droplets of her blood dripped in slow motion toward the featureless black landscape....And she was on the street.

With the others.

And she was unhurt.

She gasped; beside her, Amanda said, "What, Holly?"

There were no demons. No imps. No portals. Everyone was fine. The other members of her coven stood in the snow, watching her curiously as she turned in a circle, completely bewildered.

"Where are the others?" she asked. She was stunned. "The guys? The dark-haired man?"

Amanda glanced at Sasha and Silvana, standing nearby. Tommy came up and waved a hand in front of Holly's eyes. "Yo. Everything all right?"

"Joel?" she called.

The snow fell heavily. The wind whistled. Other pedestrians on the street passed by, oblivious to the presence of the Coven, which was warded and cloaked.

"Okay, this is very weird," Holly said slowly.

"I quite agree," said a voice as a figure stepped from the snowfall and approached her.

It was the dark-haired man. He cocked his head and studied Holly. "There was a battle," he began. He gestured to her coven. "And now ... there is not."

She nodded, flooding with relief Someone else knew what had happened.

From the falling snow, three other men emerged, one very young, looking confused and wary. The others were older, one of them in his forties. Holly recognized them from the battle.

"You stopped it," the man continued. "Magically." She had time to notice now that he had a very thick accent.

"Holly?" Amanda asked, her voice rising. "What's he talking about?"

"I stopped it," Holly agreed. But there was a price... what was it? Another death? What have I done?

She turned and walked north.

There was no tingling sensation, no sense of anxiety, no impending danger.

"It's gone." She looked at the dark-haired man, who was watching her carefully. "We ran into something here, and we were attacked."

Her coven members stared at her. But it was clear the man remembered everything that had happened as well.

"We were on our way to find you," he said. He reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out the petals of a wilted lily. "You left this behind."

"I ..." She took the lily, examining it carefully. "I had a vision. I saw you, but I never left... the place I was." She was careful not to mention the safe house. "Who are you?"

He gestured to himself and said, "We serve White Magic. I am Philippe. Our leader was killed by those whom you fight."

The youngest one looked stricken. "He was my brother, José Lu," he said quietly.

"Killed?" Holly gestured around them. "But the battle's ... gone."

"There was another battle," said the oldest of the men. "There have been many of them."

"Whom do you serve?" Philippe asked, gazing steadily at Holly. "To whom do you owe allegiance?"

"Holly, don't answer that," Sasha said firmly, coming up beside her and putting her hand on her shoulder. "We don't know who these men are."

Holly pursed her lips. "We lost José Lu during a kidnapping," Philippe informed Holly. "The Supreme Coven took one of us." He paused, then added carefully, "Her name was Nicole."

"Nicole!" Amanda cried, rushing toward the man. "Where is she?"

Holly raised her hand. "Amanda, be careful. Don't say anything else until we know what's going on."

The man looked sharply at Amanda, who was bursting with questions. "You know Nicole?" He narrowed his eyes. "You look much like her."

Holly stepped forward. "I'm the High Priestess of this coven," she announced. "You need to deal with me."

"We are here to rescue her," the man said. The other men nodded, and the oldest one crossed himself.

"Oh, Holly!" Amanda cried.

Holly softened. She decided to trust him. After all, they had risked death to fight beside them. "So are we," she said.

After a brief discussion, Holly decided the best thing to do would be to go to the second London safe house for which Joel had given them directions.

She was worried that he had not reappeared after Catherine had eliminated the battle for them. Of everyone she had seen at the battle, he was the only missing person.

There was to be a price, she reminded herself, with a terrible feeling of dread. If I caused his death ...She could not think further about it.

She had a coven to save.

San Francisco

Tante Cecile gasped as she was wrenched from her meditations. The girls were in danger. She glanced uneasily around the Victorian house and wondered if she should go find Dan. They had been in San Francisco for several days, watching over Amanda and Nicole's father and Holly's friend, Barbara Davis-Chin.

It had been hard to be separated from her daughter, Silvana, knowing that they might never see each other again. Still, each of them did what they had to for the good of the Coven.

She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples slowly, trying to draw the images she had seen into clearer focus. A great battle, her Silvana fighting nobly- Then, suddenly it was over, as though it had never been. Why? She saw Holly standing before a veiled woman promising her... what? Something.

Her eyes flew open as her heart skipped a beat. Oh, Holly! What have you done?

London Safe House

The second safe house was more in keeping with what Amanda had expected the first one would be like: a small London flat festively decorated for Yule with garlands of holly and ivy, and a Yule log atop a cheery mantel awaiting the birth of the sun. The flat was overseen by a female witch named Rose, who ushered in the ten fugitives and led them as far away from the doors and windows as possible.

"There's no guarantee you're safe any longer," Rose told them after Holly related the story of the battle and the undoing of it. "But I don't know what else to do."

She gave them something to eat and excused herself to figure out sleeping arrangements.

As they crowded into her sitting room, Philippe approached Holly and Sasha and said, "We must talk."

Amanda frowned, somewhat hurt by the exclusion. She was obviously not one of the inner sanctum of their group.

Then Tommy took her hand and said, "Let them deal with it for now, Amanda. Holly's our leader."

The contact of his skin, though she had felt it a hundred times during rituals, sent an unexpected shiver through her. Her mind began to go someplace that frightened her. Tommy... Tommy Nagai is a man... he's a guy... and I... I'm a woman... we're growing up. We can... there are things we can do and be together, the two of us... if, um, he wants... Suddenly she wasn't interested in what Holly and the man were talking about. She wasn't jealous that Sasha had been allowed to join in and she wasn't. She was just intensely aware of Tommy. None of them is with him. I am.

She looked down at his hand in hers. She felt herself flushing and said, "Nagai, you're making contact with my skin."

His smile was wicked gentle. His almond eyes were dancing. He looked as if he had swallowed a flashlight, and her breath caught. We're so having the chemistry thing, she thought.

"Tommy, you're ... you're holding my hand."

"So?" He chuckled.

She gave his hand a shake. "C'mon, let me go." When he didn't, she said, "What's your deal, Tommy?"

"You are such an incredible dork," he told her fondly. "Anderson, I've been crushing on you for years. Haven't you ever noticed?"

"Oh." She was taken aback. Tommy?

Tommy the joker, who never took her seriously but who was always there, always listening, always commiserating over everything that ever happened to her? Hello?

"Years," he repeated, as if trying to penetrate her astonishment. "Since we were babies, practically."

"Oh." She gave him a shy smile. "Hi." It wasn't poetry, but it was all she could think to say. Somehow, though, it was all she needed to say.

He smiled back. "Hi." Gave her hand another wag. "Not so bad?"

"Not so bad," she agreed. "But we're still babies."

"Not so much." He pecked her cheek. "Mew." A cat jumped up onto Amanda's lap. Startled, she jumped and then settled as the cat began to purr and curled up as though to go to sleep.

"Well, where did you come from?" she asked the bedraggled-looking feline. "Are you Rose's cat?"

"Her name is Astarte. She is Nicole's. She came to Nicole a few nights before she was kidnapped. She has joined us in the search," Pablo told her.

Amanda felt her stomach twist into a tight knot. A few nights before she was kidnapped ...Did this cat come to her when Holly drowned Hecate? she wondered. A chill rippled up her spine.

Philippe looked over at Amanda and Tommy. He looked envious. "They found each other," he murmured. "Well, they didn't have far to look," Sasha said dryly. She looked expectantly at Holly.

Holly cleared her throat. "As you know, there was a battle, and I... I made contact with a veiled woman. She undid it somehow."

"What was her price?" Sasha asked. As Holly flushed, she pressed; "It was worse than the cat, wasn't it?"

Holly narrowed her eyes. "That's my business."

"No, it's not, not when you're part of a coven. We all have to agree on things. It's the way of the Mother Coven."

Jer's mother was putting Holly on the defensive, and she didn't like it. Holly threw back her head and shot back, "And that's why the Mother Coven is so weak, Sasha. Look at us. They can't even protect us, while the Supreme Coven kidnaps some of us and kills others. They're lame."

Sasha blinked. "I can't believe you can say that, when--"

"Alors," Philippe said, raising his hands. He turned his attention to Holly. "I beg your pardon, but we must move to action, not discuss philosophy."

"You're right," she said tersely. "What's done is done. What I did or said..." She exhaled. "I'm not certain what I agreed to, in all honesty. But it saved us."

"Sometimes that's not the right thing to do," Sasha insisted.

"Well, when you get down off your high horse, let me know." Holly turned on her heel.

"Holly," Philippe called, following her as she stomped into the kitchen. She looked around, found Rose's electric kettle, and lifted it to see if there was water in it. Satisfied that it had recently been filled, she plugged it in and rummaged through the scattering of tea things on a silver tray for a tea bag.

"You're the one Nicole called," Philippe said, leaning against the white-tiled counter. "It was then that James and Eli were alerted to our location. Then that José Lu was killed."

She hunched her shoulders as she selected a Prince of Wales tea bag and smoothed the string away from the little pouch of fragrant tea. "Are you trying to guilt-trip me into saving her? Because you don't need to. I said I'd do it and I will."

"I'm only saying that I care about her. We care about her," he amended. "No, you don't." She scowled at him. "You're just as bad as the Mother Coven. All this talking isn't going to get anyone back."

"We need to figure out who each of us is first," he replied. He gestured to the tea bag. "May I have some as well?"

"Sorry," she muttered, picking up a second bag. "There should be some cups around here somewhere...."

He opened a cabinet and pulled out two mugs that said lilith fair. He chuckled. "Rose is such a one who would go to a thing like that, eh? Sarah McLachlan?"

Despite herself, Holly smiled in recognition. "My mom loved her stuff. She thought that made her hip and cool."

"Moms yearn to be hip and cool." He chuckled. "My own mother is a traditional French housewife. Except that she sells magic herbs and potions to all her rich girlfriends."

"Some sell Avon, some sell love spells."

"Exactement." She pointed to the cabinet. "You have a bit of psychic awareness. There's no way you could have known the cups were in there."

"Peut-." His shrug was pure French.

The kettle began to burble. Holly took the cups from him and settled the tea bags inside them.

"Okay. You've broken the ice and found common ground, thereby bonding with me. What do you propose we do now?"

"Transportation spell," he said. "Go to them."

Her grin widened. "I like that."

He grinned back and pointed to his head. "Psychic awareness," he replied. "You see? We will work well together."

"I hope so," she said as she lifted the kettle again. He frowned. "Let it boil. Americans never let it boil."

Setting the kettle down, she folded her arms. "I'll let it boil over, if that's what it takes. To make good tea," she added pointedly.

"To make good tea," he echoed.

Jer: London

James and Eli swaggered belowdecks, pints of beer in their hands, and chuckled at the mess that was Jer, lying prone on a sleep-away cot nestled among the ship's cargo. They had taken one of the Supreme Coven's private yachts for the voyage to London-- James, being who he was, commandeered it--and Jer, though in terrible pain, understood that he was being taken to headquarters to help with the conjuring of the Black Fire. Does my father know what's going on? he wondered. Whose side is he on these days? Will he be there?

He knew that his days of relative isolation were over. Now he would have to earn his keep ... and ensure his own survival.

But it was Eli and Dad who conjured the fire. I have no idea how they did it.

He wondered how Holly was. Where she was. He had dreamed of her so many times.

I hope I haven't sent my spirit out to her, but I can't be sure. I've spent so much time half-unconscious, and I know I've thought about her. They're looking for her. They want to kill her.

"Want a beer, Jer?" Eli asked, sidling over to his brother. Viciously he pressed the bottom of his beer mug against Jer's burned, swollen lips. Jer groaned in pain as his lower lip cracked and began to bleed. "Not thirsty?" Jer was thirsty. He was practically dying of thirst.

I won't give them the satisfaction of begging, he thought. But with his next breath he moaned, "Water."

"Sorry? What's that?" Eli queried politely.

Jer clamped his mouth shut.

Eli laughed. He made a show of swigging down his beer and walked away.

"Help James and me conjure the Black Fire," he said, "and you'll have all the water you can drink."

London, Safe House

Kari sat quietly, rocking gently. She had been feeling better, safer when they were at Joel's. Now the realization that a huge battle had happened and she couldn't even remember it terrified her. Was I going to die? she couldn't stop herself from wondering. And just how did Holly stop it? Something wasn't right with that. Didn't the others see that as well?

They're too busy kissing the ground she walks on, she thought bitterly. Well, I certainly didn't elect her as head of the Coven. I don't know why we have to do everything she says. Truth be told, she would much rather have Sasha as their leader. The older woman was more experienced and kinder, especially to Kari.

And Sasha was Jer's mother. Kari wasn't so naive as to believe that that didn't play a huge part in how she felt. Tears stung the back of her eyes. There was something so comforting in Sasha's presence, and she reminded Kari of Jer so much--her manners, her features. Kari could feel the tears streaming openly down her face now. The others didn't notice, though. They never did. Either that Or they didn't care. So many nights she had lain awake wishing she had never met Jer and been introduced to the world of magic. Then she would repent her thoughts because she couldn't imagine a life without Jer Deveraux. So many nights she cried herself to sleep praying that she would see him again. But when she had seen him ... he had only had eyes for Holly. Kari tried to convince herself that Holly had bewitched him. But was I already losing my hold on him? He was so dour and withdrawn. Things were coming to a head between him and his father... almost as if they sensed they were going to have a showdown.

Holly came between them and forced the issue. She's the most arrogant chick I've ever known ... and with her power, that makes her dangerous. God, I wish I'd never gotten involved in all this crap.

I'd have a Ph.D. by now, if I'd just stayed the course.

Yeah, but I was too into Jer to turn back when I realized he really was a warlock, and there was such a thing as true magic. By then I was hooked on him, and on trying to learn how to use magic on my own. I can't blame that on Holly.

But I can blame her for taking him away from me.

Some time there'll be payback, Cathers. Count on it.

Kari balled her fists and closed her eyes.

The tears kept coming.

Part Two Imbolc

"When they hung her, I watched and laughed. She was innocent. I was the witch they sought I sold my soul to the Devil himself, and the Devil protects his own. He protected me, and he protected the Cathers woman. She told me once she was descended from queens of powerful

witchery, and I believe her." --Confession of Tabitha Johnson, upon her deathbed Salem, Massachusetts

FOUR
HEMATITE

We lick the wounds that we have borne
As limb from limb we have been torn
But we will rise and live again
Death's the beginning, not the end
Find now the strength to change
To take our souls and rearrange
We can be as we will We can love, or laugh, or kill

Headquarters of the Supreme Coven: London

In the clothes she'd been captured in, although freshly laundered, Nicole paced the floor of the honeymoon suite. Her dark hair was in a tangle, her thoughts as jumbled.

I have to get out of here.

The room was her prison, and she was not allowed to leave it. She had tried everything, from blasting at the door with magic bolts to hacking at the knob with a wooden coat hanger. She felt terribly inept at figuring her way out--real life certainly wasn't like the movies--and it embarrassed her that she gave up so easily.

James had been gone for two days, which was a relief, but she was unbearably tense from wondering what was going to happen next. Tension squeezed her heart as she gazed at the carved relief of the moon on the headboard of the bed. All witches knew when the full moon blazed; in two more nights, it would be Yule, one of the most sacred nights of the Coventry calendar--and the night James had promised he would force her into thrall. She would be the Lady to his Lord, and he would exploit her magical energies, use them for his own evil purposes ... and there would be nothing she could do to stop him. It was the worst violation she could imagine. I blew it. I should never have left the coven.

In anger, she tossed another bolt at the door.

To her shock, the section of wood adjacent to the jamb splintered from the doorknob to the top. She gaped at it openmouthed, unable to believe it. Racing to it, she pushed on the weakened section, hearing a sharp crack as it continued to split. Her heart caught; she glanced around guiltily, listening for footsteps in case someone realized what she'd accomplished, then shot another bolt against the wood.

This time the section detached sufficiently for her to push her hand through and unlock the door on the other side. She scraped her hand on the rough wood, but she would have been willing to push her way through a broken window if it meant getting out.

Easing the door open, she peered into the hallway. There was no one there, but that didn't mean it was unguarded. For all she knew, she had already triggered an alarm and James's family's henchmen were on their way here to subdue her.

She took a step into the corridor, which was papered in black and red, and then another. She shook her head, amazed that she had gotten this far. She flicked her gaze over her shoulder, anxiously scanning for movement.

And then she ran like hell.

She had no idea where she was going, and she told herself she should slow down and figure out a plan. But how? What plan? She didn't know anything about this place except that it was home to the greatest evil force in Coventry, the Supreme Coven. That people died here.

That I might die here.

And so she ran.

Seated on the throne of skulls, Sir William cocked his head as Matthew Monroe, one of his principal lieutenants, walked into the room.

The redheaded Monroe looked bemused and said, "This is what we have so far. Someone managed to trip the alarms at the guard post in north London, but nothing happened." He shrugged. "As far as we can determine, no demons or imps were dispatched. There was no engagement, and everything seems quiet now."

Sir William shook his head. "It's not right. The only way our alarms activate is when an identifiable threat triggers them. That means a witch."

Monroe nodded. "That's true, Sir William."

"And yet, nothing happened."

"Also true." Monroe crossed his arms over his chest. "But I don't think it was a glitch. I think someone tripped the alarm, and then used magic to reset it before anything happened."

"That's the most logical explanation. But it is, of course, very troubling."

"Very, sir," Monroe agreed.

Sir William narrowed his eyes. Slowly, his human form melted away, revealing his demonic appearance. He was proud of it. His ancestors had worked long and hard to become elite members of the damned--the first had been Sir Richard, governor of Botany Bay. Sir Richard's

explorations into the Nightmare Dreamtime were legendary, and Sir William was justly proud of him.

Monroe blinked fiercely, but stood his ground, one of the few who had seen the transformation often enough not to run screaming in fear. His fearlessness was one of his more admirable traits, and one of his more dangerous. Still, Sir William trusted him as he trusted few others.

His voice rumbled in his chest as he said, "Have we located the Cathers witch?"

Monroe hesitated. "We're fairly certain she's in London. The Deveraux falcons have sensed her, but they can't seem to locate her."

With his large clawed hand, Sir William made a fist and pounded the armrest of his throne. "Damn the Mother Coven and their wards and cloaks! If they'd stop hiding, come out and fight ..." He huffed. "I don't understand how the Cahors ever consented to become part of that group. They were far too hot-blooded." His scaly lips pulled back in the rictus of a smile. "And Holly Cathers is more of the old school, wouldn't you say?"

Monroe couldn't help but smile back. "As you say, Sir William. Particularly if she's the one who tripped our alarm and lived to tell the tale."

"She needs killing."

"She does," Monroe agreed.

Sir William chuckled. "Has my son shown up yet? Brought Jeraud Deveraux with him?"

Monroe checked his watch. "They're due within the hour," he informed his High Priest.

"Of course James thinks he'll discover the secret of the Black Fire first, use it to push me off this chair," Sir William drawled. "That boy ... thick as a post."

"He has a lot of smart friends," Monroe reminded him. "And I still contend that Michael Deveraux is one of them."

"Michael's only loyal to Michael," Sir William insisted. "As long as I keep my grip, he'll come along."

He dug his claws into the armrest, cracking the bones, and yanked a section of it free. The splintered bone fragments resembled bits of bread sticks in his fist. "Looks like I still have that grip."

Monroe's brows raised slightly, and his voice quavered for only an instant as he replied, "Looks like you do."

Sir William carelessly tossed the bones to the floor and said, "Use one of the more long-legged sacrifices tonight. We need a new femur for this thing.

"Black and red, black and red, blackred, blackred...The wallpaper was a blur. Paintings and suits of armor were blurs as Nicole raced past them. Mirrors startled her, but she kept on.

Nicole hadn't stopped running since she had escaped from her room at the headquarters of the Supreme Coven. Her lungs ached and her throat was dry as dust; she kept telling herself to slow down and think, but what good would that do? She was as panicked as a mouse in a cage with a snake, and she knew it.

And so she ran.

Her impulse was to go down any set of stairs she found, but even in that, she didn't know if she was doing the right thing. She had never actually seen the outside of the Supreme Coven's headquarters, and for all she knew, it was built entirely underground. Warlocks preferred their ritual halls below the earth; it was witches who worshiped the Lady Moon and tried to build their sacred places as close to her as possible.

Now, in the dark, she nearly tumbled down another set of stairs, these made of stone. She took them, heaving painfully with each downward, widely spaced step. There was no banister, only a stone wall, and no light.

She was halfway down when she heard voices echoing off the hard surfaces. She froze. "... home sweet home now, Jer." Nicole inhaled sharply. That's Eli.

"How the mighty are fallen, eh, Deveraux? Now you're down in the dungeons with the sacrifices. If you don't watch it, you'll end up like them." And that's James.

She shuddered and plastered herself against the wall, even though there was no way they could see her from this vantage point.

But I don't know that, do I? she thought, panicking again. I don't know anything....She forced down the panic and tried to listen. Her heartbeat in her ears roared so loudly, she was almost sure the three men could hear it too.

"Thirsty?" James asked.

There was no answer.

"Well, I've got to check in with dear old Dad," he continued. "Then I'll go check in on my darling little wife."

Her blood ran cold. He's going to realize I've escaped.

"Your father's in some kind of conference," Eli said. "I saw his whipping boy Monroe go into the throne room. I've got some new arcana I need to dedicate. Would you give me a hand?"

"Sure. Nicole will wait."

They both chuckled.

Footsteps rang on the stone below. She waited for a long time until they had faded away before she continued on down the stairs.

Can I trust Jer? she thought. Does it matter? I need help, and he knows his way around here. He's their captive, just like me, so there's hope.

But he's a Deveraux. How can anybody ever trust one of them?

She came to the bottom of the stairs. To her right, about fifteen feet away, stood a wall of bars divided into five or six cells; above them, a badly flickering fluorescent light. Shapes moved in the cells as she approached, and she stopped for a moment, licking her lips as she tried to get up the nerve to move forward. She was terrified that someone would give her away. There might be a reward in it... what am I saying? Of course there will be a reward. As soon as they know I'm missing, everyone will be looking for me.

She whispered, "Jer?"

There was no answer.

What did they do to him? Maybe he can't even hear me. Maybe he can't talk.

Taking another step closer, she tried again. "Jer?"

"Oh, God," a male voice cried out from the darkness. "Oh, thank God, have you come to save us? They're crazy here! They're going to kill us!"

"Ssh," she begged. "Please. Be quiet."

"We're tourists. This is insane! We're from Ohio!" The voice raised, shrill and frantic. "We thought we were buying tickets to a play, and the next thing we knew..." There was sobbing.

Nicole drew nearer to the cells. From the cell farthest to her right, hands poked from between the bars, stretching to touch her.

"God, get us out of here!" a woman shrieked.

Nicole made a magical gesture she had learned from José Lu and said, "Be calm."

A magical tingle prickled her skin as a soft waft of serenity trailed over her arms and shoulders. One tiny iota of tension left her. But one only. Her heart was still pounding so rapidly, she couldn't count the beats.

The woman's voice dropped to a whisper. "We're strangers here. We have no quarrel with ... whoever you are. You have to help us." The words were slurred, almost sullen. "Or we will be murdered."

"Help us," the male voice added, pleading.

Nicole walked to the cell, bent down, and put out her hand. She stretched between the bars, worrying that in their panic, these people might grab at her and not let her go. But she felt she had to give them some kind of hope. Some comfort.

Goddess, protect them.

"I'll try," she promised, experimentally moving her hand so as to make contact.

A hand brushed her fingers. She heard the mournful weeping, but it was too dark for her to make out a face. Having no idea if the occupant could see her, either, she said again, "I promise you. I'll try."

"Nicole?"

She started. That voice had come from the other end of the row; she got up, swaying for a moment, and staggered toward it, completely winded. "Jer?"

The light was falling at a better angle near the front right quadrant of the cell, and she positioned herself to take advantage of it as she peered between the bars.

"Don't look at me," he croaked.

She wished she had listened to him.

He didn't look human. He was so badly burned that she would have never been able to recognize him if she hadn't known who he was.

"It was the Black Fire," she murmured. "Oh, Jer, I'm so sorry."

"I would've been fine," he rasped, "if you hadn't pulled Holly from me. Cathers and Deveraux together can withstand the Black Fire. But once she left me ... there, to face it by myself..." He sounded hoarse and he spoke slowly. She winced at the sound of his voice; his vocal cords must have been seared; she couldn't even imagine the pain of being burned inside and out. "Deveraux have always been abandoned by Cahors."

"Oh, God, Jer." She gripped the bars and closed her eyes, unable to look at him any longer. "God, I'm sorry. I've going to get you out of here. But we have to hurry. James is going to realize I'm gone, and then we'll both be toast." She laughed anxiously. "So to speak."

"Okay. What's your plan?"

"My... plan." She hesitated. "Jer, I don't... I just escaped. I didn't even know you were here!"

"We can't just walk out, Nicole." He sounded irritated with her.

"I did," she replied. "Well, I blasted my way out. I broke down the door of our room with magic that I didn't even know I had. But no one came to see what was going on," she added hastily. "No one stopped me from coming here."

"--probably didn't bother with your room-- whole place--heavily warded--figure you're harmless."

She strained to hear him, but his voice faded in and out. There was a moment of silence, and she thought he was finished. He continued, though, his voice slightly stronger. "Do you have access to James's arcana?"

"His magic stuff?" she asked, embarrassed because she didn't know the vocabulary. "Not really." "Then you have to steal it."

"What?"

"We have to have a plan," he said. "People don't just leave this place."

"Well, I know that," she said hotly. "Go back to your room. Let James think you can't get out."

"No way!" She took a step away from his cell and stuffed her hands in her jeans pockets. "No way on earth am I going back there. Are you insane?"

"They'll look for you. And they'll find you. And if they find you, there's no way we're getting out of here."

She raised her chin, but tears sluiced down her cheeks. I really do not want to agree with him.

"It's Yule in two nights," she pointed out desperately. "He's going to put me in thrall. I wouldn't be able to stand that, Jer. He'll force me to help him with his magics, and I won't be able to stop myself. You know the kind of spells they do around here. They're evil."

"Then we have one night," he told her with exaggerated patience, "to plan our escape. Now, go back." Dejectedly, Nicole pulled her hands out of her pockets. "I can't do it. I can't go back to him for even one minute!"

"Fine. Then let's escape right now," Jer mocked. "James ... he's mean. He ..."

"Nicole, if you want to get out of here, you're going to have to do a lot more than freak out. Now go back to your room."

The harshness of his tone put her on notice. She took a deep breath and said, "I almost forgot that you're a Deveraux."

"Don't ever forget it," he growled. "I don't."

She wiped her hands; they were ringing wet with perspiration. She was shaking at the thought of returning to James.

"How am I going to know where his arcana is?" she asked him.

"Has he asked you to participate in a rite?"

"No. Not yet. But--"

"Then you're going to have to ask him to let you. Tell him you want to." Her eyes widened. "No way. He does Black Magic!"

"Do you have a better idea?" he demanded. At her silence, he said, "You're going to have to get your hands dirty, Nicole. There's no pretty way out of this. No one's going to come to our rescue."

"The Goddess ... she began. "I think she's watching over me, guiding me."

"She guided you to me, then. And I say that we have to act. We have to save ourselves."

"But ... he sacrifices things. You know he does." She glanced uneasily at the row of cells, thought about the fingertips she had touched. She felt sick to her stomach.

"If he makes you sacrifice something, you'll have to do it," he insisted.

Her stomach twisted. "Jer she pleaded.

"When you get a chance to see his arcana, look for a soul stone. You'll need an athame. He probably has an extra one. You'll have to steal both items," he said, mentally going through his plan. "Try to get some mugwort. We always have our own back home, but in a big place like this, he might just get some from a common storage area."

"The athame ... that's his knife, right?"

"Yes," Jer told her. "I'd tell you to take his principal one, but he'd notice that right away. A high-ranking warlock like him should have a couple of spares at least. It's got to be one he's used. Make sure."

She swallowed hard. "Does used mean that he's sacrificed something with it?"

Jer grunted with surprise. "You Cahors witches are very different from us, aren't you? Of course that's what it means."

"Oh, God, Jer! I--I--"

"Damn it, Nicole! Lose the attitude. Do you want to end up like me? Get back there now"

"Then what?" she cried. "What do you want me to do after I've stolen these things?"

"Bring them to me."

"But how? How will I get out again?"

"You'll have to figure that out," he said tiredly. His voice was growing weak again. "I can't exactly help you."

"Why not?" she demanded. "Aren't you a warlock?"

"I'm half-dead, Nicole."

She put her hands on her hips and glared at the misshapen thing that used to be Jer Deveraux. "And I say, you lose the 'tude. This is more your turf than mine, Jer. Stop laying it all on my shoulders."

There was a silence. Then Jer made a strange gravelly sound that might have been a chuckle. "Touché, Nicole. You have a point." He let out a long, raggedy breath. "Maybe I can do something. Loosen my cell door, something like that."

"Say a protection spell over me," she suggested. "We're not good at those, but I'll do my best."

She stood perfectly stilt while he chanted a few words in Latin, using a spell she didn't know--not that I know that many--but she felt nothing after he finished.

She said, "It didn't take."

"I told you we aren't very good at those," he reminded her from the shadows. "You should go. You have to beat him back to your room."

She grimaced. "He'll see the wrecked door."

"Can you fix it?" he asked her.

"Not magically, I don't think."

"What about your Goddess? Can she?"

"Don't make fun of my beliefs," she snapped, then realized that until that moment, she hadn't truly believed. In snippets, and in bits and pieces, her faith had grown. But it still wasn't there. She was still terrified, and she still felt very alone.

"You'll have to deal with it there," he said urgently. "Go, Nicole."

She hesitated. "I don't know how to get back."

"That I can help with. I'll do a finder's spell. Go on."

"I... I'll be back as soon as I can."

She turned on her heel and ran back to the stairs, taking them, rushing like a madwoman despite her exhaustion. Part of her resisted each step, each footfall forward--she was going back to James, and nothing in her wanted to do that--but suddenly she felt strangely buoyed, even energized. She knew that she was supposed to turn right; knew that at the next stairway, she needed to go left.

It's Jer's finder's spell, she realized.

Before she knew it, she was racing down the corridor to her room. The door was flush with the wall, and it wasn't until she reached it that she saw that it appeared to be untouched. It was as if she had never so much as scratched her fingernail across it.

"What?" she said aloud, then glanced around, tried the knob, and found that it opened.

She let herself in, closed it behind herself, and heard the lock click. She was effectively locked in again, with no evidence that she had gotten out.

How can this be?

Then she turned around to face the bed, and gasped.

A shimmering blue figure stared back at her. By the height, Nicole judged it to be a woman. She was standing next to the bed, a gauzy phantom veiled from head to toe in black, except for a dagger that she held across her chest. It was curved and encrusted with jewels.

An athame, Nicole realized. Is this the Goddess? "Who are you?" she asked aloud, sinking to her knees. But there was something about the figure that was ... off. She knew deep in her soul that

this was not the Goddess, but a lesser being. Yet she didn't want to insult the apparition, who may have come to help her. She stayed on her knees. "Are you a friend? Did you fix the door?"

The figure remained silent.

Nicole tried again. "Are you Isabeau?" Though Isabeau had taken Holly over at a s conducted by Tante Cecile last year, Nicole had not had a good view of her. And veiled as the figure was, it was impossible to tell her identity.

The figure still said nothing, only extended the dagger toward her. Nicole uncertainly reached out her hand. "Does it belong to James?" she asked as she got to her feet.

As if in reply, the figure inclined her head the merest fraction of an inch. Then she shifted her gaze to the headboard. Nicole followed her line of vision and walked toward the bed, nervously skirting the area where the figure stood.

"Is there something for me here?" Nicole asked.

She crossed to the headboard and touched the carving of the Horned God seated on the pile of human skulls.

It was loose to her touch. Blinking, she grasped it between her fingers, working it gently, and pulled the figure off the rest of the frieze. A hole approximately two inches in diameter had been bored into the wood, and she peered inside.

There was a small pile of objects, including a ring, what looked to be a couple of smooth pebbles, and something else. She pulled it out and saw that it was a tiny wax figurine with hair wrapped around its head. Her hair.

She swallowed and looked back at the veiled form. "Is this me?"The figure held out her hand.

Nicole uncertainly clasped the figure to her chest. "You want it?"

The woman moved her head. It was eerie that she didn't speak, and barely moved. Everything was happening at once; Nicole was exhausted from running and still so frightened that she could hardly stand, much less consider what was going on. She needed a moment to figure out what to do ... but she didn't have a moment.

"But..." She glanced down at the figurine, at the pebbles, and at the knife. As far as she could tell, the woman was helping her; though she was not a celestial being, she appeared to be on Nicole's side, at least in some deep-boned sense that Nicole couldn't really even begin to comprehend.

Then the woman turned the knife around so that she held it hilt-first, and offered it to Nicole.

Nicole took a breath, and wrapped her hand around the hilt.

A cold, icy chill ran down her spine. And she saw in her mind's eye: A souvenir shop, its front door hanging open, and snow pouring in. Nearby, a tea cup, smashed on the tile. A puddle of tea.

A man, his name was Joel, and he was a Druid; he had helped Holly, but now he was lying on the floor before a dying fire, his eyes wide open, his lips tinged a pale, robin's egg blue.

"Oh, my God, he's dead!" Nicole cried.

At once the shimmering figure disappeared, leaving Nicole with the knife, the wax figure, the ring, and the pebbles.

And the door to the bedroom began to open.

Quickly she replaced the pebbles, the ring, and the figure and pushed the carving back into place. The knife, she hid under one of the pillows.

She had just whirled around to face the door when James strutted in.

He said nothing, only smirked at her and shut the door. "You must have missed me," he said. "You're panting."

She forced herself to stop breathing heavily, which wasn't difficult. As he came near, her chest constricted, and it was hard to make herself breathe at all.

"There's going to be a ritual tonight," he informed her. "And you're going to participate." He smiled evilly. "An old friend of yours will be there." Alarms went off.

Does he mean Jer?

"What kind of ritual?" she asked him.

"We're working on the Black Fire. You know, Cathers and Deveraux together is supposed to be a potent combination."

She tried to play dumb. "So Eli will be there."

"Oh. Yeah. Hi."

He looked at her with a mixture of amusement and contempt. Then he crossed to the bed, sat down, and stretched out, still wearing his boots. She tried to take a steadying breath; she was growing faint from lack of oxygen, but she knew she had to keep her wits about her. He held out his arms, "Come here, Nicole. Welcome me home."

She stared at him and gave her head a shake. Not again. Never again. There was a knock on the door, and then it opened. A redheaded man stood in the doorway. He looked unaccountably

nervous. He flicked his glance in Nicole's direction. His cheeks visibly flushed as if someone had slapped him. Nicole observed him carefully, intrigued.

James half sat up, frowning. "Monroe, I didn't say 'come in.'"

"Your father wants to see you," the man said. He glanced once more at Nicole, then looked quickly away. She could almost hear his heartbeat, he was so nervous.

Oblivious to the other man's distress, James swore under his breath and got up. He brushed past Nicole and headed out the door. The two left, James slammed the door behind them, and she heard the lock click.

For a moment she panicked at the thought that she was once more entrapped, and then she reminded herself that she had managed to get out once before. And now she had the things she needed.

I think I do. "Isabeau?" she called. "Are you still here?" There was no answer, and Nicole sensed that she was truly alone. She scrambled back onto the bed and retrieved the items from the headboard, pausing to examine the ring. The black stone was shaped like a pentagram, topped with a gold replica of the carving of the Horned God that was on the headboard.

She closed her fist around it and took a deep breath.

I'll take it to Jer.

If I can get back to him.

As the others grouped around Holly and Amanda, Nicole's cat, Astarte, settled into Amanda's lap. Holly reached out to pet her, and the cat hissed at her.

She withdrew her hand, gazing at Philippe, Sasha, and Rose, who had arranged everyone else in a pentagram surrounding the two witches. They were still in Rose's parlor; the pentagram was burned into the wooden floor, beneath her floral carpets.

"We call upon the incarnations of Deveraux and Cahors past," Sasha intoned, "that we might learn more of the blood feud between the two great houses. Let our Priestess glimpse her past and the past of her house. Let the blood of Cathers drip into the memories of Cathers hearts."

She picked up Rose's athame. Holly fearlessly held out her hand, palm up. Sasha drew a slice down the center. It hurt, but Holly remained still and centered. It was Amanda's turn. When the knife ran down the center of her palm, she sucked in her breath and murmured, "Ow."

"Let me see," Holly demanded. "Let me live through the eyes of Cathers. And Deveraux," she added.

"No," Amanda whispered. "Stay away from them."

"And Deveraux," Holly repeated, ignoring her cousin.

There was a stir around the circle, which Holly also ignored. She pressed her palm against Amanda's--their birthmarks creating two thirds of the lily, which was the symbol of the great House of Cahors. Immediately she felt their combined strength filling her veins.

When we get Nicole back, we'll be the three Ladies of the Lily together. There'll be no stopping us from doing whatever we want to do.

"Still your mind, Priestess," Philippe urged her.

Holly took a deep breath, and did as he asked.

San Francisco

Richard Anderson sat and he thought. He didn't seem to do much else these days. He had been grieving for a long time---for years. Then one day--yesterday, actually--he just stopped. He was done. Done grieving for his wife, done grieving for his marriage, done grieving for his life. It was as though he suddenly had woken up.

He looked around, and strangers were taking care of him. He believed one of them was Amanda's friend's mother or aunt or something. He had no idea who the Native American guy was. There was much talk and concern about a Barbara, who apparently wasn't doing well.

And no one could tell him how his girls were doing.

Something had to change. He needed more information first, though. If there was one thing he had learned in Vietnam, it was that you damn well better know what was waiting for you when you leaped. The only lesson he had learned half so well was to crave safety and stability. When his wife, Marie-Claire, had met him, he had been a daredevil. He took risks. When he had come home from the war to his young wife, he had found the most stable job he could and settled down. His computer company had sprung from that, and it had never been a very risky enterprise.

She had never understood his desire for stability; he could see that now. Maybe he hadn't been exciting enough for her at that point, instead of actually trying to talk about it or ask for a divorce, though, she had snuck around behind his back. Her fault. He had known she was doing it and had done nothing. His fault. He had been too worried about keeping her. Having two little girls hadn't helped. He had felt such a need to keep their home life secure for them, so that they wouldn't have to face risk, uncertainty.

He had sure botched that. Maybe instead he should have taught his girls to survive, to be tough. Maybe that would stand them in better stead now that they were fighting such evil. He closed his eyes. There was nothing he could do to change the past. He could, however, change the future. Maybe it was time for his daughters to discover that their old man knew a thing or two about life and war. He couldn't do magic, but he bet they'd be surprised to learn exactly what he could do.

FIVE BLOODSTONE

Harken now, there's work ahead
For every Deveraux, alive or dead
Oh, Green Han grant us this we pray
Courage and victory at end of day
Goddess help us face our fears
Drying now our angry tears
Give us the strength to prevail
As we glimpse beneath the veil

Salem, Massachusetts: October 29, 1692

Jonathan Deveraux smiled as he awoke. He could hear the rain pounding on the roof, and from afar thunder rumbled ominously. Yes, it was going to be a glorious day.

As he dressed he mentally reviewed the events of the past months. Salem had been a quiet town until January, when young Elizabeth Parris and Abigail Williams had started crying that there were witches in their midst. Hallucinations, seizures, and trances experienced by them and other local girls had been all the proof the God-fearing people needed.

What had started out as an ugly prank by a couple of bored, spiteful children had turned into an epidemic of fear and paranoia. But, more than that, it had turned into a game of chess that Jonathan and Abigail Cathers played.

When he had come to Salem he had been shocked to find a descendant of the Cahors family living there with a new name and no memory of the blood feud that had driven her ancestor from her native France. Abigail Cathers was a witch, but she never knew that he, Jonathan Deveraux, was a warlock.

So for months she had played the game, though she did not know who her opponent was. He would move a citizen of the town into a position to denounce her as a witch and she would deflect, causing another to be accused in her place. Sarah Osborne, Margaret Jacobs, and Elizabeth Proctor had all been pawns, sacrificed by Abigail to cast suspicion away from herself. The good citizens were blissfully unaware of the manipulation of their minds by the two. But at last he had checkmated her. Today she would stand trial before the Court of Oyer and Terminer. The six remaining judges of the court, which had been set up by the governor to try the witch cases, could do no else but find her guilty. He only wished he could be there to see the look on her face when they pronounced the sentence. Alas, the court was closed to the public. His scrying stone would have to do.

As the child Elizabeth Parris slowly and solemnly denounced Abigail Cathers, the woman turned white. Three girls sat in chairs before the judges, their faces grim but their eyes dancing with a fiendish glee. How many had died because of them?

"And she cursed my dog so she could not have pups. Every year she's had a litter and this year none. And it's all because of Abigail Cathers. Doggie barked at Abigail, and Abigail looked at her quite cruelly and said that she would never have little puppies to bark at people again."

"I have done nothing wrong," Abigail said, standing. "These children have falsely accused so many, and you have willingly believed every word. Listen to what they are saying; it is ridiculous. Why would I curse a dog for doing what it was made to do? This court has sentenced dozens of innocents to their death. My friend, Goodwife Mary Shiflett, was among them ..." And here she faltered. Tears formed in her eyes. "... and you drowned her! You drowned her!"

"She was well accused," Samuel asserted. She raised her chin. "True witches would not have allowed themselves to be killed: True witches would have silenced these girls and not their miserable dogs."

She sat back down, the chains that bound her clanking loudly in the silence. The testimonies continued. The evidence was all ridiculous, highly circumstantial, and the judges were believing every word. At last Abigail exploded. Once more, she got to her feet. Her eyes began to glow, and she shrieked, "You stupid little girls. You have no idea what a witch can do!"

Behind her the wall exploded, flinging debris into the air. Men shouted as bits of stone cascaded down upon them. Dust powdered the room. Then she was gone as her restraints fell to the ground with a loud clatter. The girls lay crushed beneath the weight of the falling stones.

Silence fell thick and terrifying upon the group of men gathered there. "Is it possible?" Samuel asked into the silence. "Could we have convicted so many innocents while we have let the one true witch escape?" Governor Phips rose to his feet. He was pale and shaking from head to toe. "Gentlemen, I don't know the answer to Mr. Sewall's question. All I know is, I'm disbanding the court." "But, sir, how can you even think of doing that after what we've just seen?" Jonathan Corwin demanded. The governor held up a hand. "And how can you, sir, condone convicting more people who are probably innocent after what we've just seen? You think that a real witch would go to her death as lightly as the ones that you have murdered?"

"But the confessions--"

"There have only been a handful of those, and at this time how can we be sure that that Devil who just left here didn't bewitch them into confessing just to cast suspicion from her?" Bartholomew pointed out wearily.

That silenced them all for a moment.

John Hathorne spoke quietly into the silence. "You all know me, and you know I don't take our duties lightly. It seems to me that either this witch was far more powerful than her fellows, or we have condemned a great many innocent souls to death. If the latter is true, as I suspect, then God will judge us for what we have done."

He paused to let his words sink in. "If God is to be our judge then, let history not judge us. If this were to come to light there would be massive public unrest-- upheaval, even. The authority of the law, the Church itself, could be questioned. There are many who already think we are wrong; let us not swell their ranks. We do have several confessions that shall be proof enough for most. Several have been sentenced and killed. Let us put an end then to these witch trials."

He waited for the murmurs to cease; "And let us erase all record of Abigail Cathers and what she did here today. Let us not speak of it, not even to each other."

As the dust still settled slowly along his shoulders, John commanded in a voice that shook, "Clerk, tear the pages regarding Abigail Cathers from the record. Destroy them. No one must know of the terrible things we have witnessed here."

Solemnly the young man did as he was told. After removing the pages he struck a match and set them on fire. He dropped them to the stone floor, and as they all watched them burn, the flame seemed to turn from hellfire red to black.

At last the records were but ash, and John sat back with a shudder. He felt sick. "And what of the others we already have in custody?" Samuel asked. "If we simply release them it's as good as admitting there was no threat."

"Then they shall be tried, but not by us," John Richards said. "And somehow I think they'll be found innocent."

Lieutenant Governor William Stoughton whispered, "Amen."

Jonathan Deveraux sighed heavily as he put his scrying stone away. He had not succeeded in having Abigail killed. At the very least he had just made that task harder to accomplish since now he would have to try to find her. She certainly wouldn't be staying anywhere near the area-- not after what she had done.

Ah, well. Salem would return to its same sleepy roots, and life would return to normal.

How dull.

"Thus it has always been," Sasha said to Holly as they sat back from their shared vision of the past. They were in the sitting room of the safe house with Philippe, who had participated. Rose had commandeered the others to work on fixing some food for the large gathering. "Deveraux hunting down Cahors--or rather, Cathers, once your family changed its name--all over time and space."

Holly nodded wanly. "Six hundred years ago, Isabeau de Cahors was forced to marry Jean de Deveraux, and then she helped her family massacre the Deveraux family. There was a huge fire, and she died in it. Everyone assumed Jean died too."

"But he didn't," Philippe concluded. "She had sworn to kill him, but either she failed or she spared him. And now their spirits are intertwined, and I believe they will continue to be so until she fulfills her blood vow and kills him. And The Deveraux Coven continues to hunt the Cathers witches wherever they may be found."

"And kills him'?" Holly repeated. "But how can Isabeau kill Jean, when they're both spirits?"

"I think you know the answer to that," Sasha said gently. She laid a hand on Holly's arm. "Isabeau has the ability to possess you, and Jean can live again through ... my son."

"Jer," Holly murmured with a shudder. She looked down at Sasha's hand on her arm. She was grateful for the older woman's sustaining, calm presence. Though Sasha was nothing like her own mother, still, she was someone's mother... and Holly felt very much in need of mothering these days.

She's Jer's mother, she reminded herself How can she talk about this so calmly?

"I think we can figure out a way to beat this," Sasha said firmly. "I have to believe that, Holly. I don't believe you're destined to kill my son."

"Or for your son to kill me. Isabeau may want resolution, but Jean wants revenge," Holly reminded her.

"He's still madly in love with Isabeau. They were very passionate people, Jean and Isabeau." She made a little face. "That's what attracted me to Jer's father. His passion for life." Stirring, she gave Holly's arm another squeeze. "But that's a different subject. What we need to concentrate on now is finding your cousin, and figuring out where Jer is. He keeps making contact with you, so that means he's ... alive...."

Her voice caught. Holly put her hands in Sasha's and gazed steadily into her eyes. "I've already had to do things I didn't want to do, for the sake of the Coven," Holly told her. "I'm strong, like Isabeau. I'll find him, Sasha. But I won't harm him."

Sasha closed her eyes and let out a heavy sigh.

"When Michael forced me to leave, I worried so about my boys. Not a day has gone by since then that I haven't wondered and worried about them. That's why I went to the Mother Coven--so I could learn spells to protect them and keep them safe. And then I began my online friendship with Kari, who kept me informed about her boyfriend, 'Warlock.'

"Holly flushed, feeling awkward. Jer and Kari had been hot and heavy for over a year, until Holly came along. She couldn't help her mixed feelings on the subject. Sasha continued: "I'm sure Michael told them that I deserted them."

Holly swallowed. Michael Deveraux had indeed told his sons that their mother had abandoned them. Eli pretended not to care, but she knew it had wounded Jer deeply. As the only semi-good

Deveraux in the family, Jer had suffered the most from Sasha's absence. She knew he believed that if his mother had stayed or taken him with her, he wouldn't be as tainted with evil as he was now.

I don't think he's evil at all, Holly told herself. She realized, though, that was wishful thinking, and not something she was positive of.

But I am tainted, she thought. I have let evil come into me in order to protect my coven. I can't be with anyone who's completely good. I'll ruin him. For a second, she panicked. What have I done to myself? To my life?

And then she raised her chin. I did what I had to do. It's done, and there's no use going back over it.

"Are you all right, Holly?" Philippe asked, peering at her. Then he gave her and Sasha a crooked smile. "A strange question, in these strange times."

"I'm all right," she said steadily. "I am."

"Then we must press on. We must plan a strategy," Philippe said, looking at them both. "My theory is that since you had such a vivid image of Jer when we were in the battle, it means he's nearby. If that is so, it's possible he is in the Supreme Coven's headquarters."

"But he told me he was on the island of Avalon," she argued. "He told me that himself, in a dream." She balled her fists. "He lied to me."

"Perhaps he's been moved," Sasha put in. "Yes," Holly breathed, uncomfortable.

Philippe shrugged. "We do know that Nicole is at the headquarters. And that she is married to James. Or at least that is what the Mother Coven was told by their spies. Perhaps he is there as well."

Overhearing, Rose came over. She nodded as she said, "I can confirm that. We had a message to that effect, from someone on the inside. Someone on our side," she added. "I mean, that Nicole is married to James, and that she's inside the headquarters."

Philippe clenched his jaw and doubled his fists. His dark brows pinched as he gritted out, "That cannot stand. We must free her as soon as possible."

"So you know the location of the headquarters?" Holly said slowly. "And you didn't tell us?"

"I don't know the location," Rose shot back. "That hasn't been revealed to us."

"Who is the spy?" Holly asked Rose. "And if she--or he--knows so much, why don't they just give you the location?"

"We don't know who it is," Rose said bluntly. "We have a friend inside, but he--it's probably a male--has not identified himself. As for giving us the location, we're hoping that he will, in due time."

"Then how do we know this friend isn't just feeding us misinformation? Messing with us?" Holly persisted. "Pablo also confirmed Nicole's presence there," Philippe interjected. "He is a Seer. He can also read minds."

Holly glanced up sharply. "And he can't read the address, either?"

"Think about it," Rose said. "Such information is probably one of the most closely guarded secrets of the Supreme Coven. They've probably found a way to protect it, even from someone like Pablo. Surely they're aware that there are mind readers on our side as well as theirs."

"He'd better stay out of my head." Holly's tone was tense. Harsh. She couldn't help it. She wanted no one to know the depths she had gone to in order to protect her covenates ... nor to grasp how far she was willing to go in the future.

I'm not even sure how far I'm willing to go." "Understood?" she asked, even more harshly.

Philippe looked surprised, but said nothing. She could see the wheels turning, however, see his uncertainty about her.

You'd all better stay away, she thought hotly. I'm not what I seem. Her hands trembled at the fury--and the fear--warring inside her.

"Holly?" Amanda asked, coming up to the group. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. I'm fine," she said tersely. She turned away.

"Has Pablo been able to sense the location again?" Sasha asked Philippe, perhaps to placate Holly. Clearly frustrated; he shook his head.

"Then here's what I suggest," Sasha said tentatively. "With you and Pablo working together, we try to connect with Nicole. We work through her, try to find the headquarters again."

Amanda covered her mouth with her hands. "Nicole," she murmured. "God, I hope she's all right."

"Trying to connect like that may put her in danger," Philippe pointed out. "If they realize what we're up to ...""I don't know what else we can do," Sasha said. "And she's already in danger." Rose raised a hand. "Maybe we need to rethink. We're rushing--"

"We can't just sit around and wait for something else to happen," Holly cut in. "We have to make it happen."

"She's right," Philippe said with approval. He stood. "I'll get Pablo."

"First, we need to eat," Sasha insisted. "Holly's been working hard. She's drained, and so am I. We need to regroup." Philippe hesitated, and then nodded. "Eh, bien. You're right. We need to be strong, and prepared." He looked through the doorway at Alonzo, who was handing out cups of coffee to some of the others. "We of the White Magic Coven would like to have a Catholic Mass. Do you object?" he asked Holly, Sasha, and Rose.

"Not at all," Rose replied. "The more blessings on us, the better."

"I'll speak to Alonzo," he said, rising. Sasha watched him go. She said, "We're lucky that they found us." Then she turned to Holly and said, "Tell me more about how the battle vanished. We need to know everything we can about their magics."

A cold knot wound in Holly's stomach. She said, "Isabeau came to me while I was hurt. I was dying." She swallowed. "She told me she could help us. Then ..." She took a breath. Should I tell her everything?

"Go on," Sasha prodded. "Her mother was there." Sasha looked surprised. "Catherine?"

"Yes. She appeared to me once before." Holly thought a moment. "But she was a corpse the first time. This time she was veiled."

And then she knew: Isabeau lied to me. That wasn't her mother. It was the Goddess as Hecate, Queen of Witches. Hecate still hasn't forgiven me for sacrificing Nicole's familiar, Hecate. Her statue on the grounds of the Mother Temple wept at the sight of me. If I'm right, I sacrificed Joel to her. That was my second sacrifice to her. Maybe even my third, if Kialish's death counts. And any witch knows that the more sacrifices you give to one manifestation of the Goddess, the more that manifestation owns you, controls you.

She set her jaw.

I am controlled by no one. Not Hecate, not anyone. I am my own mistress.

"Never mind," she said aloud. "Forget all this. It's time to look for Nicole. Now."

"But..." Sasha looked confused. "You need to eat, and the men want to have the Mass ..."

"Who's in charge here?" Holly asked shrilly. She got to her feet and called, "Philippe! Change of plans!"

After Nicole was certain that James was gone for good, she tried the door again and found that it was locked. Before she hurtled magical energy at it, she tried using the athame on it. The ultra-sharp and sturdy weapon stripped the doorjamb as clean as a bone, and she pushed out of the room and into the corridor as before. She stuffed the stones, the figurine, and the ring in her pockets. Instead of running, she tiptoed stealthily, wondering if Jer's spell would help her find

her way back. The headquarters of the Supreme Coven was enormous; the architecture spanned centuries.

Allowing her intuition to guide her, she wove her way down innumerable passageways, some so narrow, she had to turn sideways to get through- Cobwebs stretched across walls of stone; she panicked as she realized she was in unexplored territory, not retracing her steps from the first time, and then she reminded herself that she didn't need to go the same way. She only had to find Jer.

Time was ticking by, and she was still wandering; then, just as she began to lose hope, she heard voices.

Intrigued, frightened, she drew close to a wood-paneled wall and put her ear against it. Then she realized that farther up on her right was a sort of balcony, and she dropped to her hands and knees and crawled to the low wall.

"... traitor," a voice said from a distance below her location. She cringed. That was Sir William. My father-in-law.

"No, I swear it. I'm loyal to the Supreme Coven. Why would I want to see the Mother Coven in ascendance? I'm a warlock. That would be madness!"

The speaker was the man who had come to their room. Monroe. The one who hadn't been able to stop looking at her in her room. He sounded terrified. His voice was shaking.

"Monroe, do you take me for an idiot?" Sir William demanded. "I watched you with my scrying stone. You thought your mind was warded, hidden from my gaze. How dare you underestimate me! You've been feeding information to those bitches for nearly a year! All your family has betrayed us, for centuries! And you thought the time was right. You let down your guard and contacted them. I've been watching all this time."

"No, Sir William! There's been a terrible mistake--"

"Indeed there has. And you made it!" Sir William boomed.

There was a horrible scream. Nicole covered her ears, but the sound penetrated. It went on and on and on until she thought she would scream as well.

And then there was silence. After that there was a thud, as if a body had fallen down. "Clean it up," Sir William commanded.

For a moment, Nicole was so frightened that she couldn't see, couldn't breathe. Then she scuttled as fast as she could on her hands and knees until she could stand up again. She doubled over and retched; then she started running, praying to the Goddess to get her to Jer before whatever had happened to the man named Monroe happened to Jer, or to her.

She found stairs and raced down them; she was gasping for breath as she rounded a stairwell and flew down another set of stairs. She groped in the darkness, hearing that heartrending scream in her mind.

Straight ahead, a light hovered about two feet off the ground.

She froze, backing away, shaking so hard she could barely stand. A voice emanated from the center of the light. "Nicole?"

"Holly," Nicole whispered. "Holly!" She ran toward the light, praying it wasn't a trap, and whispered, "I'm here! It's me!"

"Stand in the light," Holly said. "It's a teleportation spell. We'll get you out of there."

Nicole began to obey. And then she hesitated and said, "Jer's here, too. In the headquarters. But he's not with me."

There was a pause. Then Holly said again, her voice steady, "Stand in the light, Nicole. We'll get him later."

"But--" And then she heard footsteps coming down the stairs. She ran forward to the light But just before she stepped into it, it vanished, utterly. Now she stood in pitch darkness, blinking at the afterimage of the bright light, completely disoriented and beginning to panic again.

The footsteps were nearing the bottom of the stairs. They were heavy, a man's footsteps; was it her imagination, or did they sound like James's?

Her heart pounded. She looked back over her shoulder and saw a small light, like a candle or a flashlight, bobbing as whoever was approaching took the last step. By the unhurried pace, Nicole assumed the intruder hadn't seen her yet.

She moved to the left, finding nothing in her way, and began to walk as quickly and as quietly as she could. Her shoulder bumped into a wall; as far as she could tell, she had moved into a corridor. She kept going, biting her lip to keep from crying out when something scurried over her shoe.

Then she slogged into foul-smelling water; she slogged through it until it splashed around her knees. Nearly choking from the odor, she pressed on, fearfully glancing backward. She was making too much noise, but she couldn't make herself walk any more slowly. She was too frightened.

At last the water grew shallower; then she was out of it. The corridor let out onto another stairway and she took it, tired and sore and beginning to lose hope that she would ever find Jer. She kept hearing the horrible scream; it was all she could do to force herself not to imagine what Sir William had done to the man named Monroe who had been branded a traitor.

Then all of a sudden she realized she was standing on the landing of the last stairway before the dungeons, and as she stepped down she saw again the watery light and the row of cells.

Her heart leaped and she broke into a run, giddy with relief and wobbly with exhaustion.

"Jer!" she whispered sotto voce. "Jer, it's Nicole! I have the stuff!"

She reached his cage just as the familiar sphere of light appeared inside and Jer, apparently not having heard her, stepped into it.

Then it disappeared again, and Jer with it.

Leaving her behind.

She stepped toward the cage and reached out a hand. The cell was completely empty.

"Hey," she whispered.

"Jer? Holly?"

"Hey, yourself, baby, what's going on?" drawled a voice.

Nicole whirled around.

Eli and James stood less than three feet away, grinning at her.

SIX JADE

Quietly now, grind their bones
Our eyes set on the throne of thrones
We crush them now as we rise
Use them as stepping-stones to the skies
Weave and work and cast a spell
To send the Deveraux straight to
Hell See the fear in their eyes
As they watch House Cahors rise

Holly: London

As Holly stood in the bright light, she could barely make out the shape of another figure inside the blazing whiteness with her. She reached out a hand and whispered a name that had rested on her lips for more nights than she could remember. "Jer."

Speaking his name aloud was like casting a spell. He was there with her at Rose's house; he really was, alive and safe. She felt his warmth, smelted his scent. She could hardly stand up, she

was so amazed and happy. He put his arms around her and crushed his mouth against hers; his lips were chapped, but she didn't care; she held him tightly as he kissed her, reveling in his nearness, so overcome that she burst into tears. He's here, he's all right. I have him at last. Thank you, thank you for surviving. And for loving me. By the Goddess, Jer, I love you....The light abruptly vanished.

They tumbled from the magic portal Philippe's coven had helped her coven create in Rose's sitting room, both landing hard on the carpet. Then Jer roughly pushed her away, rolling into a ball and hiding his face in his hands as she lay there, stunned.

"Jeraud!" Sasha cried, running to him. She threw her arms around him and held him, but he kept his frozen position, refusing to move.

"Don't look at me!" he shouted.

"Jer? Sweetheart?" Sasha said, astounded. She tried to pull his hands from his head, but he held firm.

And then Holly saw his hand, and caught her breath. It didn't look human. It was nothing but scars upon scars, wrapped around bone. Her stomach turned at the sight. "The Black Fire," she murmured, looking at his mother, who was stricken. "You were so badly burned."

"Yes." He cleared his throat. "Could someone get me something--a blanket, a towel?"

Holly understood his humiliation, and she looked searchingly at the others, who were standing around dumbfounded. Philippe glanced from Holly to Jer to Sasha, his brows knitting as he frowned in bewilderment. "Who is this?" he demanded.

Then Amanda took a step toward her and shouted, "Holly, you liar! Where's my sister?"

"I have to go back for her," Holly said, her emotions twisting her voice. She couldn't stop staring as Rose hurried to Jer's side with a large bath towel and draped it over his head.

Finished, Rose took a step backward, whispering to Kari, "Who is he, Kari?"

Kari was crying hard, her sobs coming in large, hot gasps. She turned on her heel and ran out of the room; seconds later, they heard a door slam.

"Oh, my God, what if she's gone outside?" Silvana asked. "What if the birds see her?" She hesitated, then rushed after her. "Kari? Come back!" Alonzo regarded Jer as the younger man fumbled his way to the settee and sat heavily down. "This is a warlock," he announced.

"Holly, damn it! Where's Nicole?" Amanda's voice shook. "You go get my sister! Now!"

"I will," Holly said, taking a deep breath. "Philippe, we have to re-create the spell." She looked at Amanda. "I saw her, Amanda. I'll get her."

"Why didn't you this time?" Amanda shrieked at her. "Why did you bring him instead?" Her hand trembled as she pointed at Jer. "It's always the Deveraux! Always Jer who comes first!"

"She wouldn't come without him," Holly answered weakly, but she knew that that answer wasn't worthy of her. I found Jer, and I didn't give him a chance to say no. I putted him in. He didn't even know what the light was."And this is how you repay her for being so kind?" Amanda's accusations were cutting her to the quick--or maybe they were just hitting too close to home.

"Philippe, make the portal!" Holly shouted.

"Now!" Rose joined Philippe, Alonzo, Armand, and Pablo as they made a circle and began to chant in ancient Celtic. Sasha pulled Amanda to the circle, and each of them joined hands with Rose. A pinprick of light formed in the center of the circle, about three feet off the ground. It began to shine more brightly, and to grow. A low, almost subaudible hum emanated from the light.

The light expanded into an ellipse, then split into 150 rings, then split again. The individual rings began to shimmer and rotate as the hum increased in volume.

There was the sound of a crash, and then the sphere became an elongated oval, pulsing with light from inside it.

The portal had been successfully created.

Now it was up to Holly. She closed her eyes and concentrated on Nicole, on merging with her vibrations, on becoming one with her. She was the only one in the group powerful enough to achieve such a union, and she knew why Amanda was so upset: Her entire concentration should have been filled with nothing but thoughts of Nicole, and yet she had obviously been thinking of Jer as well... for here he was.

Then Holly saw Nicole in her mind's eye ... and what she saw, she did not like.

Her cousin was dressed in ceremonial robes of black and red and bound onto an altar, her eyes staring unseeing as Eli Deveraux, and a man Holly didn't recognize, both stood over her, chanting. "No," she murmured.

"What? What's wrong? What do you see?" Amanda cried, stepping forward toward Holly, but Sasha firmly touched her shoulder, keeping her from breaking the circle.

"Don't break her concentration," she warned. "Help us, Amanda." Amanda shut her eyes and took up the chant, which Rose and Philippe had pieced together from two spells, one from the Mother Coven's tradition and one from that of the Coven of White Magic.

Holly rode the strength of Amanda's sure image of her sister, using that to make herself connect more fully with her. Then she concentrated on Jer, who had draped the towel over his head, since he had just been with Nicole in person.

Then, when she felt the most in communion with her cousin--who's been drugged!--she stepped into the portal----and Jer jumped in after her.

"Jer," she gasped as the intense white light surrounded them. She couldn't see his scars in the light, just his vague outline. She could feel him, though, both his physical presence as well as his spiritual one.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"Bound to an altar. Your brother's there, and some other man--"

"I'll fight them. You free her." Jer leaped from the light. Pulling her wits about herself, Holly followed after.

The darkness of the room disoriented her; it was as if dozens of flashbulbs had gone off in her face and she stumbled, trying to clear her vision with a hasty spell.

It worked a little; she squinted hard and rushed toward the altar, seeing Jer and the other two men in a filmy blur. Jer was hurtling fireballs at his brother; then he picked up an athame from the altar and was slashing it at the man Holly did not know.

Eli deflected each projectile from his brother's fists, laughing as he did so.

"So, little brother, playing the white knight?" he taunted. "Or have you tricked Holly into racing right into our clutches?"

With that, Eli flung a magical line of energy in Holly's direction. It circled above her head, then plummeted downward over her arms. Instantly, it began to divide into more lines until she was captured in a glowing web.

"Holly!" Jer cried, running toward her. But James forced him back with a barrage of pulses of magic that threw him across the room. She watched helplessly as Jer smacked the wall with a sickening thud and landed in a heap on the floor.

"Goddess, give us the help we need, infuse him now with strength and speed," she prayed, imploring the Goddess to strengthen Jer.

Then Eli yanked on the end of the line, dragging her to her knees. She forced her head back so she could see.

With a crackle of energy he created a grappling hook and launched it at her. "Die, witch!" he shouted.

The other man just watched with an amused expression. But while he was concentrating on her, Jer leaped to his feet and rushed the man, grabbing him around the shoulders, and hurled him at

Eli. The momentum knocked Eli's hand and the grappling hook sailed wide, clattering with a metallic sound against the wall.

Jer shouted something in Latin that she didn't understand, and the web disappeared. Then he flicked his fingers at Holly and she was hoisted as if by invisible hands to her feet. She raced to Nicole and snapped her fingers at the black velvet ropes around Nicole's wrists and ankles, and they fell away.

"Guards!" the other man shouted. "We have intruders!"

Now it was Holly's turn to defend them; she caused a blaze of fire to explode along the floor, creating a fiery barrier between the two men and her and Jer. Jer leaped to the altar and scooped Nicole up in his arms, then laid her over his back fireman style. As he raced toward the sphere of light, he cast another, stronger barrier behind Holly's firewall. "Come on!" he shouted.

Holly turned and joined him and Nicole in the portal. With a flash of energy, they disappeared.

Once more she and Jer fell back into the sitting room; once more he fumbled for cover while Philippe ran to the inert Nicole. Her eyes were still open but frighteningly vacant.

'Ah, ma belle," he whispered, enfolding her hands in his. He brushed her masses of black curls from her forehead. "Has he put you in thrall?"

"It's what she was most afraid of," Jer said.

Jer's mother knelt beside Nicole and studied her eyes. "No," Sasha said finally. "She's not in thrall. She's been drugged." She looked at Rose. "Do you have oak to burn? We need chamomile and rosemary. A quartz crystal," she said briskly.

"Of course." Rose nodded and hurried to her pantry.

Amanda plopped down next to Philippe. "Nicki," she called, "wake up!"

"I'm going to burn some sage as well," Rose called from the back of the house.

"That's a good idea," Sasha replied. She rubbed her hands briskly together; a heady mixture of cinnamon and ginger filled the room. After she opened her hands, Holly saw the spices smeared on her palms. She leaned forward over Nicole and cupped Nicole's eyes, murmuring words of healing.

"What was going on back there?" Amanda asked Holly tearfully.

"She was on an altar," Holly told her. "Eli and some other guy were there."

"James Moore," Jer filled in. "Heir to the throne of skulls."

"What were they going to do to her?" Amanda persisted.

Jer shrugged beneath the towel he had found to conceal his disfigured features. "Sacrifice her, probably. They were going to try to conjure the Black Fire."

"Oh, my God," Amanda said, covering her mouth. "Nicole."

"They were going to force Jer to help," Holly guessed. She hesitated. "Or do you know how to do it? Conjure the Black Fire?"

His head swiveled toward her. For a moment he said nothing, and then he shook his head. "I don't know anything about it." After a moment he added, "But I will tell you one thing. You're not safe in London anymore. They'll be coming after you."

And you, Holly filled in. Are we going to be hunted for the rest of our lives? Is this ever going to end?

Kari had run two long London blocks before Silvana had managed to catch up with her. Kari had been crying bitter tears, hunched and sobbing as she ran, and Silvana felt sorry for her. Nobody seemed to get that she really loved Jer Deveraux, and she hated all the witchcraft and Holly, who had come between them. Holly and Amanda were cruel to her, and Sasha and Tommy politely tolerated her. Of all the Coven, Silvana herself seemed to be the only one who had any empathy for her tough situation.

Silvana had tapped her on the shoulder, saying, "Kari, it's me."

Kari turned abruptly, sliding in the snow. Her face was blotched from crying. "Did you see him?"

"Yes, yes, I saw him," Silvana soothed, holding out her arms. Kari stayed where she was, cupping her face and wildly shaking her head. "He looks like a monster!"

"I know, Kari."

"It never would have happened if Holly hadn't moved to Seattle," she said. "We were happy. Studying at school, making love ..."

Silvana hadn't known them then, but she had gotten the distinct impression that Jer had already started to get tired of their relationship before Holly had shown up. But she said nothing about that now. She tried another tack. "Kari, we can't be out here. It's dangerous. The falcons are looking for us everywhere. Now that...this has happened our enemies will be searching for us even harder."

"I don't care!" Kari yelled. "I'm so sick of all of this!"

"Kari, please," Silvana tried again. "We have to be careful."

"Why? We're going to die, anyway! Eddie's gone, and Kialish, and Amanda and Nicole's mother.... They're just picking us off one by one." Her voice rose to a thin, high-pitched shriek. "I can't stand this anymore!"

Then she broke down, bursting into heavy sobs, this time allowing Silvana to bundle her up into her arms and hold her. No one on the street noticed them--we must still be cloaked, Silvana thought gratefully--with passersby unconsciously skirting around the area where they stood.

Nevertheless, Silvana was anxious as they stood out in the open. Her heart pounded, and her gaze swept the area while she waited for Kari to calm a bit. The street was busy with last-minute Christmas shoppers hurrying through the snow. Silvana felt a brief, sharp pang for Christmases past--simpler days--then sternly reminded herself that self-pity was a luxury she could not afford. Nor could she let Kari indulge herself for too long.

"Kari ... ," she began, and then she froze, listening. She thought she heard a strange scuttling noise against the brick face of the building behind them. She turned, to see the shadow of something rapidly climbing an old drainpipe. It was too dark to make it out, but as she raised her head to follow the shadow, she heard the flapping of wings above the roof.

"Let's go," she said urgently, and her tone must have alerted Kari that she meant it. The other girl lifted her head, looked up at the roof, and peered hard. Her lips parted, and she gestured with her head toward the roof. She must have seen something, for her swollen eyes grew wide and she looked back at Silvana with real fear.

Watching us, Silvana mouthed.

Kari swallowed hard and nodded.

Yes, Silvana mouthed.

They hurried together back to the flat, awkward in the mushy gray city snow. Silvana looked over her shoulder, but saw nothing more.

Kari pulled open the door, and Silvana brought up the rear, shutting the door and leaning against it as if to keep out the shadows and the danger with the force of her weight.

"Did you see anything?" Silvana asked her. Kari shook her head. "No. But I thought I heard a... bird?"

"Me too," she said grimly.

"Deveraux falcons," Kari murmured. "Or something else from the Supreme Coven. You tried to warn me. Once again, my freak-out endangers the whole coven," she said bitterly.

"They've never picked up on us yet," Silvana reminded her. "But we have to let Holly know."

"Oh, God," Kari moaned as she took off her jacket and put it on a hook beside the door. "She'll probably turn me into a toad." It was meant as a joke, but Silvana could see that she was genuinely afraid. With good reason: Holly was not the same kind and gentle girl Silvana had met last year.

They trudged into the sitting room to find Nicole propped up with pillows on the settee. A crocheted afghan was wrapped around her shoulders.

Philippe sat on an ottoman pulled up beside her and he was holding a cup of something hot and steaming.

Holly glanced over at the two as they entered, her lip curling at the sight of Kari, and Silvana was disappointed all over again at the way she treated Kari. "Nicole," Silvana said warmly. "How are you?"

Nicole winced. "Headache. But I'm alive, so I can't complain." Philippe touched her cheek. "Grace a Dieu," he murmured. She smiled gently at him and took the cup from his hand, sipped. Kari looked around the room and said, "Where's Jer?"

"Lying down," Holly replied frostily. "In my room."

God, Holly, lighten up, Silvana told her silently. Then aloud, she said, "Something may have noticed us." At the flash of anger on Holly's face, she caught her breath. Then she raised her chin and added, "And we heard bird's wings."

"Great," Holly bit off

"Thanks, Kari." Silvana took a step forward.

Holly glared at her.

"Kari's been through a lot. We all have."

Holly opened her mouth to say something more, but Sasha came up and placed a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Holly, why don't you get some of that tea Nicole is having?" she asked pointedly. "It's very soothing. There are more cups in the kitchen."

Frosty with silence, Holly jerked away and swept out of the room. Sasha grimaced apologetically at the two girls. "She's ... tense."

"No kidding," Silvana grumbled. "That still doesn't give her the right to be so mean to everybody."

Sasha exhaled slowly. "No. The fact that she's High Priestess of our coven does, though." She added under her breath, "Unfortunately."

"I don't believe that," Silvana insisted. "Hey, I didn't elect her leader, and I say--" Sasha put up a hand. "That's right. We didn't elect her. She's High Priestess by right. She can't step down even if she wants to. As you have seen. So ..." She moved her shoulders. "She gets a few privileges. Which include bad manners."

Kari rolled her eyes. Sasha wagged her finger at her and said in a low whisper, "I'd be a little more cautious around her, Kari. The pressure's getting to be too much for her. Now," she continued in a louder voice, "tell me about the bird."

"We think we heard the Deveraux falcons," Silvana began. "We think we're all in trouble."

Kari nodded in agreement. "Big trouble," she said.

Michael Deveraux: Seattle

As Michael stood on the widow's walk of his home in Lower Queen Anne, the December fogs wrapped around him and held him like a lovesick woman. Night moisture glistened on spiderwebs and encircled the streetlights like faery rings. He stood, listening to the night, wondering what was going on in London.

I should be there, he thought, frustrated. I'm out of the loop. He had thrown the runes and read the entrails of a great many number of animals, and all the signs pointed to his staying in Seattle. But nothing is going on here. Everyone is in London, including Holly Cathers. And I swore to Sir William that I would kill her.

He sighed and resumed his pacing. He was uneasy in his skin. Two more nights until Yule, both his sons were gone, and he was at a distinct disadvantage in the game they all were playing. Clouds cloaked the moon, casting him in darkness. It was cold, and there was snow all around him on the widow's walk. The air smelled crisp, and he closed his eyes, remembering for a moment a child's delight at the layers of white all around his house, and the hope of a day off from school. His father, a powerful warlock in his own right, used to take credit for those days of freedom, assuring his little son that he himself had caused the snow to fall, just for him. There was no reason not to believe that. The Deveraux had done far more powerful things, and recently.

Last Beltane, we conjured the Black Fire, he reminded himself. I assumed the reason my spell finally worked was because we three were together, my sons and I. But we haven't been able to do it since. I know. I tried, and failed.... "Laurent," he called to his ancestor, "will you walk with me?"

The stench of the grave heralded the materialization of the great duke who had ruled the Deveraux family when the Cahors had massacred them. Laurent had conjured the Black Fire that night, and it had been by the black flames that Isabeau had died. Finally, last year on the six hundredth anniversary of the massacre, he had revealed the chant to Michael that would call it forth. And it had worked.

Now, nothing.

Michael didn't know if Laurent had anything to do with the failure, if the phantom warlock was blocking it or had withdrawn his influence in some way. He did know that Laurent was as interested as he was in having a Deveraux ascend the throne of skulls in London.

He also knew Laurent did not particularly care if the victor was Michael himself, one of Michael's sons, or another Deveraux who had not yet been born. Time was on the side of the phantom, and he was a patient and cunning creature--so unlike Jean, his son, who had been so rash and impetuous.

As Michael watched, the mists swirled around a figure that slowly gained mass and solidity. Laurent's skeleton appeared first, and then bits of muscle; when Michael had first begun working with his ancestor, Laurent could only appear to him as a desiccated corpse. But now he had amassed enough life energy to walk the earth again in the guise of a vigorous and very formidable man.

He did so now, wearing black jeans, a black T-shirt, and a black leather jacket. Broad-shouldered and heavily muscled, he towered over Michael, very much a Deveraux with dark hair and eyes and beard, and looked with humor on his living kinsman as he said, "You're alone here in Seattle. They've all run off to London to see the Queen."

"Yes. This is ridiculous," Michael pouted. "I'm wasting my time ..."

And then his words trailed off as Laurent raised his hands and clapped them together twice. In the distance, the answering screech of a falcon heralded magic in the air.

As the silvery clouds drifted away from the moon, the silhouette of an enormous bird cut across the glowing sphere; the flapping of the wings made the snow flutter and the wind blow. A huge, proud creature, its wings swept silently up, down, as it drew near the widow's walk.

On its back rode Michael's imp, the one who had revealed to him the Curse of the Cahors--that those they loved would die by water. As it spied Michael it threw up its hands and laughed maniacally, as it was wont to do. Its chattering teeth gleamed in the moonlight; its pointed ears stood up like two feathers on either side of its head.

The bird was Fantasma, spirit-familiar of the Deveraux, and as it swooped toward the walk, the imp slid off its back and landed on the wooden railing.

"Where have you been?" Michael demanded. He had thought the creature was down in his chamber of spells, where he kept it.

"Holly Cathersss has taken your ssson from Headquartersss," the imp said. "No Jer Deveraux tonight, no Black Fire tonight."

It rubbed its taloned fingers together, its repulsive, leathery face drawn back with glee. "Now we bring her back! Now we kill her!"

"What?" Michael was stunned.

Laurent raised a brow. "They were going to create the Black Fire?" he asked the imp.

"Yessss. Going to try," the imp reported, grinning evilly. It bobbed up and down on the railing, skipping along the thin piece of white-painted wood with no care for the thirty-foot drop to the ground.

"Do you know how they hoped to accomplish it?" Laurent pressed. He had assured Michael that he had no idea why the spell to conjure the fire was not working now. Michael only half believed him; only a fool would trust a Deveraux. In their family, blood was not thick at all. And it was the cheapest of commodities.

"No," the imp replied, completely unconcerned. Michael wondered if it was lying to Laurent--if, later, it would tell Michael everything. Michael had no idea why this imp had come to him, had chosen him to serve, and it had occurred to him more than once that it might actually be a spy--sent from James Moore, perhaps, or even Sir William.

"She rescued him," Michael mused. "Rescued my son."

He couldn't help his admiration, but he prayed he did not reveal it in his tone. Little in this world infuriated Laurent as Holly Cathers's continuing ability to thwart them at every turn. But though his ancestor insisted that she must die, Michael had not given up the idea of making her his consort. A strong witch like her in thrall, and Cahors and Deveraux together again ... it could prove to be exactly what he needed to take over the Supreme Coven and conjure the Black Fire alone.

The imp nodded eagerly. "Now we lure her back!" It jabbed a talon downward, and Michael understood. Lying in rows in his basement and in boxes in his chamber of spells, and resting impatiently in graveyards and mausoleums, his army of the dead awaited their marching orders. He had begun animating them months ago, biding his time, waiting, too, for the moment to strike.

Duke Laurent smiled broadly. "Excellent," he said. "I will enjoy that."

"And Sssan Francissco," the imp reminded Michael, "where the three are hiding."

Michael knew he was referring to the shaman, Dan Carter; the voodoo woman, Tante Cecile; and Holly's uncle, Richard Anderson, the husband of Michael's dead lover. He sneered. Killing Marie Claire's husband would be ironic. As he had torn the two apart in life, he could cause them to be joined together in death. "San Francisco as well," Michael assented.

"It's a fine time to be a Deveraux," the Duke said approvingly. "A fine time for revenge, and death."

The imp cluttered gleefully, and Fantasma flapped his wings as he soared in mockery at the Goddess Moon.

Michael glided along the widow's walk with a lighter step.

From her perch among the mists of time and magic, Pandion, the lady hawke of the Cahors, woke from her seemingly eternal slumbers and cocked her head. She sensed a battle was at hand, and her heart soared.

It had been too long since she had dined on ashes and blood.

Centuries too long.

SEVEN AMBER

Passion now begins to wale
And whom we desire, we will take
Then we'll cut them down to the pick
Love itself, the crudest trick
Moved we are by love's sweet song
Though it plays not for long
We can blow on embers bright
Till passion overtakes the light

Cathers Coven: London

They were alone. Seated on her bed, Jer was hidden in his blanket. He remained silent.

Holly kept her eyes fixed on her hands, which were shaking badly. Her knees wobbled, and she sat on the other side of the bed; it was narrow enough that she could feel his body heat as he moved uncomfortably away.

She blurted, "Jer, I didn't mean ..."

"I know." His voice was a cruel parody of his old voice, the one that had not been burned with Black Fire.

"I didn't mean to leave you alone in the fire," she cut in, speaking more loudly than she had meant to. "My cousins didn't know what would happen to you."

"Doesn't matter, does it?" He kept his back to her. The blanket stretched across his broad back. She remembered what it felt like to put her arms around him. His lips on hers had been soft and

warm, and then, as desire mounted, more insistent. She remembered all this, and her hands shook even harder.

I've dreamed of this moment for so long. But it's not at all how I thought it would be. I'm glad he's safe. So glad. But... he doesn't love me anymore. If he ever did.

I can make him love me, she thought fiercely. I'm a witch.

She balled her fists, resisting the temptation. That would be a hollow victory. "I ... we can work on your ... on your scars," she ventured.

"Just stay away from me," he croaked. Then he said, "Eddie and Kialish are both dead?"

"Yes." She closed her eyes, remembering Eddie's last moments. He had screamed for her to help him as the sea monster had advanced on him. But she had chosen to save Amanda instead, even though she had been afraid that Amanda was already dead.

His silence condemned her. Then he said, "This is all because of us. My family. The Deveraux."

He said his own name as if it was a curse; to Holly's way of thinking, he was right.

"My father will rule the Supreme Coven, Holly. He'll do whatever it takes. He won't stop until he's sitting on the throne of skulls, either he himself or Eli. And he needs Black Fire to get there."

"I know," she said softly. "He doesn't care about people. About... me." Jer drooped forward; the blanket shifted, and she realized he was burying his head in his hands. "My God, I've become such a whiner. I'm a friggin' wimp."

"No." She put her hand on his shoulder.

A shudder ran through him and he jerked away. She clasped her hand against her chest, afraid she had harmed him. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Me too." He took a deep breath. "Please, Holly, I need some time. Alone."

The moment widened to a minute. Then Holly rose unsteadily and walked from the room, shutting the door behind herself.

"How are you doing, ma belle?" Philippe asked quietly as they sat beside each other on the settee. The others were milling around, talking about what Kari and Silvana had or hadn't seen, beginning to look for things to eat for dinner. Holly had slammed into her bedroom, where Jer was, and had not returned.

Nicole nodded slowly. "Good, but only because you're here." She looked at him wonderingly. "You actually came after me."

He smiled. "Did I not promise that I would? We of the White Magic Coven always keep our promises."

He leaned down and kissed her, and she couldn't help but smile. There was a promise in his kiss, and she knew that he would keep it.

"I love you," she told him when he pulled back. "You're what kept me alive the last few weeks."

"And do you know that I love you and will do everything in my power to keep you safe?"

She nodded happily. "Yes. I can feel that."

Then Astarte sidled up to her, meowed, and leaped into her lap. To her surprise, she began crying.

"Oh, cat," she said fondly.

"My sweet cat." And she realized she was weeping for Hecate, who was dead. As if Astarte understood, she put a paw on Nicole's cheek, catching a tear, and cocked her head. There was tenderness in the gesture, and sympathy, and Nicole stroked the cat's head as she leaned against Philippe, resting against his chest as the cat began to purr.

"You are well loved," Philippe said.

Nicole closed her eyes. "Yes." Then she swallowed. "I have to talk to Holly. It's about Joel."

He raised a brow. "What?"

She took a deep breath and started to rise. Her knees were a little wobbly. Philippe assisted her.

"Thanks." She hesitated. "You can come with me, if you want."

"Of course."

He slid his fingers through hers; holding hands, they walked out of the sitting room and toward Holly's closed door. Nicole began to tremble; she was more afraid than ever of Holly, even though Holly had just risked her own life to save Nicole's.

She raised her hand and rapped softly on the door. "Holly?"

The door opened. Holly had been crying. She made no mention of her tears, only narrowed her eyes as if she were irritated by the intrusion. "What?"

Nicole glanced around her; she couldn't help her revolted fascination with Jer. He looked so horrible, it was hard not to fall into something like a hypnotic spell and gaze at him, as if something were hardwired in her brain that said, Pay attention. Don't let this happen to you.

He was lying with his face to the wall, the covers pulled up to his chin. She couldn't make out his features.

As if she sensed that Nicole was gawking, Holly scowled at her and came into the hallway, shutting the door behind herself. She crossed her arms across her chest and squared her shoulders.

Nicole wanted to say, Holly, it's just me. But she didn't. What she did say was, "I had a vision. There was a man named Joel, I think... I think he's dead, Holly."

The other girl visibly paled. Nicole reached out a hand and steadied Holly by the shoulder. Holly looked past her, as if to a distant place only she could see, and bit her lower lip. Beneath her hand, Nicole could feel Holly trembling.

"What did you see?" she asked finally.

"He was in his house. On the floor. The snow was coming in."

Holly flicked a glance at Philippe. "Go and check," she ordered him.

He nodded. "I'll need the address."

"I'll go with you," Nicole said. "No." Holly shook her head. "You'll stay here."

Nicole frowned. "But--"

"She's right, Nicole," Philippe cut in. "You stay here. I'll go alone."

Philippe was gone nearly an hour. When he returned, Holly was waiting for him in the entryway. Her face was ashen, and there were circles under her eyes. He hadn't realized how tired she looked, and his heart went out to her. She looked thin in a baggy sweater, and he guessed that the Capri pants she was wearing shouldn't be as loose as they were on her frame. I wonder if she's eating? he thought. She was in a nearly impossible position; he didn't know how she was managing as well as she was, and he admired her for her strength of will and her courage.

She looked at him, then dropped her gaze as his expression told her the bad news. Joel was indeed dead, and had been lying just as Nicole had seen him in her vision.

Holly was silent for a time. Then she murmured, "He healed me. During the battle that went away, he saved my life. And I..."

"Sometimes there is a bargain," Philippe said gently. "If that was the case, it was the right one to make. You are the High Priestess of a coven, and a powerful and important witch."

She stared up at him, her eyes glittering like hard, brittle glass. "If I'm so damn powerful, why did I have to make such a bargain?" she demanded. Then she softened a bit. "What did you do with him?" she asked.

He hesitated. Then he said, "Witches are generally cremated. But I couldn't do that for him. I simply called the police. His death appears as a heart attack, no foul play."

"But you didn't wait for the police."

"Non. They won't find me," he assured her. "They won't find us," he corrected.

"Good." She swallowed. "Thanks."

He inclined his head. "You are welcome, Holly."

She blinked as if she was almost shocked by the kindness in his voice. His compassion for her increased.

Then she shrugged as if to deny the dent he had made in her armor, turned on her heel, and left him alone in the entryway, where Nicole found him.

She put her arms around him and pressed her face against his chest.

"You found him," Nicole said brokenly, "as I saw him."

"Oui."

"Oh, God, I hate this. All of this," she whispered. "I want it to be over."

Philippe stroked her hair, and let her cry.

Tante Cecile, Dan, and Richard: San Francisco

Cecile Beaufriere had found several boxes of Christmas decorations in the attic of the small San Francisco house she, Dan Carter, and Richard Anderson had been living in for the last few weeks. They had discussed living in Holly's home, or the home of Barbara Davis-Chin, but in the end, had decided that they had to stay as low under Michael Deveraux's radar as possible. She and Richard had enough money to sustain them for a few more months--she had never liked using magic for personal economic gain--but she wondered when this ordeal would be over.

If it's ever over. The battle between good and evil is eternal. Are we destined to be part of that battle from now on?

Despite her voodoo roots, she had always kept Christmas back home in New Orleans. She did the same now, though it seemed forced: Richard was still numb from the shock of discovering the realities of the magical realm, and sick with worry over his daughters. He seemed to be

rallying somewhat, however, and talking about making plans "to help out." She had cautioned him to be very careful; they were in hiding, and he shouldn't do anything that might allow Michael Deveraux to locate them.

Dan was still mourning the death of his son, Kialish--and Kialish's partner, Eddie, too--and Cecile was well-aware that this was the first Christmas without them.

The year of firsts is the hardest, she told herself as she quietly decorated the Christmas tree. The first birthday, the first anniversary ... the first time you walk into a room and realize that he will never be in his favorite chair., oh, Marcus...Cecile had lost her own true love many years before. Marcus, Silvana's uncle, had been a fabulous man--creative, artistic, and very kind. A professor at Tulane, he had died of a brain embolism when Silvana was an infant. Cecile had had no warning, and despite all the magical work she had done to keep her family safe and well, she and her niece had lost him in a matter of heartbeats.

Now she was charged with protecting someone else's loved one--Richard--and she was not certain she was up to the task.

"That's pretty," he said now, walking into the living room. Nicole and Amanda, his daughters, were going to be terribly shocked when they saw him again. His hair had gone completely white.

And they will see him, she vowed firmly. We will all be reunited. My loa will help guard them and guide them home.

"Thank you." She smiled at him and held out a small box of colored glass ornaments shaped like Christmas stockings. "Would you like to help?"

"Maybe in a little while." He eased himself slowly into a recliner facing the tree, folding his hands over his lap, and smiled vacantly at her

."Wish I had some eggnog," he added. She said nothing. What he wished he had was the whiskey that went in the eggnog. By mutual agreement, neither she nor Dan purchased alcohol when they went to the grocery store--and Richard never went. They saw to that.

Tomorrow night the moon would be full, and witches and magic users everywhere would be celebrating Yule. The winter solstice. Ironically, Yule had roots as an Egyptian solar festival, a twelve-day holiday to celebrate the rebirth of Horus, son of Isis and Osiris. The magical properties of the season were still recognized in their various forms, with many traditions being celebrated in many ways. The American secularized forms, together bundled as Christmas, had always held their appeal for Cecile, and she had no problem participating in the many rituals and traditions, drawing the strength of community from them.

But now she was isolated from her community. Now she was a stranger in a strange land, drawing strength only from Dan Carter. The two kept the flame alive as they waited for those in Europe to find and save the lost ones, put an end to the Cathers-Deveraux vendetta, and hopefully, return home.

What I fear, however, is that the Deveraux have convinced the Supreme Coven to make the private vendetta their public war... pulling in the Mother Coven as well. And then it will never end, because the two larger forces will paint the confrontation as the war of good versus evil. When in truth it's not that at all. The Cathers were never entirely good. And if the love Jean held for Isabeau is to be accepted as real, the Deveraux were never entirely evil....She sighed and placed another metallic Christmas stocking on the tree. Her spirits drooped, and she wished--as she often wished--that she and Silvana were back home in the French Quarter, blissfully unaware of all the trouble that had been brewing in Seattle.

But that was a coward's thinking, and she knew that those blessed with communion with the loa had grave responsibilities in this world.

I should give thanks that Amanda called me, she thought. I have been called to my highest and best purpose. But in truth, she really couldn't. My niece-daughter is with the Coven, and I'm as worried about her as Richard is about his girls. Sighing, she plucked another ball out of the box.

That was when she saw the shadows flitting across Richard Anderson's face.

Wings.

Several of them, flapped in silhouette across his pale features, and then against the tan leather of the recliner. They glided silently over the flocked wallpaper, sliding menacingly along.

As was Cecile's habit, the drapes were pulled across the windows. The silhouettes were magical, emanating from no natural source. Drawing in breath, Cecile set the box down and whispered to her ha, "Guardians, come. Guardians, take the magic from this room and use it for protection."

Still, the silhouettes slid without sound over the walls, then dipped downward toward the floorboards, stretching over the hardwood floor. The shadows moved toward her; she got up on the ladder she had been using to decorate the tree, standing still and praying for protection, for strength, for annihilation of all evil. At that moment, she heard Dan Carter shout from upstairs, where his bedroom was. It was a cry of surprise. His footsteps sounded across the floor; then his door opened. She held her breath as he raced down the stairs.

She called out, "Stop!" when he began to race into the room. Seeing the menacing shadows of wings, he halted, frozen to the spot. Then he made a series of hand motions and plucked something from the leather bag he had had the presence of mind to bring with him-- his medicine bag--and sprinkled it in front of himself on the floor.

The shadows broke up as they hit that portion of the hardwood. He sprinkled more on the floor, and then into the air in front of him, and in that way, created a safety zone for himself as he walked toward Cecile. As he progressed, he gestured for her to stay silent. Finally he stood at the bottom of the ladder. He flung magical dust at her, then reached out his hands and gestured for her to come to him. She let him pull her from the ladder and drape her body over his shoulder. Saying not a word, he backed slowly out of the room.

That was when the shaking began.

The entire house quaked, once to the left, and once to the right. The windows rattled. From inside the chimney, birds shrieked.

Then ghostly hounds began baying, their howls terrible and fierce, their invisible toenails skittering over the wooden floor as they raced after Dan and Cecile. Cecile smelled their wet fur and their dragon-hot breath, but saw nothing. They were invisible. But as they rushed past Richard's recliner, they tipped it over, throwing Richard to the floor.

Invisible maybe, but not insubstantial. Richard got to his feet, then was hit dead-on by something. With a shout he fell to his knees and began wrestling with something he couldn't see. He yelled, "Run! Get out of here!"

Dan ran-walked backward. Cecile scrambled out of his arms and raised her hands to Heaven, summoning the forces of Baron Samedi, King of voodoo, to aid her. Rushing winds gathered between her palms and she sent them to Richard to aid him.

Then the door slammed shut, separating her and Dan from Richard.

"Richard!" she shouted, pounding on the door with her fists. Dan began to chant as he worked the doorknob, straining to get the door open. The invisible hounds scratched and bayed on the other side, and the door bowed toward her and Dan.

There was a crash, and then the door burst open and Richard shot across the transom. Dan slammed the door behind him.

Richard shouted, "Keep going!"

His face was cut and bleeding, and a hank of his hair had been yanked from his skull; he looked partially scalped.

The three raced down the hallway toward the stairs, Cecile in the lead, Dan next, and Richard bringing up the rear. Dan yelled to her, "Upstairs!"

Halfway there, mist began to gather around their ankles; it was dark brown, hot, and poisonous. It attacked them, swirling around their legs. Blisters broke out on her shins and thighs, and Cecile cried out, shocked by the pain.

Dan grabbed her hand and yanked her toward the stairs, pushing her in front of him and propelling her upstairs. She stumbled several times, but he gave her no chance to right herself. He kept pushing and pushing until she reached the landing. Richard charged up close behind.

"My room!" Dan shouted. "Go, Cecile!"

Speaking her name was like breaking a spell; as she raced down the hall she began to babble, saying, "What's happening? What's going on?" even though she knew: They were finally being attacked. By the Supreme Coven or Michael Deveraux, she could not say. She had anticipated this for a long time, waited for it, braced herself for it.

I finally let down my guard, and now, it's here.

But how? How did they find us?

She threw open the door to Dan's bedroom and ran inside. The other two came in right behind her and slammed the door.

Dreamcatchers hung from the ceiling, and feathers and bones; they "whipped about as the three of them ran for the wall opposite the door and flattened themselves against it. She prayed to her loa and Dan called upon Raven, his totem, while Richard pushed Dan's dresser in front of the door. The house was booming as if someone were bowling with cannonballs, and the door was rattling practically off the hinges.

That was when the window shattered, and an enormous black falcon soared into the room.

"Look out!" Dan cried, throwing himself over Cecile in a shielding embrace. They flattened against the floor, he with his weight on top of her, as the shards flew in all directions and the bird screamed with pain.

She hazarded a glance at it, peering through the jumble of his arms. It had been aiming at Richard, but it had narrowly missed him. He had ducked, and the bird had pinioned itself in the wall. Blood was gushing from the bird's beak and it was struggling frantically to get loose. It flapped its wings and batted its head, but still it stayed stuck, and it was rapidly losing blood.

Dan was murmuring words at it; she joined in, in French, willing it to die and for its essence of hate to return to its master. Still, the bird thrashed, flapping its wings.

Richard picked up the brass lamp on top of the dresser and began slamming it against the bird's body.

It screamed like a human being; he kept hitting it, with a strength Cecile hadn't realized Richard possessed, until the creature hung limp from its beak. Then it detached from the wall and slid to the floor, dead.

That was when the imps started pouring in through the broken window. Hundreds of them, tiny, scaly creatures that jittered and cackled as they crawled over the shards, mindless of the injuries they inflicted on themselves. Some lost limbs, some taloned claws, and still they jabbered and clattered, dropping onto the floor like cockroaches or rats, and scrambling toward Dan and Cecile. That was when Cecile sent out a mental message: Holly, help us! We're under attack!

She had no idea if the girl would hear them.

But Dan shifted his attention toward her and said, 'Yes. Good, Cecile.'

She felt his own vibration as he joined her.

Help, Holly!

Save us!

We have been found!

The Tri-Covenant: London, Yule

It was finally Yule. Sasha smiled at the two pairings who had volunteered to put themselves into thrall-- the Lady to the Lord--in order multiply their magical powers. As an official of the Mother Coven, she had the ability to perform the rite, and she knew that now, more than ever, those she traveled with had need of more power. The forces of the Supreme Coven were gathering all around them, and she knew, in her heart, that their days of safety were numbered.

So she stood on the night of the full moon before the door to Westminster Abbey with two couples bound together with herbed ropes, ready to slice their palms so that their blood might mingle.

One of the pairs was Nicole and Philippe, which did not surprise her. But the second had made her smile wistfully for lost days of innocent love: Tommy Nagai had declared his love for Amanda, and she, apparently, returned it.

Life is full of surprises, she told herself Many of them sweet and winsome.

But as with life, so with the ritual: She had assumed that Jeraud would agree to accept Holly in thrall, and he had refused.

"My blood is tainted," he had told his mother. "I am a Deveraux."

That was exactly the point, Sasha had tried to explain to him. He was a Deveraux.

Ashen, Holly had absorbed the blow of his refusal as best she could, but it was clear she had not been prepared for what was, ultimately, a rejection of the most intimate connection witch and warlock could undergo. She loved Jer, plain and simple. And she had assumed that he would consent to place her in thrall. After all, she had braved much to rescue him--the enmity of the Mother Coven, her own life, and that of her other loved ones.

But all Jer said when he refused was, "I am a Deveraux."

So Holly stood beside Sasha, acting as her assistant while she bound the ropes around the wrists of the others. Nicole and Philippe were filled with passion-- Sasha could feel it--while Amanda and Tommy were newer, shyer, more childlike with each other.

"By the Goddess, I charge thee, turn to each other in times of peril," Sasha intoned. "By her mercy, draw strength from each other, the Lady to the Lord, the Lord to the Lady."

"Blessed be," the onlookers intoned. Alonzo made the sign of the cross over them while Sasha dipped oak leaves in water and sprinkled them. "May the Lord draw magical blessings from the Lady, and may the Lady do the same."

"Blessed be."

Holly choked back tears as Jer stood in the shadow beyond the reach of me Lady Moon. His scarred face was hidden from her view, and yet, she had memorized each rivulet of flesh, the way his eyes pulled downward as if his face were melting. Her heart understood why he had refused to place himself in thrall with her, and yet that same heart was breaking.

It's our turn, she mentally told him.

But she understood the danger as well--what if Isabeau took possession of her, and demanded Jean's death? What if Jean finally exacted his revenge?

And yet, her yearning for him was unbearable.

Jer, I would die for you. I would forsake all these others for you. And she meant it too. Goddess help me, I mean it.

He kept his face turned away from hers, as if by looking at her he might weaken. So she kept staring at him, hoping to make eye contact.

But through the long ritual, he kept his face averted.

His heart averted.

I love you, she called out to him.

And she knew he answered, I know.

She endured her pain during the ritual, as Amanda and Tommy and Nicole and Philippe entered into a union more profound and intimate than Christian marriage: Their magical essences were united, and they were, in a sense, one combined source of magical power. She saw the light in their eyes, saw the soft glow of magic surrounding them, and she could hardly bear to be in their presence.

Then Sasha announced, "It is done. They are in thrall."

And Nicole and Amanda both gasped and said in unison, "Seattle is under attack!"

It was true. Back in the safe house, Rose turned on the news. Seattle, in the state of Washington, was under siege. No one knew what precisely was going on, but floods rushed through the town; squares of city blocks were on fire; and people were being devoured by "packs of dogs" the likes of which the city had never seen. Bodies by the score were being discovered, both on land and washing up on the beaches. And numerous eyewitnesses had claimed that the dead were walking----

"It's Michael," Holly angrily announced. She didn't need scrying stones and runes to tell her that, although she did consult them. "He wants us back there."

Though I have no idea why.

"What about San Francisco?" Amanda demanded, frantic about her father. Silvana was equally worried about Cecile. But the news was only about Seattle. While they watched, Jer came up to Holly.

As if to underscore his reasons for not joining her in thrall, he let her see his hideous face. If only Joel were alive, he could probably do something to heal him, she thought bitterly. The Black Fire that had burned him was magic, and it would take incredibly strong healing magic to even begin to heal the damage done to him. Alas, healing was not one of her gifts. Cahors seem better equipped to inflict pain and suffering than to heal. She did her best not to react, but her stomach churned at the sight of him. As if he read her expression, he gave her a sour smile.

Then he said loudly, "I'd like to propose that we three covens unite. We'll be a Tri-Covenate, and there's very little stronger than that."

Sasha came over, listening carefully. She nodded at his words and said to Holly, "He's right. We have your coven, the Coven of White Magic, and the remnants of Jer's Rebel Coven--he and Kari."

At this, Kari took a breath. She said, "I wouldn't be here if I could help it," she said a bit sullenly.

"I know." Jer put a hand on her shoulder. When she visibly shuddered, he removed it with a sigh. "But you're still part of my coven. I haven't released you."

Philippe and the other members of his coven shared a silent look before he answered, "The Coven of White Magic agrees to this union."

"Even though I'm in thrall to you, Philippe, I'm still part of Holly's coven," Nicole said.

"Yes," Sasha agreed. "One of the three Ladies of the Lily."

She pointed to the scar in Nicole's palm. As Nicole held out her hand, Amanda walked to her and put her hand beside her sister's. Holly joined them, and together, the imprint of a lily was formed in their upright palms.

"When we place it together, we make very strong magic," Amanda said, smiling at them both.

Nicole lowered her gaze and sighed--whether out of guilt that she had abandoned the other two, or with resignation that she couldn't outrun her obligation, Holly didn't know.

A rush of pity shot through her for Nicole, and Kari--for them all, in fact.

It would have been so nice to grow up innocent of the Coventry world, she thought. To not know there was power like this. To not need it.

"Let us go outside, then, so the Lady Moon will shine down on us," Sasha urged.

They did as she bade, finding a place behind Rose's flat where they could perform the ritual unnoticed.

Holly stood, a little anxious at the thought of binding her coven to the others so formally. Not the kind of binding ritual I was hoping to do tonight, she thought, looking at Jer. Sasha opened her arms. "Let the leaders come forward."

Holly, Philippe, and Jer stood in a triangle, each with his or her hands on the shoulders of the others. Sasha walked slowly to each of them, picking up each hand, slicing the palm and replacing it on a shoulder. In the end the blood of each was upon a shoulder of the other two. Rose took a silk cord and wove it in and out of their legs, binding the three of them together.

Then Sasha bade each person stand behind the leader of his or her coven. Rose pricked their fingers with a pin, and they each squeezed a drop of blood onto the head of their leader.

Sasha spoke, her voice reverberating with authority and power: "Now these three lives and these three fates are bound together as are these three covens. Each High Priest or Priestess bears the responsibility for their own coven. The blood of each of their covenates is on their heads. Each High Priest or High Priestess also bears the burdens of the other two. You place hands on shoulders to support and to guide one another. Your burdens are theirs as your blood is now theirs. Your legs are bound so that you may not turn from one another in adversity, never flee from your brothers and sisters, but will stand beside them to protect them. You are three."

Sasha placed her hand on Jer's head. "You are fire."

Holly winced in unison with him as he heard the word. Fire had nearly been his destruction. Fire had cost him so much. How then, could he be fire?

Sasha moved to place her hand on Philippe's head. "You are earth."

Then it was Holly's turn. Sasha placed her hand upon her head. "You are water."

Dread filled Holly. No! How can I be water, the thing that destroys those I love? As she thought back upon all that she had done, though, the "sacrifices" she had made, she could see the truth of it. The pain wrenched her heart.

Sasha removed her hand and continued. "You three stand in need of a fourth. Let the Goddess dwell with you and fulfill the circle. Let the Goddess be the very air that you breathe."

A chill wind whipped suddenly through Holly and the others, cold enough to take her breath away. Then, as quickly as it had come, it was gone. The Goddess has spoken.

Sasha held out her arms and sent beams of magical energy into the center of the triangle; they filled the space between Holly, Jer, and Philippe, until Holly sensed Jer's magical essence, and Philippe's, too, and allowed hers to mingle with theirs. The result was an increased magical presence, much greater than the sum of its parts, and she wondered, Is this what thrall is like? Is it even better? Because this is pretty wonderful.

As if in answer to her question, Philippe glanced lovingly at Nicole, and she at him, and the moment was so private that Holly began to cry.

Sasha whispered in her ear, "Someday, Holly, I promise."

But Jer overheard her and looked at his mother steadily, offering no such words of encouragement. Holly had not felt so alone since her parents had died on the river ... at the hands of a Deveraux.

Maybe he is his father's son, she told herself, which was a foolish thing to think, but she knew what she meant: Maybe he was more Michael's son than Sasha's, more evil than good.

"It is done," Sasha declared, and the energies that crackled in the middle of the triangle dissipated. Holly let her hands fall off of Jer's and Philippe's shoulders and she stepped back, shaken.

"We need to get back to the States," Nicole proclaimed. "We have so many people to protect."

Holly nodded. Then she reached out a hand to Jer.

But it started to snow, and he took advantage of the curtain of white to pretend that he didn't see her outstretched hand.

As before, the Mother Coven offered their private jet, but no other support. No soldiers, no weapons, nothing in the battle against evil that was raging in Seattle.

As soon as they alighted from the plane, the Tri-Covenant was under siege. The weather was horrible-- thunder and lightning, incredibly heavy rains that turned the streets to frothing seas,

chaotic with an undertow of cars, newspaper kiosks, street signs, and even streetlights. As the waters poured down the hills of Seattle, they began to drag wide-eyed bodies with them, and the corpses of innocent animals caught in the magical onslaught.

Worse were the fires raging all over the city, which the rain couldn't dampen. The flames soared into the sky like demonic aurora borealis; the tongues of fire scorched vast skyscrapers and entire city blocks; there was so much devastation that the news stations had stopped taking count, apparently deciding that they might as well wait until it was all done, and the death and devastation would no longer be a moving target but a quantifiable tragedy.

As Holly and the others tried to grab a cab or even a bus to the Anderson home, they couldn't believe the throngs of panicked crowds trying to catch flights out of the city. The airport was jammed, and people were so terrified that they put their humanity on hold: They lost their sense of accountability, and forgot that once this was over, they would have to live with their own actions. No one could think that far. No one could think at all.

"We're all going to Hell!" a collared priest informed Holly as he pushed past her and the others as they went down an escalator.

Another man said, "We're in Hell, brother!"

Staring at the others, Holly walked through the automatic sliding-glass door and stepped into the storm.

Wind and rain pulled at her, the air howling like a banshee. She caught at her coat, huddling against the elements as Alonzo struggled to hold his umbrella over her. She thought of her parents' funeral--how lightning had struck a tree--and she felt a thick, cold loathing for Michael Deveraux that she knew would only be lost upon his death.

By the Goddess, I will kill him before the next moon, she vowed, her hands clenched.

And then the loathing grew, and Holly thought she would lose another shred of her humanity, another piece of her soul. She knew it, and she was glad.

Witches in my position can't afford the luxury of softness. I have to be hard, so others don't have to be. Jer's worried that he's too dark, too evil to ally himself with me. He doesn't even know evil, the things I've done to protect my people.

And in that moment, Holly allied herself with the darkness. She felt herself yield to it, go over to it, and there was one last instant of regret.

I will never know the pleasures of ordinary people again, she realized.

Jer must have sensed her capitulation. He glanced at her and murmured, "Holly, no."

"You could have saved me," she flung at him.

Then she turned her back on him and began looking for a taxi.

They grabbed two minivan cabs, and the drive into Seattle was like a nightmare. People ran in mindless terror. Buildings burned. And the torrents of water washed down the streets and gutters, floodwaters such as God had called down when Noah had built the ark.

"Look, Holly," Amanda said, pointing upward through the cab's front window.

Huge flocks of birds flew across the fiery, rain-soaked skies. They were falcons.

"All this can't be because of Michael," Holly murmured. "He's not that powerful."

"He's one of the most powerful warlocks who ever lived," Jer countered, seated in the cab beside Holly.

She turned and glared at him. "You sound proud of him."

"I don't mean to," he told her honestly, "but maybe I can't help it."

The cab driver was courageous, winding through the city at a snail's pace because there was so much chaos and danger that he couldn't have gone any faster if he had wanted to. He muttered from time to time, stroking an icon on the dashboard of the vehicle as though its presence could protect him. "You must be the only people coming into the city," the driver noted.

"We have business to take care of," Holly answered.

They were lucky to have gotten the cab, let alone two. Indeed, these were the only two taxis that had been willing to drive as far as the Anderson home. The price for the courage of the two drivers was not coming cheap, though. Holly had paid each driver five hundred dollars before they would leave the airport terminal.

Behind them, the other cab, transporting Nicole, Philippe, Alonzo, Armand, Pablo, and Kari, blared its horn as a whitish-blue figure lurched in front of its headlights. The walking dead, Holly noted. Michael has created himself an army.

Thus it was that she wasn't surprised that when the taxis dropped them off at the Anderson home, it was under attack by zombies. The two minivans roared away, careening wildly down the street.

Huge sections of the covered porch had been pried away, and the large chunks of wood boards and posts were in the hands of the dead, who were destroying the ground-floor windows and doors in an effort to get in. She saw in the moonlight and firelight their slack faces, their unseeing eyes, and she thanked whatever manifestation of the Goddess that had inspired her and the others to send Richard, Tante Cecile, and Dan Carter out of town. As it was, it was almost more than Amanda and Nicole could bear, watching their home being taken apart piece by piece.

Like crazy whirligigs, falcons careened overhead, squawking and chorusing a cacophony of triumph. Their blank, beady eyes bored into Holly's as she began to lob fireballs at them, making her mark more often than not. Jer and Armand joined her; still, the birds flew, increasing in numbers, until the night sky was filled with them. They buzzed the house, swooping down on the Tri-Covenates, their talons gleaming and their beaks sharp as they attempted to rip and tear at the humans on the ground.

Then, directly in front of Holly, the earth began to quiver, and as she watched, hands and heads emerged from the mud, and the dead began to walk. Movement caught the corner of her eye, and she turned to look..... down the street.

"Oh, my God, Nicole, don't look!" she begged her cousin, but it was too late.

The emaciated corpse of Nicole and Amanda's mother dragged itself into view. There was so little flesh left that the skeleton lurched awkwardly like a puppet on strings, a creature whose arms and legs were far too large for its body. Her face was half-eaten away by worms, and one eye was missing. The other was milky white.

Nicole began screaming. Philippe grabbed her to his chest and held her. Tommy did the same to Amanda.

Then Philippe lobbed a fireball at the hideous thing and, despite the buckets of rain, it ignited like a piece of paper and burned down within seconds. The bones were charred; there was nothing else left, and the remains fluttered to the mud and rested there.

There is no reason to be here, Holly realized. Nothing to be gained.

Then a man she didn't know ran up the street. He waved his hands wildly over his head; he was bellowing with terror. He zoomed over to Alonzo and flung his arms around the man, shouting, "You've got to help me! It's my daughter! She's in trouble!"

And Holly understood that Michael Deveraux was going to make it very, very difficult for them here ... and perhaps even more important, it was going to be nearly impossible for them to leave.

The waters of Elliott Bay churned and frothed as monsters came forth. Giant squid, schools of large, biting fish, and more of the enormous sea creatures that had ripped Eddie to shreds emerged from the restless waters. News helicopters and Coast Guard boats combed the area with searchlights; no one could believe what they were seeing.

Holly stood beside Jer on the cliffs, watching the unfolding nightmare, and she wanted more than anything to lean against him and feel his strength. But he held himself aloof from her, and she had to handle it all on her own. She remembered how the last time she had stood on these cliffs, she had commanded a phantom army. But now, she was drained; there was nothing in her that could command anything. And Isabeau was not with her.

She looked up at Jer, who was wearing a ski mask, and said, "Is Jean with you?"

Wordlessly he shook his head. His eyes were dull, and she thought she detected an air of shame about him. After all, his father was responsible for everything that was going on around them.

"I don't know why he isn't," he said finally. "The Deveraux love this kind of insanity."

"So do the Cahors," she said miserably.

He began to reach out to her--she saw the gesture plainly--and then he pulled back his hand. They stood side by side, yet they couldn't have been further apart.

He said, "I'm sorry, Holly. That my father is this kind of man. That I'm ..."

"You're not," she said, laying a hand on his forearm. Though he wore a thick black sweater, he shifted under her touch, as if she could see how hideous he looked. "Jer, you're good."

"I'm not." She saw the pain in his eyes. It was the only part of his face that she could see. She realized it was a miracle that his eyes hadn't been burned out of his skull. "And," he said slowly, "neither are you. Are you, Holly? You've paid a price to keep these people alive."

She sagged. "Yes," she admitted. "I have. Can you tell, Jer? Can you see it?"

"I can feel it. There's a coldness around you that didn't used to be there."

It was her turn to apologize. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not." He paused and added, "You're not so untouchable, so innocent. Before, you seemed out of my reach."

"But not now?" she asked, her voice husky. He shook his head silently.

That gave her pause. I wonder if Isabeau influenced me to lose part of my soul, she wondered, because she had already lost part of hers. Murdering her husband took away a large chunk. But she had committed many other sins. Murder for her and her mother was a way of life.

"You know why he's doing this, don't you?" he asked her.

"Because he's an evil bastard?" she replied.

"To distract you. To keep you here."

She caught her breath. "To keep me from going to San Francisco?"

"Yes," he said. "Cecile, Dan, and your uncle." He shook his head at the carnage unfolding before them, then looked back at her. "Divide and conquer. That's an old Deveraux game."

"I should go there," she realized. "Some of us should. And some of us should stay here," he told her. "He'll keep the stakes high, try to take advantage by destroying all of Seattle if he has to.

"Holly caught her breath. "Is he capable of that?"

Hidden in the ski mask, Jer pursed his lips together. "Oh, yes," he said solemnly. "He certainly is." Then his mouth curved into a sharp, bitter smile. "But I'll give him a run for his money. What's the saying? 'The apple never falls far from the tree.'"

"Please, Be careful," she breathed. --He shook his head, and his eyes burned into hers. "No way."

Then he was reaching for her, pulling her close. His lips were crushing hers. She groaned in her soul and clung to him, needing him more than she had ever needed anyone or anything.

Then, just as she began to lose herself, he let her go and stepped back. "Leave me," he said roughly.

She opened her mouth to protest and realized it was useless. She choked down a sob and turned away.

This might be the last time I ever see him alive, she realized.

She looked over her shoulder. He was staring at her.

She caught her breath and half raised her hand. Then he deliberately turned his back and walked in the opposite direction, toward the bay. Kari saw him coming and held out a hand to him, defiantly glancing in Holly's direction.

Jer took her offered hand; his own hand was gloved. They fell to talking earnestly, gesturing toward the bay. Planning strategy, perhaps.

Stuffing her hands in her pockets, the most powerful witch alive slunk away, feeling as ridiculous as a lovesick twelve-year-old.

EIGHT WHITE OPAL

We dance beneath the sun-drenched sky
And worship the day as it passes by
The sun renews and gives us life
And guides us through our daily strife
Cursed sun, go away Arise, oh,
Goddess, and kill the day
Take the light's wretched lies
And hide them within midnight skies

Holly and Silvana: San Francisco

Silvana insisted on coming with Holly, and she consented. Frankly, she wished they could have brought more of their coven members with them, but they had more than enough to do in Seattle, and Holly wanted to try for a surprise attack if and when they needed to.

Getting a flight out of Seattle had been an act of the Goddess. Magic alone had gotten them through the crowds, who were turning on one another like caged animals. And when the rest of the flights were grounded because the weather became just too severe, magic convinced the air traffic controllers and the pilot that their flights could take off safely. And, thanks to magic, it had.

On their flight to Oakland, which was a more convenient airport, Holly performed a finder's spell in order to locate the house where Dan, Tante Cecile, and Uncle Richard had been living. By tacit agreement, she had not tried to find them before now. Ignorance would serve as their protection.

But now, on the plane, she saw their house and she was alarmed at what else she saw: imps and falcons descending on them, tearing out their hearts and setting the house on fire.

Goddess, prevent this, she begged. Prevent this, Hecate, and I will do and be whatever you want.

They landed, and she magically arranged for the woman at the car rental to "see" that Holly was twenty-one on her driver's license, thus making her old enough to rent a car. She also "provided" herself with enough funds to cover the fees, even though she had used up all her money securing the plane tickets. She saw Silvana's small reaction of displeasure and silently challenged her to protest. Many witches would condemn her for creating wealth--it wasn't done-- but she didn't care.

This is about survival, not manners.

While Silvana stared at the map and tried to guide them, Holly prayed to the Goddess to give her a sense of direction. The fog was thick as soaking wet wool, and she realized that in the year she had been away, she had forgotten how to drive in San Francisco weather.

A year, she thought dully as they crept along. I feel like I've never lived here. I feel like a stranger.

Seattle has become my home.

Silvana sat beside her, murmuring spells, and to Holly's relief, the fog thinned. She looked over at Silvana and said, "Thanks." She flushed and said, "I'm not thinking clearly. I could have done that, lifted the fog."

Silvana tried to smile, but she couldn't manage it. "Just get us there, okay?" She looked out the window. "Oh, God, Holly, what if something's happened?"

Holly pursed her lips together. There was no good answer to that, and she didn't feel like mouthing some meaningless words of comfort.

Dismayed, Silvana glanced at her, then back at the window. "Hang on, Tante," she whispered.

Holly thought, I've grown so cold. Am I cold enough to cool the blood of a Deveraux? As she drove on, the pale moon trailed after them in a sky of clouds and mists.

Then she turned to Silvana and said, "I forgot. We have to cross the Bay Bridge."

Silvana regarded her steadily. "You're thinking about the curse. That those close to you die by drowning."

Holly nodded. She looked to the side of the road, narrowed her eyes, and pulled over. They sat in front of a Burger King. "Get out," she said. "I'm not taking you."

"What?" Silvana frowned at her. "I'm not taking you across the bridge." Holly pulled on the emergency brake and crossed her arms, the engine idling.

Frowning, Silvana reached for the brake. Holly flicked her fingers in her direction, zapping her with a tiny bolt of magical energy.

"Ow!" Silvana cried. "Holly, stop it!"

"Get out." Holly raised her chin. "I mean it, Silvana."

Something in her look persuaded the other girl that she was all business. Silvana pulled back slightly and said, "Holly, we're talking about my aunt; she's like my mother."

"I won't ever get to her if I have to save you from drowning. For all we know, the bridge will collapse or I'll drive over the side. You're staying here." She gestured to Silvana's purse. "You have some money. And a cell phone. If you get tired, go to a motel. I'll call you when it's safe."

Silvana stared at her. "You're serious."

"Get out of the car or I'll make you get out."

Her beaded cornrows clacked together as Silvana yanked open the door and got out. Angrily she slammed the door.

Without so much as a good-bye, Holly took off the brake and peeled out.

Grimly she drove on, watching for road signs, looking up for falcons, to the sides of the road for other evidence that Michael Deveraux was waiting for her. Maybe he thought I'd come in on a broom, she thought hotly. Everyone keeps telling me how powerful I am, but I don't know how to use that power. I don't know that many spells.

I need help.

She kept going, the fog nearly impenetrable as she remembered to use only her low beams. She went through the tunnel, and then she moved with the traffic onto the bridge.

A deep groaning sound seemed to emanate from one of the steel girders as she passed it, and the hair on the back of her neck stood on end.

"There is no one around me that I care about, all right?" she said aloud, as if she had to address the curse like a person. "So don't even think about it."

With the rest of the traffic, she traveled over the bridge, her face prickling with anxiety as she made it across; her nervousness did not lessen even after she got to the other side. If anything, it increased. Her intuition was guiding her to fork to the right, and she knew the finder's spell was working. The longer she drove, the closer she was getting to the epicenter of whatever bad magic Michael Deveraux was wreaking on people she cared about very much.

Those I love are back in Seattle, battling dark magic indeed....Then she felt the house rather than saw it, and realized that it was cloaked from the gaze of the rest of the neighborhood. She murmured a Spell of Seeing and it rippled into view: a small house on a rise, set apart, separated from a group of houses lower down the street by what appeared to be storage sheds and rows of oleander bushes. The rooftop was glowing with green energy and as she pulled the car to a stop and opened her door, she heard the shattering of glass.

She climbed out of the car. Then a wild wind whipped up, smashing into her and flattening her against the car as the door slammed shut. She moved her hands and murmured a spell, and the wind separated on the other side of her body as she moved away from the car and began to run to the structure.

Glass was flying everywhere, which her spell deflected. There was loud pounding and the rushing of wind.

She took the steps to the porch by twos, hordes of tiny imps streaming around her feet like tiny horses on stampede. Perhaps recognizing her as the enemy, they began to clump around her ankles, scratching and biting her, and she cried out and hurtled a fireball toward her foot, careful not to harm herself as she took the majority of her attackers out.

She flicked a wrist at the front door and it opened with the burst of a howling wind from the other side. She was pelted with dozen of bodies of dead imps, which she deflected with a protection spell; they hit an invisible barrier in front of her, dropping to the stoop and piling up. With a flick of her wrist the pile shifted to the right, and she shouted, "Dan! Tante Cecile? Uncle Richard?"

She could barely hear herself over the noise and confusion, much less anyone else. She raced across the threshold and stood in the foyer. The ghostly baying of Hell Hounds warned her of their presence; she flung herself against the wall as their toenails clattered on the wooden floor.

She warded herself, placing another barrier between herself and the hounds, and felt a spray of hot breath before the spell took hold.

There was a loud crash, followed by a shout on the second story of the house. Holly turned and raced up the stairs, to find her uncle in the hallway, swinging an ax at a large, scaly demon sprouting a crown of horns from its head. Vaguely human-shaped, it stood on two clawed feet and swung at Richard with long, taloned hands. It was slathering and drooling.

Richard lunged and swung his ax, then ducked to a squatting position as the demon swung. Then he swung again from the awkward position and, this time, sliced the demon across its bony kneecaps. The creature roared and staggered backward; Richard pressed his advantage and sprang at the monster, pushing it to the ground, where he swung the ax again and brought it across the demon's neck. Its head rolled off, and green blood sprayed the hallway.

Sickened, Holly ran to her uncle's side and threw her arms around him.

"Holly!" he cried, embracing her. "Thank God! Where are the girls?"

"Seattle," she said. She pulled away. "What's going on?"

"We think it's Michael." He pointed to the opened doorway a little farther down the hall. "Cecile and Dan are in there."

She nodded and barreled into the room with Richard following behind.

It was total chaos. More demons of many varieties and monsters she had never encountered before were overwhelming the two magic users, who had crouched behind a dresser that had been pushed into the middle of the room. They had shielded it with energy, but Holly could see that the field was weakening.

Cecile turned her head, saw Holly, and shouted. "Thank goodness! Holly, stop them!"

Holly lifted her arms and opened her mouth.

And that was when she froze.

Cecile frowned. "Holly?"

Her mind was a blank. She couldn't think of a single spell, couldn't feel magic anywhere in her being. What's wrong with me?

"Holly!" Cecile shouted. She waved her hands in her direction. "Have you been bewitched?"

I don't know, she thought, bewildered.

Then she had a sense of something crowding inside her mind, of a presence like a shadow looming over her; although there was nothing there when she glanced left and right. She was cold; she began shivering as goose bumps broke along her arms.

Then the coldness slipped inside her, as if she had swallowed a glassful of ice.

Before her stood Isabeau, perhaps more solidly than ever before, as if she was not quite a part of the material world, but more than she had been.

Not actually before me, Holly realized, but in my mind's eye.

A veiled woman stood beside Holly's ancestress. Hecate, Holly thought.

Imperiously, the Goddess bowed her head, acknowledging her name in her incarnation as the supreme deity of witches.

We can help you, Isabeau said. Michael Deveraux has sent these creatures to harass and kill you. Without your witch sisters, you are not enough of a match for him.

"Holly, help us!" Dan yelled at her. "Damn it!"

As Holly blinked, it was as if she could see the room through Isabeau and Hecate; she was aware that the battle was escalating, and that her side was losing.

You want more of me, Holly accused Isabeau. Want me to make another sacrifice, ensnare myself more deeply in Hecate's service ... have you made some sort of bargain with her yourself?

Isabeau made no answer, but a smile played at the corners of her mouth, and her eyes glinted. There was a huge blast, followed by another. Holly looked through the two women to see three enormous black shadows burst through the walls of the room. They were at least eight feet tall, and covered with scales; their eyes glowed red, and their hands ended in talons like scythes.

They stood for a moment in a row, and then they hurtled themselves toward Holly, Dan, and Cecile.

Without thinking, Holly raised her hands and thundered, "Begone!"

The room exploded. Flame, whirlwind, a rushing torrent of water and stone ... all cycloned around Holly as energy shot through her body, making her convulse. Her eyes rolled back, and she shouted in a strange language she did not know; she was tumbling end over end in the chaos, every part of her sizzling. Her hair was on fire; her eyelashes danced with sparks. Her teeth smoked. Blue flames crawled and danced along her skin.

Someone screamed her name, over and over and over.

The shadows grabbed at her, roaring in fury talons sliced at her, and missed and Holly woke up on her hands and knees in wet sand. She raised her head and opened her eyes.

It was night, and she was on a beach. Tante Cecile lay beside her on her back Dan lay on his side facing her, surf washing over his body. Holly looked around and spotted Uncle Richard draped over the hood of a car in a parking lot approximately twenty feet behind her. He lifted his head and regarded her.

Slowly the others moved, Cecile sitting gingerly upright, and Dan rolled over again onto his stomach, giving a short shout as a wave crashed over his back. Then he pushed himself back onto his haunches and awkwardly lurched to his feet.

"What did you do?" Cecile asked Holly, her voice cracking as she stared at her. Her eyes were wide.

"I don't know," Holly replied honestly. But whatever it was, I did it by myself, she thought with wondering satisfaction. I didn't sacrifice anything to the Goddess.

She rose to her feet. "Let's go," she ordered the others.

"Where?" Cecile asked her. "Back to Seattle?"

"The hospital first," Holly said. "To Barbara."

"Of course." Cecile stood. She gazed at Holly and said, "You've claimed your power. I can see it. It's crackling around you."

Holly glanced down at her hands. A blue fluorescence gleamed along her flesh, then gradually dissipated. Were Isabeau and Hecate blocking me somehow, so that I would have to ask the Goddess for help? she wondered. And so I'd keep making sacrifices to her?

She lowered her hands. "You're right," she told Cecile.

After using a pay phone to call a cab, Richard rented a car. Holly connected with Silvana, who ordered takeout that was ready by the time they picked her up. Silvana and Tante Cecile embraced tearfully. Holly was pleased by the look of gratitude on Silvana's face when she looked at Holly, but even more pleased by the forgiveness in her eyes. Not that I need anyone's forgiveness, Holly thought, feeling suddenly defensive.

They devoured hamburgers and fries en route to Marin County General. Although it was well past midnight, it was easy for Holly to "convince" the night nurse to lead her to Barbara Davis-Chin's room.

"I need to warn you, she's comatose," the woman--whose name badge read addy--said cautiously. "She won't know you're here."

Holly nodded absently, her gaze fixed on the half-opened door. It was painted a soft green. In the center of it hung a clear plastic rectangle containing a manila chart affixed to a clipboard. The chart read, davischin, b. Holly had a flash of a mental image of her mother hurrying down the corridors of the emergency room with an armload of similar charts, consulting the names of her patients as she approached their beds. It had always been so amazing; her mom took care of people for such a short time, and yet she made certain she knew their names, bonded with them, focused on them.

I miss her so much, Holly thought with a sharp pang. Then Holly pushed open the door, and nearly fainted.

Barbara Davis-Chin lay in her bed as Holly remembered her from her last visit: pale and thin and hooked up to machines. But this time, a nightmare sat on her chest.

It was a hunched, evilly smiling creature with pointed ears and a face as sharp and angular as a skeleton key; it was the color of dirty coins, and covered with filthy gray hair.

Its fist was sunk deep into Barbara's chest, and Holly could see that its filthy fingers were socketed around Barbara's beating heart, squeezing poison into it from its own veins and arteries, which pulsed and rivuleted on the exterior of its body.

All the while it cackled maniacally, and Holly realized that no one could hear it except her.

She thought of running back to the waiting room where Silvana and the others were waiting, then steeled herself to turn to the nurse, who was still bewitched and obviously did not see or hear what Holly saw and heard, and say, "You can go back to the nurses' station now."

"Yes," the woman said.

As the nurse drifted away, Holly steadily walked toward the creature. It jutted its bottom lip toward her--it was a brilliant red, as if it were bleeding--and began to growl.

Holly began to intone a protection spell, then realized that each time she prayed to the Goddess, she had to sacrifice a tiny part of her soul; she wondered if this was the price other witches paid, or if this was a cost she bore alone. But knowing it, she kept her mouth shut and decided to deal with the imp--if that was what it was--on her own terms.

She moved toward it; it smiled at her, completely unruffled by her presence.

Holly stared at it, her focus centering on it; then, in a strange juxtaposition of her senses, she was aware of the thrumming of Barbara's pulse, the loud drumming of her heartbeat--kathum, kathum, then she was a sight, not a person, careening down the arm and then the fist of the creature, slamming inside Barbara's heart-- The heart of darkness; this is the center of the evil, of the dreams, of the sickness that is killing her..... all around Holly floated nightmare shapes and tortured landscapes; she whirled around in a circle with her mouth open screaming in silence-- STOP IT!

And then she was back at the doorway, staring at the imp, which grinned back at her and then chattered happily, drawing Barbara's heart clean out of her body and displaying it to Holly. She thought of Hecate, the dead familiar, and how Bast had presented the dead falcon to her and her cousins as a trophy; only now, it was Barbara's diseased heart being presented to her; her heart that was bleeding and in such misery--STOP IT!

The creature disappeared ... but Holly sensed its malevolent presence. Even if she could no longer see it, it was still torturing Barbara.

She rushed to the waiting room, all eyes upon her. "We need to get Barbara out of here."

Uncle Richard ceased his pacing and fixed his eyes on her. "Sit, rest, I'll take care of the paperwork." He took off

She sank into a chair and accepted the coffee that was offered her by Tante Cecile. She was tired, and very worried. The lines were being drawn ... across living bodies and through living hearts.

This is a deadly game Michael Deveraux is playing, she thought. And I can't afford to lose it.

Wearily she closed her eyes.

How many generations of Cathers and Deveraux have kept this up? It's got to end. We've got to win.

Johnstown, Pennsylvania: May 31, 1889, 2 p.m.

The lake had risen two feet overnight. The dam at South Fork groaned against the weight of the extra water. The dam was old and in need of repair. No one seemed to care, though. Everyone expected the dam to go on doing what it had always done. Every year after the rains, people would scratch their heads and marvel that it still stood, but they did nothing to help it in its battle to contain the lake.

Fourteen miles below the dam the town of Johnstown sat in a flood plain. The good citizens occasionally made rumblings against the owners of the dam, but the rumblings meant nothing. They were just a way to pass the time, something to speak of besides the weather.

And so, year after year, the town rumbled and the dam groaned and nothing was done. The water pressed harder, the lake rose higher, and in the dam a tiny fracture became a crack. The crack had been noticed, and several men now struggled to relieve the pressure on the dam. They tried, among other things, to open a new channel to allow the water someplace else to go. Their efforts were too little, too late, though. The dam groaned as it tried to hold back a wall of water sixty feet deep.

Claire Cathers was happy. The thought took her by surprise as she was sweeping her front porch. She stopped and leaned for a moment on the handle of her broom as she stared idly out into the

wet street. It was nearly sunset, and the rain had let up for a few minutes. A couple more hours and her husband and daughter would be home.

She smiled at the thought of Ginny. The little girl was beautiful, headstrong, and passionate--a Cathers through and through. Of course, that was to be expected. Cathers blood always seemed to prevail, and Virginia had a double dose of it.

Five years earlier if someone had told Claire that she would marry her third cousin, Peter, the one who had tormented her as a child, she would have called them crazy.

Old Simon Jones stopped before her and tipped his hat. "Afternoon, Mrs. Claire."

"Afternoon, Simon. How's the day shapin' up?"

"Tolerable so long as the dam holds." She chuckled good-naturedly at the joke. The dam had been the subject of much concern, talk, and humor for as long as she could remember. Still, the old structure held.

The sky darkened perceptibly, and a few fat drops of water splatted on the ground. "Have a good evening, Simon," she called after his retreating back.

"Good Lord willing and the creek don't rise. Well, at least not more than it has."

She smiled. Life was good. In fact, it had turned out altogether differently from what she had expected. Her mother had died when she was very young. Her father had always been a sternly disapproving man. In most matters he always acquiesced to his two older sisters, and he had taken that frustration out on Claire. He had taught her to act like a lady, and that meant being humble and submissive; matter of fact, they had been married an entire year before she could bring herself to look Peter in the eye.

Peter was a salesman. Most Cathers were, and had been as long as anyone could remember. They were all smooth talkers and quite persuasive, but none was quite as silver-tongued as her Peter.

For all that, though, he was a gentle and loving Ginny that he would raise his daughter differently than her father had raised her. He had kept his promise. He always said to little Ginny that a woman was the equal of a man. Even though she was tiny he took her everywhere with him. He even took her on sales trips like the one they would be home from soon.

Claire pressed a hand tight against her stomach. Tonight when Peter arrived home she would have another surprise for him. She smiled as she prayed that God would give her a son. The local midwife had given her some herbs to put under her bed, that she might have a boy. Claire protested that she didn't believe in such superstitions. She had put the herbs under her bed, anyway, though, she wanted a son so badly. God willing, maybe I will have one.

The skies opened up and the rain began again. Claire, having swept the debris and excess water from her porch, hurried back inside. She added more wood to the fire in an effort to battle the chill damp in the air. The streets were flooding, an annual occurrence in Johnstown.

Everywhere businessmen were transporting their wares to the second stories of their buildings. Husbands and wives were carting furniture and food upstairs in their homes. Claire had already moved upstairs everything they would need earlier that day.

She glanced back outside at the sheets of rain pelting the street and for a moment felt uneasy. Something didn't feel quite right, as though there was a strange energy in the air. She shrugged it off with a whispered prayer for the safety of Peter and her little girl. She began to wonder if she would see them both within the hour or if they had stopped along the road, seeking shelter.

Then two young men ran down the street, shouting, "Dam's breaking! The dam's breaking!"

The taller of the two ran into the blacksmith, who threw up his hands and said, "Heard that before, young feller!"

"It's true, it's happening!" the shorter lad said. Then they raced on, bellowing at the top of their lungs, "Dam's breaking!"

"Must be foreigners," the blacksmith said to Claire. "Crazy boys."

She nodded vaguely, not really listening. Her ears were attuned to another sound: a strange, distant roar, like that of..... of what? An ocean?

Then she saw the wall of water raging down the hillside. Its immensity shocked her into incomprehension; she had never imagined such a flood in her life; never seen such a thing as the vast, churning waters as they mowed down trees as if they were dandelions. For a moment the sight made no sense to her; she stood in her everyday gingham dress and her second-best white apron, staring. "My God!" she screamed, and she began to run.

She raced past houses where families were scrambling to their second stories; a tree shot through the gully to her left, bounding through a gush of water. She heard the flood behind her, and directly before her stood a house with an open door. She headed toward it, not sure why she did; in her panic she could no longer think clearly.

From behind her she heard screams, heard thunder, and then...

"My God, no!" Peter Cathers cried.

He stood at the rim of the canyon, looking down on the destruction of Johnstown. Swaying with disbelief, he held his child in his arms and screamed for his wife as the waters engulfed everything in their path, then spread out in all directions with grasping, merciless tentacles. Rooftops poked above the raging waters, then disappeared. Whole tracts of trees shot down the hills and slammed straight through buildings.

Bodies of people and animals floated like corks.

"Claire! Claire!"

He was unaware that as his little daughter closed her eyes to the horrors, her world within telescoped into a strange world of gray mist, rolling across an image: a sailing ship, sails bursting with wind, and a little girl-- --She looks like me!--tumbling over the side into the ocean.

And a woman on deck shrieking, held back by sailors, as she struggled to free herself and leap into the sea after the girl.

The mists roiled and thickened, then rolled away, and Ginny heard the thoughts of that woman, as if she were standing next to her, speaking directly to her: Now we are three, we "Cathers." I have no daughter to carry on the family line, but the boys have at least some magic. Mayhap 'tis just as well. Perhaps it is a sign from the Goddess that House Cahors is truly dead ... and that the magick should die with me.

Then two little boys rushed up to her, shouting and throwing their arms around her knees and her waist. The smaller of the two stared straight at Ginny; in her mind, he opened his mouth and, in an eerie, otherworldly voice, said directly to her, "Virginia, I am your ancestor."

Then Ginny's eyes snapped open and her small child's grabbed up lanks of her father's hair as she buried her face against his shoulder and sobbed, "Papa, Papa, the lady is scaring me!"

And then little Ginny saw another thing: a letter, and it read: Know this then, Hannah, my darling wife, we did not hang them all in Salem. Some--and I am so ashamed to say this--we ducked some, as they did in the Olde World. That is to say, we tied these poor women to stools, and put them in the river. And if they sank, we declared them innocent. Aye, if they drowned, I mean to say, we consigned their souls to God.... Then Abigail Cathers showed us true witchr'y, and I knew we had murdered innocent women who had no more knowledge of witchcraft than you or I.

God have mercy on me, I cannot bear this guilt any longer.

Adieu.

Jonathan Corwin

Then in her mind she saw her own mother bobbing in a room with many chairs, and a table, all underwater. Her mother's eyes were open, and her hair blossomed around her head like a halo.

Ginny burst into tears and moaned to her father, "Mama has drowned, Daddy. She has drowned!"

At Johnstown, ten thousand were said to have lost their lives. Though Claire Cathers's corpse was never found, she was declared dead, and Peter Cathers decided to go West, to take his daughter from that place of watery death and find the driest country that he could.

The things that Ginny had seen, she never spoke of again, and in due time, she forgot.

California proved not to be the place for fortune; Cathers father and daughter determined to go north, to Seattle, a place said to be rich in everything but men.

They loaded a wagon with their belongings, mostly mining equipment they no longer needed, for there had been no gold for them in California, and began a long journey toward the Pacific Northwest. Ginny was almost nine then, and considered by all who knew her to be of keen intellect, and a beauty to boot.

Stopping one evening in an encampment, where there was beef stew with real beef and potatoes and onions and carrots, the rough men there spoke of Dr. Deveroo, a seller of patent medicines that could cure what ailed a man.

"He's comin' tonight with his travelin' show," one of the miners told Peter while Ginny scooped up the last of her beef stew with a hardtack biscuit. They sat side by side on long trestle tables beneath a canvas canopy strung above their heads. The place was lit with lamps, and Ginny thought it looked like a fairy land. "First there's fine entertainment, and then he sells his patent medicines." He gestured to Ginny. "She looks a bit peaked. She might could use a few spoonfuls."

Peter shrugged. "We'll see."

"Oh, Papa, can we see the fine entertainment?" Ginny begged.

Peter smiled indulgently. "I suppose, Ginny." He picked up his tin cup of coffee and sipped it appreciatively. "There's no charge for the entertainment, I take it?" he asked the miner.

"None, sir," the man replied. "Deveroo sells his elixir; that's how he affords the rest."

About an hour later, as two brightly painted wagons pulled into the encampment, a cheer rose up around the camp. Peter put Ginny on his shoulders so she could see.

"He's got black hair and black eyes," she reported.

"Black hair and brown eyes, I reckon," her father corrected her.

"No, Papa. They are black as coal. And he's staring right at me."

Peter felt a little chill; he didn't know why. He said, "I'm here, Ginny."

"I know. Oh, and now he's smiling at everyone."

"Please, friends!" boomed a voice. "Esteemed and illustrious gentlemen! Please have a seat so that all may see our most amazing presentation! My companions and I have traveled the length and breadth of this great land, and we have seen many remarkable sights, some of which we will present to you this very night!"

Everyone settled back onto their seats at the trestle table, affording Peter a look at Deveroo as the man stood up on the buckboard of his wagon. He was a tall man, broad-shouldered, dressed in a black suit of clothes with a black waistcoat and a white shirt. He wore a top hat, which he doffed, and his curly hair brushed his shoulders. He wore a drooping mustache ... and indeed, his eyes were very black. Peter had never seen the like in his entire life.

The wagon itself was decorated with faces of a strange man made of leaves. The grotesque faces were strangely contorted, appearing rather evil, and Peter wasn't certain that this "fine entertainment" would prove to be something his daughter should see.

The other wagon was painted with wild swirls of green and red, in no discernible pattern. A very muscular bald man dressed in a leopard skin held the reins, which he put down with a flourish, rose, and picked up a concertina, which he began to play. The squeeze box looked like a toy in contrast with his massive stature.

Two ladies in elaborate golden dresses appeared from the back of the same wagon, lightly tripping down a set of wooden stairs until they alighted on the earth. They began to dance, and Ginny caught her breath, enchanted.

After their dance was concluded, the man in the leopard skin performed many amazing feats of strength, including hoisting two miners seated in chairs over his head. He bent a man's shovel and twisted a bar of steel into a knot.

"Sandor the Strong Man drinks three tablespoons of my patented life elixir every morning, noon, and night!" Dr. Deveroo proclaimed. "Such a bottle can be yours for only one paltry dollar!"

"Papa, you should buy some," Ginny told her father. "Perhaps another time. A dollar is a lot of money," Peter told her.

Many of the miners did purchase bottles, and some proceeded to begin their three-tablespoon regimen immediately upon receipt. "And now, watch, my friends, as I amaze and astonish you with feats of magic!" Dr. Deveroo exclaimed.

He clapped his hands and snapped his fingers, then flicked them three times. Flames formed along his fingertips, outlining his hands with fire.

The crowd gasped.

Then he raised his hands above his head and waved them, and the flames extended upward, shooting into the sky.

Peter blinked, astonished. Ginny sucked in her breath again and said, "Papa, how did he do that?"

The flames extinguished, and the man bowed at the audience as the miners broke into wild applause. Then he extended his hands toward the two beautiful ladies, who twirled and curtsied, both smiling so prettily at him.

Slowly, the two rose into the air, still twirling, until they hung high above the wagons, bobbing like golden butterflies.

The crowd fell silent, each man thunderstruck. "It's wires," Peter murmured. Ginny leaned down to hear him. "Not magic, Papa?"

"Of course not." But his voice was shaky, as if he didn't believe what he was saying.

Slowly the ladies floated toward the ground. The men began to applaud, then to hoot and holler. They stamped their feet. They whistled.

"Gentlemen, I thank you!" Dr. Deveroo said, sweeping off his top hat and laying it over his chest. "Now, please lend me your ears as I tell you of the wonders of my patented elixir, which will cure all your ailments like magic. But science is at work here, my friends, not pixies and elves! Science, which paves the new frontier with wonders like my Patented Elixir of Life!"

One of the two women glided toward him carrying a green glass bottle topped with a cork. She handed it to Dr. Deveroo as if it were a precious gem.

He pulled the cork off the top and put the bottle to his lips. "This will make you stronger than ten men! It'll put hair on your head and a shine in your eye!"

He took a gulp of the liquid. Then he reached forward and put his hand around the woman's waist. As the crowd watched, he easily lifted her up and held her above his head while he took another swallow of the elixir.

"Yes, gentlemen!" he cried. "Dr. Deveroo's Patented Elixir of Life will fill you with life!" He put the lady down and jumped off his wagon. Then he made a show of walking to the back of it. He put both his hands beneath the end of it, squatted, and lifted it up off the ground. "Papa," Ginny breathed. "Papa, how can it be?"

Peter guffawed. "It's all tricks," he said uncertainly.

"Take me off your shoulders," she begged. "I don't want him to see me."

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Ginny," he assured her.

She hesitated, and then she said, "Papa, he's so strong, he could make the dam break."

"Oh, Ginny," Peter said softly. "Oh, my girl."

Then Dr. Deveroo's gaze swiveled toward her. He gazed directly at her; she felt his dark stare as if it were a slap across her cheek. His eyes narrowed, and his heavy brows met above his nose. He looked like a devil just waiting to grab her and eat her up.

She clung to her father and wailed, "Papa, get me out of here!" Heads turned in their direction; a few men smirked, amused by the little girl's terror as if they, rational men all, had not gaped in silence at the astonishing feats of prestidigitation of Dr. Deveroo mere seconds before.

"Relax, girlie, it's just for show," a well-meaning man ventured. He was gray and leathery and had no teeth. He reached out a hand and patted Ginny's leg, and she writhed as if she had been burned.

"Papa, please, Papa." She scrambled to the ground, landing hard, and raced into the crowd of men.

"Ginny!" Peter shouted after her. He broke into a run, muttering, "Excuse me, 'scuse me, please, pardon," as he eased men out of his path. "Ginny!"

How could he have lost her so quickly? But no one could tell him where she had gone. He looked everywhere, all over the camp; and as the show went on and most of the miners lined up to purchase a bottle or two of Dr. Deveroo's elixir, Peter became more and more frantic.

"Might I help?" Deveroo asked finally, once the last bottle had been sold and the ladies had disappeared back inside their wagon. The man in the leopard skin sat on the buckboard, wolfing down some beef stew.

"I've looked everywhere," Peter confessed, wiping his face.

Then he looked into the eyes of the man. Peter's lips parted; he felt dizzy all over. Not just dizzy, but rather ill. The man's eyes ... they were completely black. There was no color to them. And if one gazed into them long enough ... one would ... would ... Peter shook himself. He tipped his hat and said brusquely, "Thank you, sir, but this is a family matter. I'll find my girl myself.

Dr. Deveroo inclined his head like a king. He said, "As you wish, Mr....?"

'And to his dying day, Peter had no idea why he said, "Cavendish. Martin Cavendish." "Cavendish," Deveroo said slowly. "Nice to make your acquaintance, sir." Deveroo doffed his hat once more. "Well, if I may be of service, please don't hesitate to call on me. My troupe and I will be camping not far from here."

"Thank you kindly, sir." Peter inclined his head and moved away. He was uneasy in his skin; he could barely stand to look at the man, though he had no idea why. He turned his back and quickly strode away.

Ginny. She's hiding in our wagon.

Suddenly he knew it as certainly as he knew that she was right to be afraid of Deveroo.

Something is amiss here. We are in danger.

Without another look back, he hurried to the wagon, got in, and picked up the reins. Luckily he had not unharnessed the horses. He called over his shoulder, "Ginny? You in there?"

"Papa, ssh," she hissed back. "He'll hear you!"

"It's all right, girl. We're getting out of here."

He flicked the reins, and the horses began to move. As they galloped away from the encampment, he saw Deveroo in the process of climbing into his own wagon. The man took off his hat and stared after Peter's wagon; in the darkness, Peter could not see his face, but he imagined him fiercely glaring at him. A shiver ran up Peter's spine; he didn't know why. But he flicked his reins and called, "Hee-yah!" to the horses, and they escaped into the night.

And I'm not stopping until we get to Seattle.

Dr. Deveroo, whose name was actually Paul Deveraux, narrowed his eyes as the Cavendish wagon raced down the trail. Silhouetted by the black night, its plain wooden sides illuminated by stars, it carried interesting cargo: a man and his little girl tetches with witchblood. He could feel it on them, practically smell it on the girl.

Cavendish, he thought. That's a name I'll have to remember.

In the ensuing months he traveled the land, performing his magic and selling his elixir. In San Francisco, he received a letter from friends within the Supreme Coven, loyal to the House of Deveraux and eager to dethrone the Moores. The Moores were still running things, still boasting how they could use the Nightmare Dreamtime that old Sir Richard Moore had learned about down in Van Diemen's Land to get rid of their enemies.

What the Moores did not realize was that through their friends, the Deveraux now possessed the secret of the Nightmare Dreamtime as well.

All we need is the Black Fire, and we'll be on the throne again, Paul Deveraux reminded himself as he read the letter by the light of a campfire.

His confederate, one Edward Monroe, wrote: We have heard stories of a medicine man in the timberland, who claims to know how to conjure something his people call the Dark Cloud Fire. Perhaps this might prove of interest. The place is called Seattle."

"Seattle," Paul Deveraux mused. "Sounds interesting."

NINE
PERIDOT

From earth we are, to earth we go
And so the cycle will always flow
Shine upon us, Great Horned God
Let us dominate this land we trod
 Goddess, hear us as we pray
 Wash the past clean away
Renew us now and give new birth
To family coven, hope and mirth

Holly was tired, and her nerves were stretched thin. Leaving San Francisco had been hard, in some ways harder than it had been when she had first left a year ago. Back home on the Bay she had felt an intense sense of safety. She knew that it was illusory, but when she closed her eyes it was impossible not to believe that the last year had been a bad dream.

That was gone, though, left behind with her house, the hum of the city, and the fog that blanketed it all like a thick curtain that separated it from the rest of the world. Now, together with Tante Cecile and Dan, she was trying to smuggle Barbara Davis-Chin and Uncle Richard back into Seattle.

Didn't we just get him out of this place? she thought about her uncle.

But Uncle Richard had changed; he was in a far better place than she had ever seen him before. He was strong, and though afraid, not afraid to face whatever came his way.

The same could not be said for Barbara. The doctors had only protested weakly when Holly had decided to move Barbara. The truth was that she had been in a coma for over a year and they had no idea what to do to help her.

It was dangerous to return to Seattle, but it was time for the Tri-Covenant to prove its worth. They were stronger together than separate. At least, Holly hoped so. With James and Eli teamed up with Michael, they were going to have to be.

It wasn't far now, maybe ten minutes. Holly willed Dan to drive faster but knew that if he did he would only draw more attention both from the mundane and the magically inclined.

Nothing seemed changed in Seattle since she had managed to leave. Escape was more like it, she thought, reliving the violence she had seen in the airport. The city was still under siege. Michael Deveraux had thrown down the glove, and it was up to her to meet the challenge.

First things first, though. She had to make sure her coven was safe and she had to find a way to heal Barbara.

She glanced out the window fearfully, looking for falcons. The clouds hung heavy in the sky, dark and lowering, gathering strength for another deluge. There was no sign of birds of any kind. Beside her, Tante Cecile was murmuring low incantations to stabilize Barbara. Richard was watching the landscape intently.

Holly began murmuring her own spells, wards to strengthen those already surrounding them, wards to make them invisible to all. Suddenly something like a cold wind rushed through her mind. Michael! She knew it with all her being. He was alerted, knew that she was coming! She gasped as fear crushed her heart. A lone bird appeared in the sky, wheeling slowly lower, ever closer to the car.

Suddenly, a ward shimmered blue in the air, just outside the glass of the car. She held her breath as the bird cast about for a few moments before flying slowly from sight. She sank back in her seat, relief flooding her. Moments later they pulled up outside of Dan's cabin. Philippe and Armand emerged to escort them inside.

"You?" she asked Philippe, referencing the ward that had saved them.

He shook his head. "Pablo sensed you were in danger. Armand and Sasha cast the spell."

That made sense. Mother Coven members were nothing if not good at wards. She would have to thank them and Pablo. She still bristled, though, at the thought of Pablo sensing them, her. His gifts made her uneasy, and she had done everything that she could to shield her mind from his. She wasn't sure she had been successful, though. Still, whatever secrets the boy knew he seemed to keep hidden beneath his austere surface.

Amanda and Nicole both flew to hug their father, and Tante Cecile and Silvana embraced as well. Kari hugged Dan and murmured words of welcome. Holly noted the tears streaming on all the faces and couldn't help but feel a bittersweet pang. There was no one to welcome her. Jer just stood in a corner, immovable and brooding.

"We were getting worried about you," Amanda told Holly as she released her father.

"Not as worried as I am about all of you now that I'm here," Holly answered. "I think Michael knows we're here."

Nicole turned white, and Holly couldn't help but feel her pain. Site's still so very afraid of James... and with good reason.

"He might think, but he does not know, yet," Pablo answered quietly.

A chill danced up Holly's spine as her eyes met Pablo's. The thing she had to do was focus on the good the boy did for the group and not the danger he represented to her.

Richard had forced himself to not react as he saw his city under attack. He had lived through enough battles to know a siege when he saw one. There were forces at work here that he did not

understand. "Know thy enemy and know thyself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril." Sun Tzu was right.

He'd continued to stare out the window. He had found himself again and knew well his own strengths and weaknesses. His enemy was another story, but he was learning.

His throat had constricted painfully at the thought of seeing Nicole and Amanda. He hadn't been there for them when their mother died. He would spend the rest of his life trying to make that up to them. Holly had told him that they were alive and well. He wouldn't quite believe it until he could see it with his own eyes, hold them in his arms. He took a deep breath and willed himself to be patient.

At last they'd pulled up outside a house he did not know and two strangers rushed outside to help them in. He eyed the newcomers and liked what he saw. Especially the one who spoke briefly with Holly. He had a strength to him and a strong jaw and firm gaze.

They moved quickly inside and then he saw Amanda and Nicole. They flew to him, and he felt the tears rolling hotly down his cheeks. They were alive and they both had a glow to them that he did not remember. He crushed them to him and murmured, "I love you," over and over to them both.

Never again would he let them down. Never again.

As the others talked and rebonded, Dan approached Holly and said, "I think you need some time in the sweat lodge. Some time to pull yourself together. To reflect."

She nodded gratefully. "That's exactly what I need. Thank you." Quietly she slipped from the room.

She undressed and made her way into the room. Dan had already lit some wood, providing the sacred smoke and heat. Holly squatted by the fire and shut her eyes; she inhaled slowly, clearing her mind.

Her hands were clenched, her spine stiff. She tried to convince her body to relax, but the concept had become foreign to her. She had two states of being these days: high alert, or exhaustion.

All I do is react, she thought. We have to make apian of attack, figure out how to take the bad guys down.

Sweat rolled down her forehead and her chest. She moved away from the smoke and concentrated on her breathing.

And then she realized she was not alone.

She started; then a hand moved over hers, and she knew it was Jer. "Oh," she whispered.

He put his finger to her lips. She fell silent, every cell in her body focused on the contact. She opened her eyes and, in the pitch darkness, imagined Jer as he had been, handsome and sensual, and reached out her free hand to touch him.

As if he could see, he caught her hand and flattened it against his chest. His heart was beating fast and hard; she thought of the wings of the Deveraux falcons and began to lean toward him, silently begging him to kiss her. "Jer ...," she murmured.

And then she was alone.

"Oh!" she cried, startled. She moved her hands through the darkness, searching for him. He was not there.

Did I dream it? she wondered.

Unsteadily she rose, finding the light switch and flicking it on. There was the fire in the brazier; there, the towel she had brought with her. Self-consciously, she covered herself with it and minced toward the door.

She opened it and peered into the hallway. No one was there.

Then Dan appeared at the other end and said, "Finished?"

"Where is ... ?" she began, and then she nodded.

"The fire's still going."

"I'll take care of it," he told her. "Go get your shower."

He withdrew to give her privacy as she lurched a few more steps and then walked into the bathroom. She shut the door. Her hands were shaking.

Then she began to shower.

Nicole woke by Philippe's side. His body was warm against hers--solid and comforting. He had fallen asleep with his arm around her after having given her the most passionate of kisses. Something had woken her but had left Philippe undisturbed.

She reached out with her senses, stretching her mind carefully so as not to awaken Philippe. Holly and Amanda were performing a ritual, Nicole could feel it. Magical energy crackled in the air setting off sympathetic vibrations along each of her nerve endings. She closed her eyes and she could feel the power surging through her and around her--so familiar, and yet, somehow, new.

She had to go to them. She rose from her bed and was moving before the thought had completely formed. Their blood called to her, the same witch-blood that sang in her veins. Trying to deny it had only brought more fear and pain than she could have imagined.

Passing the spare bedroom, Nicole saw Pablo's eyes blinking at her, shining in the dark like a cat's. His head was up. He looked at her for a moment, nodded slowly, and dropped his head back down to his pillow. His eyes closed, and Nicole glided on.

No, it was time to embrace her gift, her heritage, her destiny--no matter what it might be. Her sister and cousin looked up as she entered the room. Candlelight flickered eerily over both their faces.

Amanda's eyes were warm, forgiving, and in a moment Nicole realized she had always underestimated her twin sister. Amanda's the strong one. She's been there for Holly. And she'll be there for me. Holly's eyes were bright, knowing, as though she could read Nicole's innermost thoughts. And Holly is the flame who has drawn us all together--lit our path and shown us the way. Nicole remembered once hearing an old adage, something to the effect that the brightest flames only shine for a brief while before burning themselves out. Holly was on the edge, Nicole could sense it. This was the first time she had actually met her eyes.

Three candles stood forming a triangle--a strong symbol. A candle sat before each of the other girls. One candle stood before an empty place. My place, Nicole realized.

She sat down before the candle and stared solemnly at the leaping flame. This was her place. Without her, the other two had been weaker. No more.

The candle flames leaped in unison, straining toward the sky and burning white hot.

"We three come before thee, Goddess," Amanda intoned. "I offer my soul."

"I offer my heart," Holly intoned.

And what did Nicole offer? The one thing she had always held back. "I offer my mind."

"We bind ourselves to you and to one another. We are soul sisters and witches of the blood."

"I am the mouth that I might speak the truth," Amanda offered. "I am the eyes that I might see our foes from afar," Nicole answered.

"I am the hand that smites those who raise a sword against us," Holly declared.

Next to each girl a cat appeared, silently on whisper paws. Bast and Freya had accepted Astarte, welcoming the newcomer. Nicole silently intoned a prayer for Hecate, her departed familiar. She was overwhelmed with an image so powerful, so clear. Hecate sat at the feet of a beautiful woman--the Goddess in one of her incarnations.

Tears stung her eyes as a weight lifted from her shoulders. She had felt guilt for so long over leaving her familiar behind when she ran away. Hecate had not deserved that. There had been no real way to take the cat with her. Worse, because of Hecate's connection to the magic Nicole had done, she had not wanted Hecate around as a constant reminder of the life she had been hoping to forget.

"Peace," Amanda murmured, waving her hand over her candle. Nicole hastened to follow suit, intoning the word with Holly.

Amanda had known that her sister would join them in the circle, but she couldn't stop herself from smiling when Nicole appeared in the doorway. It was good to have her back. When Nicole had left it was as though she took all of Amanda's bad memories and anger with her.

Now Nicole was back and, without all the years of built-up resentment getting in the way, Amanda was able to discover a real love for her twin sister. She thanked the Goddess for the second chance, knowing that things could have worked out much differently.

After all, Mom and Uncle Daniel didn't talk for years. Holly hadn't even known her dad had a sister.

Maybe it was true that time heals all wounds, but Amanda knew the real change was the one that had been wrought in her. Over the past year she had grown, let go of her childish jealousy of her sister, and learned the value of family.

Nicole seemed changed too. Her time in Europe sounded like it had been a living nightmare! I can't believe she had to marry James Moore.

Amanda shook her head slowly. She would not have wished such pain on her wayward sister even when she imagined she hated her. As she gazed at Nicole across the circle, Amanda felt complete.

Each girl took her candle and lifted it slowly into the air. A hot wind rushed through the room and fanned the flames until they leaped high above their heads. Suddenly the flame from Nicole's candle jumped, arcing between hers and Amanda's. Amanda's flame jumped, connecting it with Holly's. Holly's flame arced toward Nicole's until a solid ring of fire hovered above their heads connecting and enveloping them.

"No matter what each of us can do, we are made stronger by the others," Amanda whispered in awe.

As Nicole nodded agreement, Holly smiled faintly. It was good that the circle was complete again and that her cousins found strength in it. She loved them both, but the chasm between her and them was slowly widening. The others were frightened of her. That was why she would never tell them that she had caused the ring of fire to appear. Best to let them believe in the power of teamwork, the magic of three.

Kari's eyes ached from hours of staring at the computer screen in Dan's small cubby of an office. Books on shamanism lined one wall. Dreamcatchers and medicine bags were piled inside a small cube.

She heard the floorboards creaking and knew that some people were up. Casting spells, probably. Her throat began to burn, and she swallowed down the urge to vomit.

One last thing and then I'm out of here, she promised herself She didn't know where she would go, but it would be far away, school and everyone be damned. Hell, half the school has burned down and no one here cares about me. She felt a hot tear begin to roll down her cheek.

Earlier Pablo had been able to connect with Barbara's mind for the briefest moment. What he had described had sounded very familiar to Kari, who had spent years studying myths, religions, and the occult. Given what he had seen and what she remembered of Australian lore, she had had a starting place.

From there she had gone to the net. She had steered clear of all the high-traffic sites and chat groups, ferreting out those few sites that contained more esoteric, arcane knowledge, knowledge one had to specifically look for before one could find it.

At last with a triumphant sigh she sat back in her chair and rubbed her eyes. She knew what was wrong with Barbara and what they had to do to save her. Discovering that had been the easy part. What was coming next wasn't pretty.

Part Three Ostara

If one dies while in these other states of consciousness, one dies indeed. This begs the question,' Are dreams truly only ever dreams?--Cesar Phillips,

TEN SODALITE

Fire without and fire within
We'll burn them now and watch them spin
They dance for us, plead and moan
As they burn both flesh and bone
From earth we spin and strain toward sly
Trying to touch Goddess on high
Leave behind this mortal coil
As witchblood now begins to boil

Van Diemen's Land, 1790

"Sir Richard," the fawning convict murmured as he scraped and bowed at the doorway. The Cockney's clothing was in tatters, and he had lost all his teeth. He was a most disgusting man. But as he had been crippled when he had been arrested back in London--for stealing a loaf of

bread--he was no good for farming or cutting timber, and so Sir Richard Moore had taken him on as one of his house servants. Richard looked up from his letter and raised his brows.

The convict ducked as if a lash had been laid across his back ... which it had been, many times, until the creature had learned how to show proper respect to his betters.

"The Abo woman as you wished to see is 'ere."

"Excellent," Richard Moore said. "I shall see her in two minutes."

"Yes, sir." The convict backed out and then respectfully shut the door.

Richard returned to his letter, which was filled with good news. It was from his young brother, Edward.

We Moores remain in ascendance within the Coven, and it is due in no small measure to the wond'rous magic you have found in that forsaken land to which you have been dispatched. Father awaits your next discovery, as do I.

The Deveraux press on in the Americas, their quest for the Black Fire fruitless thus far. They are the laughingstock of the Coven, and I believe we have naught to fear from that quarter. The Homed God continues to favor our House and to scorn the sacrifices of the Deveraux. For which I do tender all thanks.

E.

"Excellent," Sir Richard murmured. He refolded the expensive paper and unlocked the top drawer of his desk, where he kept all his private correspondence. Retrieving a bundle of letters fastened with a bright red ribbon, he untied it, added his brother's missive to the top of the stack, and retied it.

He was in the process of replacing the bundle in the drawer when there was a knock on the door.

"Enter," he said pleasantly.

"Ere she is, Sir Richard," the Cockney man announced as he opened the door.

Richard was startled. The Abo woman was the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes upon, and never in his life had he considered that such a gentleman as he would think such a thing. She wore European clothing of fine material--a navy blue dress with a fichu of lace, and a mobcap such as any genteel lady might wear. As she swept a graceful curtsy, his blood was stirred, and he deigned to favor her with an incline of his head.

The Cockney backed out again, and Richard said, "Shut the door." The woman regarded him. He saw that her eyes were a very startling green. "Your name."

"You may call me Alikì," she said, and grinned at him coquettishly. "It is the way we say 'Alice' in my language."

"There is a joke in that," he ventured, not following her meaning.

"There will be a famous story of Alice one day, a girl who enjoys adventures in magical places," she said. "But not yet."

He regarded her, still uncertain of his place in this conversation. "I see. And will the story be about you?"

She shrugged. "Perhaps. It will be of no import to me, however."

Feeling a bit put off, he decided to get straight to the point. "I have heard of your powers of witchcraft."

Saucily she put her hands on her hips. "And I have heard of your interest in such powers."

He cocked his head. "Have you altered your appearance in order to be more appealing to me?"

She laughed but made no reply. Then she looked around the room and said to him pointedly, "I am tired and thirsty, Sir Richard."

He summoned the Cockney, who brought a chair and a bottle of Portuguese and two goblets. Sir Richard poured, and he toasted Mistress Alikì.

She sipped in a most refined way, her gaze over the rim of her goblet quite warm and inviting. Then she settled the goblet against her fichu and said, "I can show you the mysteries of the Dreamtime."

"Indeed?" He leaned forward, fascinated.

"Indeed," she promised.

"Tonight."

Tri-Covenant, Seattle

Jer could hear his heart pounding. Whether it was caused by the presence of Holly or his participation in the Aboriginal blood rite, he wasn't sure.

Standing together in the center of Dan's main room, they were wearing simple leather loincloths and, in Holly's case, a T-shirt. Both were barefooted. Kari had insisted that they dress as closely as they could to the Aboriginal custom.

Dan solemnly stepped forward and began to paint on Holly's face. The patterns and lines and symbols were unfamiliar to Jer, but he knew they were Aboriginal in origin. Dan and Kari had spent a long time, each researching in their own way, discovering the secrets of Alcheringa, the Dreamtime. When he was finished with Holly, Dan began to paint the patterns on Jer's face. Jer was acutely aware of how ugly he was, and that the paint only added to the macabre effect. If he understood everything that Kari was so solemnly telling them, the Dreamtime was the time before history before the creation of the world and man. It was somehow, though, inexplicably tied to the land, and in specific places it resonated more strongly, as though the fabric between past and present was very thin. The Aborigines also claimed that the land told the stories of the early days of creation and that certain landmarks, such as Ayres Rock, were testimony to them.

"The native peoples believe that each place is connected to its history, and it has a physical being and a spiritual being," Kari finished.

"So it's like an astral plane?" Holly asked.

"Yes, but it is more than that. It's like an astral plane for another dimension."

"What do you mean?" Nicole asked.

Kari sighed in exaggerated frustration. "If you were simply astral traveling in this dimension, everything you see would be what is familiar to you. You would go outside this house and you would see your neighbor's house, the cars parked on the street. Your spirit is just walking about without your body.

"In the Dreamtime you might see a few familiar landmarks, like the Bay, or a mountain, but it will exist in an entirely different environment. There won't be houses, or if there are, certainly not like the ones we can see out the window. There might not even be people. It might be populated by creatures we are completely unfamiliar with."

Holly shook her head impatiently. "Whatever. We'll cope with whatever we come across. We'll just find a way to free Barbara and we'll get out."

Kari nodded, though Jer recognized an angry spark in her eyes. "Fine. Do it fast--you don't want to spend any more time there than you have to. There's a reason places like this are only dreamed about. Remember, you have to exit where you enter."

"And that will be somewhere in Australia?" Jer questioned.

Kari nodded. "We really should be in Australia to be trying this, but Barbara is here with us and somehow she's been trapped there, so I figure with the help of a little magic we should be able to send you there too."

"Anything else?"

"There is one other very important thing: Remember, the mind has power over the body in this arena. Whatever happens to you there, happens to you here. If you cut yourself there, your body will bleed here. If you die in the Dreamtime, you die for real."

There was silence for a moment. Dan stepped back slowly, his work done. "All right, let's get this over with," Holly muttered.

Armand stepped forward and solemnly made the sign of the cross over both of them. Jer felt intensely uncomfortable. He hadn't yet adjusted to the beliefs of the Spanish Coven. Still, he dipped his head in a silent gesture of thanks. After all, they were going to need all the help they could get.

The others stepped away and formed a circle around them, hands joined. Jer and Holly both lay down in the center, their backs on the ground and their heads supported by small pillows. With a word, Nicole cut the lights and Philippe set the candles around them glowing. The smell of incense filled the air, sweet and light.

Jer closed his eyes and began to take long, deep breaths. The others began to chant softly, rhythmically. He willed his spirit to leave his body. His fingertips tingled where they brushed against Holly's. Slowly his mind emptied.

He felt as though he were floating, hovering an inch, just an inch, above his body. He stretched out with his mind and his spirit. A great light rushed toward him, engulfing him, and he gave himself up to it wonderingly. The light started pure and soft and then expanded until it burned his eyes through his closed eyelids. Pain seared through his body, and he heard Holly cry out even as he did. His eyes flew open. He was standing in the middle of a great desert. The sun burned down so hot that he flinched back, throwing his arm in front of his face. The Black Fire! He forced his heart to stop racing. It's only the sun.

He turned to look at Holly. She was squinting into the light, her hand up to shield her eyes.

He turned slowly, wondering where exactly they were. He froze halfway around. "Look," he pointed.

Before them rose a large, square mesa. It towered above the surrounding desert like some mighty giant.

"Uluru," he said. "Ayres Rock."

A movement caught the corner of his eye, and they turned together to see something loping toward them. "And, that, I believe, is Yowee."

The creature was obsidian, shiny and evil-looking. Its eyes glowed like the fires of Hell. It scrabbled toward them on wickedly clawed feet that made no sound. A hot wind flew before it, blowing sand into Jer's eyes. He blinked desperately.

Yowee was the spirit of death.

Holly conjured a fireball and threw it at the creature. It passed right through him as though he were a ghost. Jer threw up a powerful ward and it passed right through.

They turned and ran. Ayres Rock loomed before them. The desert air made it appear as though they were right at its base, but Jer quickly realized that was not the case. Behind him he could hear nothing, but he didn't dare risk a look back.

Before him he could see the wind that preceded the creature whipping up the sand. The blast became stronger, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. He ducked just as a tentacle--Where the hell did that come from?--cracked through the air above his head.

He began to zigzag back and forth while still trying to head for the rock. He could hear Holly panting beside him. He couldn't turn to look at her, though, because he was too busy driving his own body forward.

I shouldn't be able to run like this, not with these burned, scarred legs, he thought. Maybe I'll stay in this Dreamtime.

It's not such a nightmare for me.

At last they made it to the rock and began scrambling upward, the Yowee following behind.

They reached a plateau and found themselves face-to-face with a beautiful dark-skinned woman dressed in colonial garb.

The woman's eyes were ancient. Her hair was wild, flying about her like a lion's mane. She reached out and touched them both.

Remember, here the mind holds sway over the body. Her267lips had not moved, but her words sounded clear in Jer's mind.

He twisted, looking down at the Yowee. He closed his eyes, and in his mind he pictured the creature losing its handholds and falling backward to the desert floor. Then he opened his eyes and saw it happen. Holly must have caught on as well, because the creature suddenly exploded in a shower of gore and body parts.

He felt his body slump. Mind over body. That must be how I was able to run. Slowly he and Holly turned back to the woman who had helped them.

"Thank you."She nodded gravely.

Jer realized that she was connecting with their minds so that they might understand her.

I'm Alik. I taught Sir Richard Moore the secret of this place. And for my help, he exiled me here. Her smile was bitter. It is a just punishment, I suppose.

Holly swallowed. "Then if you're trapped...." She took a breath and glanced at Jer. "A creature sits on the chest of a friend of ours, squeezing her heart. She's been trapped, and--" The woman raised a hand. There are very few who know of this place, fewer still who know how to use it. I can help you.

"We would be very grateful," Holly told her.

Describe her, please. If her spirit is held captive here, it will appear to us as her physical form.

Holly nodded and described Barbara in detail, both her physical appearance and her personality.

Alik closed her eyes and seemed to retreat inside herself. Time passed, and she did not move.

When her eyelids fluttered open, her eyes were blazing with green light. You are in luck. She is imprisoned inside one of the caves at the base of the rock.

"Then let's go," Holly said, turning.

Be careful. There are things much older and far more terrible than the Gate Guardian you just killed. I'll go with you to help you find your path.

Holly nodded understanding and started back down. The woman followed her, and Jer brought up the rear. When they reached the bottom, Alik led them around the side. They walked for nearly half an hour before reaching a small aperture in the rock. It looked too small to be the opening of a cave, but their guide ducked her head and squeezed inside. Holly followed, and Jer anxiously ducked down and entered as well. Once inside, his skin began to crawl in a way that he recognized well. His family had cast its spell here; their magic crackled in the walls and turned his stomach.

Every fiber of his being shouted out for him to turn and flee, but he doggedly followed the two women. The passageway was narrow, and his shoulders scraped painfully against the walls as they passed through. At last they rounded a corner and a cavern was revealed. Jer exited into it with a feeling of relief.

Blue flames leaped into life all around the perimeter of the cave. Pictographs graced the walls, standing out in stark relief and seeming to blaze with a life all their own. Several passageways led off the cavern into darkness, and once more Jer shuddered. The feeling of evil was overwhelming.

In a dark corner of the cavern a green light shimmered. Holly moved toward it slowly, as though something was pulling her. Jer hung back instinctively. When Holly drew close to it, she gasped.

"Barbara!" Holly raced forward and fell to her knees before the light.

Cautiously, Jer crept forward. An old woman with tortured eyes looked up at him from the green mists of energy. She seemed half-spirit, half-flesh. Her mouth formed silent words, and her eyes pleaded with them.

Holly reached out a shaking hand as though to touch her.

The mists swirled and coalesced on top of her chest, becoming a hideous, dark shadow. The shadow was blurred, but Holly could trace the silhouette of the creature that tormented her. Take care, Aliko warned as she glided up beside her. She has been here for some time. You must be very gentle and very precise or she will die.

Holly nodded slowly. "Tell me what to do."

In the old days, leaders of my people came here to seek enlightenment and to commune with our gods. She frowned. I showed these secrets to Sir Richard in return for favor. We had a ritual for coming and a ritual forgoing. You have used the ritual for coming or you would not be here. You will have to do it for yourselves as well when you want to go. This is where she entered this land and so this is where she must leave. You must leave where you entered.

"Why haven't you performed this ritual for yourself?" Jer asked.

She looked at him sadly. I have the House of Moore to thank for that. Someday, I'll free myself. But for now, I'm trapped here.

She bent swiftly and drew a circle around Barbara. Watch carefully, she instructed.

She began murmuring a spell in a beautiful language. Jer struggled to hear the words, to remember them.

The image of Barbara shimmered once and then returned. Aliko nodded as if to herself.

Kulpunya still holds her here. He is a spirit-dingo. He was originally sent to Ayres Rock to kill the people who lived there by their enemies. He can be forced to obey with a chant. She narrowed her eyes and set her jaw, as if coming to some kind of decision. I will teach it to you.

Holly glanced at Jer apprehensively.

"Two chants?" Jer said to Holly, "You remember one, and I'll remember the other." He paused. "I'll learn the one to tame Kulpunya."

The woman held up a hand. If you mispronounce even a single word, you will free Kulpunya from his bondage, and he will try to rip you to pieces. "Then I'm definitely the one learning the chant," Jer said.

Holly looked alarmed. "Why can't you say it for us?" she asked the woman.

I am of this place now, she replied. My magic won't work on him.

Then she hesitated. After a moment, she drew Jer a distance away from Holly and stationed him so that her back was to Holly. She said to him in a quiet voice, not using her mind, "I need to warn you. Your spirit and hers, they are at war on another plane." She touched his face, tracing his ruined flesh. "She did this to you."

He licked his lips, felt the scarring on them with the tip of his tongue, and sighed heavily. "I know." And yet... you love each other. This passion ... it can rip you apart as surety as Kulpunya. It can rip her apart too.

He cocked his head, aware that Holly was staring at them. He steadily returned her gaze.

"I know that, too."

"Jer?" Holly called.

He said to the woman, "Teach me the chant." He held a hand up to keep Holly at bay. Holly's mouth dropped open and she stared at him, fuming. "All right," the woman said. "Let us begin."

She began to chant. Jer listened carefully as her voice took on a strange, hypnotic drone, and soon the rhythmic syllables began to make sense to him, as if she were speaking English. Mental images of the nightmare creature stood out in sharp relief as she took his arm and led him back toward Barbara, still encased in green energy. It was hunched on top of her chest; and as Jer watched, it plunged its hand into Barbara's chest and squeezed her heart.

He was not aware he was speaking until Kulpunya jerked up his head and drew back fangs in a rictus snarl. Jer continued the chant, aided by Alik, his voice drawing strength from hers, until their voices took on a bizarre, humming quality like a didgeridoo.

The monster growled deep in its throat and squeezed harder. The form of the aged, weakened Barbara threw back its head and whimpered in pain. "Jer," Holly murmured. "Jer, are you doing IF right?"

He ignored her, continuing the chant with Alik. She steadied his arm, raising her voice with his.

Then she turned to Holly and said, "Get ready. When I tell you, say your chant."

"Jer's voice continued to thrum, louder, louder still, as the monster's eyes narrowed. Blood and saliva dripped from its jaw. Its shoulders rounded, and the muscles in its legs bunched as it shifted its weight on Barbara's chest, preparing to spring.

Reflexive fear shot through Jer, but he kept his place in the chant.

Then it leaped at Jer.

Aliki shouted, "Now!"

Holly began her chant as Aliki bellowed at Jer, "Use your mind!"

As Kulpunya slammed into Jer and flung him to the floor of the cave, demons exploded from the dark passageways.

SeattleDeep within his chamber of spells, Michael Deveraux looked up from his altar and smiled. "Well, well," he said. "Someone's released Kulpunya." He picked up a scrying crystal and gazed into it.²⁷⁴He turned to the other two participants in the night's ritual. "Care to make a journey with me?" His son, Eli, and James Moore both nodded.

Amanda sat beside Tommy on the couch opposite Barbara Davis-Chin. Holly and Jer had been gone a while, and everyone had scattered around the room, resting and waiting and watching. Fear nibbled at the corners of her mind as she prayed protection spells for their absent comrades.

Tommy slid an arm around her shoulders and she stiffened, acutely aware of his touch. Deep inside her a new warmth began to spread, a feeling of well-being that belied their circumstances. Her skin tingled where it met Tommy's. He gave her a gentle tug and she leaned back gratefully into the circle of his arms.

She sighed and leaned her head on his shoulder. She felt so good that a twinge of guilt touched her. Who was she to feel so happy when her cousin and friend were in such terrible danger? Still, she could not stop the slow smile that spread across her face.

They sat that way for what seemed a long time. Slowly Amanda could feel the tension oozing from her body. She met Tommy's eyes and saw something beautiful shining in them. Slowly he bent his head toward her to kiss her. And then Barbara Davis-Chin began to scream.

Australian Dreamtime

Michael Deveraux smiled as he opened his eyes and found himself in Australia. Well, not exactly Australia, but close enough. He turned and saw James and Eli beside him. Eli looked disoriented and a little unnerved. James, on the other hand, appeared completely unruffled.

Michael narrowed his eyes. He was beginning to think that maybe, just maybe, he had underestimated Moore's kid. He would bear watching. There would be time enough for that later, though. For now, they had a witch to kill.

Michael turned slowly. Ayres Rock, desert floor.

And I know just where to start looking.

He had known Holly had returned to Seattle, but his falcons and scrying stones had been unable to locate her. When she had entered the Dreamtime, though, he had known it. She must have

come trying to rescue her friend, Barbara, whose spirit he had exiled here. House Moore didn't claim an exclusive understanding of Australian magic.

As they began walking toward Ayres Rock he glanced again at his companions. Eli had been a lot quieter the past few weeks. He wondered if it had anything to do with the Gathers witch that James had married out from under him, Michael was unsure where Eli's loyalties lay anymore, but he was sure there was a resentment of James that would work to his advantage.

When they reached the base of the rock, James commented, "They are inside it."

Michael nodded. "That's where I had their friend trapped."

"It's a big rock," Eli said flatly.

Michael could feel himself growing irritated. "It's more than just a rock. It's a living thing."

"Legend says that the rock was formed because two serpents were battling each other and became frozen together, locked in combat for all eternity," James explained.

Michael nodded. "Let's wake them up." The demons flew from everywhere, and Holly threw three fireballs before she remembered that in the Dreamtime the mind was what mattered.

The hideous monster Kulpunya had pinned Jer to the ground; he had one hand around the creature's jaw, and blood was gushing down his arm.

"Jer, use your mind!" she shouted to him. Kulpunya jerked his jaw free and dove at Jer.

"Your mind!" Holly shrieked.

At the last possible instant, the creature exploded. Gore splattered across Jer's face and arms, and Holly fought the urge to vomit as she dispatched another demon in a similar manner.

Aliki was also fighting, taking out demon after demon. While Holly hazarded a glance her way, a demon seized the opportunity and charged her. Before she could stop the creature it hit her and passed right through!

Holly doubled over in pain, feeling as though every one of her internal organs were ripped to shreds. It was then that she saw the demon carrying a scythe in each hand. Too late, she shouted out a warning. Aliki turned just in time to see the creature as it sliced her in half

As Holly groaned, the two halves of Aliki's body hit the dirt and vanished. She was more spirit than flesh, Holly realized. She had little time for reflection, though, as she straightened up to face another assault.

Suddenly the earth shook violently and it threw her face-first into the dirt. She heard a heavy thud and guessed that it had knocked Jer off his feet too.

Earthquake?

As she pushed herself to a sitting position, the ground shook again. She glanced up and saw Jer rising unsteadily to his feet. All the demons had vanished. Not good.

Ulu had lain in the sand a long time, so long that he had forgotten how many millennia had come and gone. Even now as he shuddered and the dust of ages fell from him, his mind quickened, flitting back through time, searching for a purpose, a meaning to it all. He groaned and stretched out sinuously. His long tongue slid out between his fangs and tasted the air, savoring the sensation. He felt bruised and scarred but above all he felt alive. He took a deep breath that rumbled in his lungs and exhaled slowly. Then he remembered Ru.

His eyes flashed open, seeking those of his brother. Ru stared back with cold, unfeeling eyes. Slowly the other snake began to uncoil and Ulu felt the almost forgotten sensation of hatred coursing through his veins. Kill Ru, his mind urged his body.

He pulled his head back and opened his mouth. Long fangs dripping venom extended downward, but Ru was ready for his attack and when Ulu struck, Ru was not where he had been. Instead, he fainted to the side and then came in, sinking his own fangs into Ulu. Ulu wrapped his body around Ru and began to squeeze as hard as he could.

Jer fell outside, and rolled as quickly as he could away from the heaving rock. Several feet away he managed to stagger to his feet and look up. His jaw dropped at what he saw.

There, above him, two enormous serpents were battling each other. Each was the red of the rock that moments before Jer and Holly had been inside. Holly, who had come tumbling out after him, joined him in looking upward, her face bearing a mixture of fear and awe.

"It will only last about another minute. Enjoy the show while you can," a familiar, mocking voice advised.

Jer whirled around to find himself facing his father, brother, and James. He clenched his hands into fists at his side as rage tore through his body.

James smirked at him, and the hairs on the back of Jer's neck lifted.

We're screwed.

His father gestured to the serpents behind him.

"The effects of the restoration spell are only temporary. The two beasties will be as frozen as stone again in a few more seconds." An amused smile crossed his face. "I wonder, though, if they will freeze in the same shape, or if Ayres Rock is about to get a makeover. That would shake up things back home, I imagine."

"What are you doing here?" Jer hissed. "Come on, Jer, your brain didn't fry. I'm here to take her out." Michael glanced at his comrades. "We all are."

Jer took a step toward his father. A sudden, startled cry from Holly caused him to turn around just in time to see one of the giant serpents lunging for him. He tried to run, but it was too late; the giant mouth closed about him. First there was a fiery blast; then a sharp, stabbing pain, and then all was darkness.

Holly watched in horror as the snake swallowed Jer. She rushed forward, too hysterical to even think of magic. The creature was attacked by its comrade, though, and it turned away from her and back to the battle.

She rushed forward. The snakes began to slow, and suddenly they dropped down to earth, the head of one along the back of the other. Before her eyes they began to morph into something else....She ran into one of the monsters, fists flying. Pain exploded up her arms. What had seemed flesh only moments before had turned to stone. Before her was only Ayres Rock--and Jer was trapped somewhere inside it.

ELEVEN CITRINE

Our magic lasts beyond the grave
With the power to destroy or save
This will be our finest hour
When we crush the Cahors' power
Witchblood flows through our veins
We dance wherever the Goddess reigns
Though our power seems to fade
Deveraux throats will taste our blade

"No!" Holly screamed as she pounded her fist against the rock.

Behind her she heard a low chuckle. She turned quickly.

Michael, Eli, and James grinned back at her.

"Now, that's fitting, isn't it?" Michael drawled. "You free one loved one from the Rock only to lose another to it. I believe that's what they call dramatic irony. We have to be going soon. One shouldn't stay too long in this place--it does things to the mind. We wanted to leave you a little present, though, before we go."

James and Eli started quietly chanting. Michael lent his voice to theirs, and the words seeped into her mind. Where have I heard them before?

She remembered--a split second before the Black Fire burst into life.

Tri-Covenant, Seattle

Amanda leaped up from the couch with Tommy beside her. The others came running as well and they all crowded around Barbara. The poor woman was babbling incoherently between sobs. She looked up at all of them and began screaming again.

"Barbara?" Amanda asked, fighting the hysteria she heard in her voice. "Can you understand me? Did you see Holly?"

Barbara just kept babbling and sobbing, Alonzo waved his hand in the air above her head. "Peace, rest, and be restored."

Her body instantly slumped and her eyes turned glassy. She stared at each one of them for a long moment before closing her eyes and drifting off to sleep.

"At least they found her," Nicole said into the silence. "Hopefully it means that they're on their way back too." Amanda nodded agreement, but the sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach told her otherwise.

Australian Dreamtime

The heat of the flame scorched Holly. She watched helplessly as Michael, Eli, and James turned and ran. She tried to reach out with her mind, to will the flames to be extinguished, but she quickly realized it was no use. If the Black Fire was terrible in its destructive power in her world, it was tenfold as devastating in this one. Flames rose as tall as skyscrapers within seconds.

She began to run around the base of the rock, praying the flames would not follow. All the while her eyes scanned the impassive face of the rock for caves, crevices--anything that might lead her to Jer.

"Goddess," she murmured, then clamped her mouth shut. When had the Goddess ever freely helped her?

Her lungs burned from the smoke-laden air and the exertion. Her eyes began to tear up until she could barely see. She lost her bearings until she couldn't have told from which direction she had come.

At last, something in the stone caught her eye. She blinked fiercely trying to clear her vision. Slowly she reached out to touch the rock face. A tiny portion of the rock face was raised, as though something had pushed it outward from the rest of the stone. The raised section of stone was in the shape of a handprint.

She placed her palm against the stone hand, and electricity shot through her. "Jer!" she cried.

It was him, she could feel it. He must have pushed his hand nearly through the beast before it had frozen. She held her breath and reached out with her mind, trying to connect with him as Dona Rosalind had done with them.

Something faint came back to her--an echo, really. Still, it was proof that he was there and alive. She pushed harder, trying to reach him, trying to reach ..."Jean!" Isabeau sobbed his name over and over as she lay beneath him and the Black Fire rolled over them. She could feel the rage pouring out of him, heard the mixture of hate and love in his voice as he told her that he would pursue her for all time.

She loved him, Goddess forgive her. She loved her greatest enemy, her husband and Lord. Yet she would rather doom herself to wander the earth for all eternity than harm him.

Yet was there hope for them both yet? The fire burned around them. Isabeau could feel its heat, but they remained untouched. What sort of magic was this? It was Cahors and Deveraux magic, working together, fueled by passion and love.

Jean looked deeply into her eyes and she could see that he realized what was happening too. His lips moved. What was he saying?

Oh, Jean, I love you. We shall stay in the fire together, you and I, and let the whole world burn around us.

Then, suddenly he was yanked from her arms. She looked up in time to see one of his servants wrestling with him. She screamed and held out her hands to him. It was too late, though; the Black Fire descended upon her and began to consume her. She felt her flesh ignite and her bones begin to melt. She died sobbing, reaching out for her beloved....You must go now or all is lost! The words pierced Holly's mind. She could hear the roar and crackle of the Black Fire scarce feet away, and the heat was singeing her hair. Hurry, run! She sobbed, trying to press her hand even closer to Jer's, willing the contact to be enough to keep them safe.

It wasn't enough, though, and she knew it. The thin sheet of rock that separated them might as well have been a foot deep. Without his flesh touching hers she could not survive the fire. Crying, she turned and began to run, praying the Goddess to light her way back to the place where she had entered the Dreamtime.

The desert landscape was on fire, but in her mind all she could see was the school gymnasium and Jer standing in the middle of the Black Fire, his flesh melting from his body as Nicole pulled her away.

"Not again!" she shrieked. "Goddess--Hecate--- not again!"

But the Goddess wasn't answering. Either that or Holly wasn't listening, because the world kept burning and she kept running farther and farther away from Jer. Farther from her beloved. Just as Jean had run.

His heart wrenched with horror even as he ran. Isabeau was dead; he had stayed long enough to see her body ignite and turn to ash. And there was nothing that I could do. It is not just, he thought savagely. I should have been the one to kill her, for betraying me and my family. The witch deserved to die, but her life was mine to give or take. Just as her body was mine... and her soul... and her heart.

Even through his rage he could feel another emotion, just as powerful. She was gone and the despair crushed his lungs, making it nearly impossible to breathe. What was she trying to tell me? he wondered. Not that it would have made any difference. Would it?

He could feel his own flesh searing and melting as the fire burned so close. The servant who had pulled him from Isabeau had already been killed by it. It was a kinder death than I would have offered him.

At last he made it to the river and he threw his body headlong into the water as the Black Fire rolled over the top of it. The river began to boil, but Jean stayed where he was, knowing that there was only death on the surface of the water.

As he began to run out of air he thought, Damn you, Isabeau. I will kill you, if not in this life then in the next.

And he was killing her. Isabeau--no, Holly--ran, trying to outrace the fire that swept along behind her, harrying her. Tears streaked her face as her eyes stung from the acrid smoke. It seemed the whole world was on fire. It filled her vision, her senses, until there was nothing left. No past, no future, there was only the fire. It seemed it was all she had ever known.

As she ran, the world around her seemed to be melting. Was the fire that powerful? Or was this what Michael had meant about people spending too long in the Dreamtime? Deep chasms seemed to open at her feet, yawning gulfs that stretched forever. If she fell down one of them would she come out on the other side of the earth? Or, maybe, like Alice, would she find herself in a world even more fantastical than this one?

Rabbit holes and stopwatches. I'm going to be late. I'm going to be very late. The others will be wondering where I am and why I didn't bring Jer back. I'll just have to tell them, he was lunch for the White Rabbit, I mean the Great Snake. It doesn't do to have tea with a snake, they spill the cups. Just like Joel spitted the cup when I killed him. No, when Catherine the Goddess killed him. That didn't seem quite right.

Holly shook her head to rid it of the colliding thoughts. The fire was close; she could feel all the moisture evaporating from her skin. If I had sunscreen I wouldn't get burned. That's what the bottle says. SPF 60 stops everything. I'll have to start carrying some with me. Since the fire is always there, it only makes sense.

And suddenly she was back where she had started, which wasn't such a bad spot after all. The fire hadn't burned there yet. "Maybe it shan't, maybe it can't," she chanted to herself, swaying slightly. Then someone was screaming and she wasn't altogether sure it wasn't her, but since her

mouth was closed she suspected that it might not be, so she turned around. "Lots of people screaming," Holly noted.

There before her were a thousand creatures, driven as deer before a forest fire. There were people, or at least husks that must once have been human, small creatures with many eyes and long arms, and demons. There were dozens and dozens of demons. Holly felt sure she recognized a couple from the battle in the cave.

"That was before the cave came to life and you all died."

She frowned. That wasn't right. If they had all died then they couldn't be here. She swayed. Maybe they were all dead, even her, and that's why they were here.

Focus, a voice hissed in her ear. A circle, the lady had said something about a circle. Holly picked up one of the smaller demons that had long, pointy claws. She grabbed him around his fat torso and squeezed. He made a rather pleasing gurgly noise. She let his claws dangle in the sand and slowly spun around until the ground had been scarred in a circle.

She set the fat demon down and he bit her leg, but she didn't notice. Too many things to do. Where will I find the time to get married? She felt tired. A nap sounded good; she lay down in the middle of the circle. A lullaby, she needed a lullaby. What had the nice lady taught her?

One of the demons she knew she recognized from the cave jumped on her chest and seemed to dissolve right into her body. Holly giggled because it tickled. Another joined in and another. "I am the lifeboat!" she screamed out, though she wasn't sure what the Titanic had to do with anything.

Suddenly there was a sharp, stabbing pain in her brain and it jolted her. What is going on? It felt as though she were being pushed out of her own mind, quite a feat given that she was already out of her body. Wasn't she? She struggled to push back, to fight. For a moment she felt as though she had been shoved into a tiny corner and was watching several little creatures fight over making her mouth move, her arms and legs.

No! she screamed. They didn't seem to hear her. Or maybe they were ignoring her. I have to get out of here! She struggled to gain back control of something, one thing. Her mouth, if only she could say the words.

They came pouring out. She couldn't remember if they were the right words, or even what words were really, but it sounded good. She could feel herself being sucked backward as though into a vacuum. As everything faded to black, she shouted, "Jer, forgive me!"

Holly sat straight up screaming. Freaked, Amanda started screaming as well. Then, as suddenly as she had started, Holly stopped, and collapsed backward on the ground. She began making low moaning noises and rocking herself. Saliva poured out of her mouth and rolled down her cheeks to mix with tears.

Amanda turned to glance at Jer's body, waiting for some sign of life from it. Blood trickled slowly down his arm, they had not seen it earlier for staring at Barbara. A minute passed and there was nothing. Stunned silence filled the room. Kari finally broke it. "Where is he?" she shrieked.

Amanda turned to look at her. Silvana had her arm around Kari, but she shook it off and lunged forward. She knelt by Jer's body, her hand shaking as she reached to touch his scarred face, then pulled it back uncertainly. "Where is he?" she demanded, looking at Holly.

Holly just continued to rock and moan. Kari leaped over Jer's body and seized Holly by the shoulders, shaking her hard. "You tell me where he is!" she screamed. Holly didn't answer, but her head banged against the ground like a rag doll as Kari shook her.

Before Amanda could overcome her shock and move to stop her, Silvana stepped forward and grabbed Kari firmly by the shoulders.

"Kari, let her go! She can't hear you!"

"Where, where, where!" Kari shouted, tears streaming down her face.

Alonzo darted forward and pulled Kari's hands from Holly. Holly slumped back down on the floor, her eyes glassy. Alonzo yanked Kari to her feet; she balled her hands into fists and started punching him in the chest and shoulders.

He signaled for Silvana to let go of her. Reluctantly she did and stepped backward. Alonzo let Kari hit him a couple more times before finally catching her flying fists in his hands. "Why? Why did she leave him there?" Kari sobbed.

"We don't know what happened yet," Alonzo said quietly. "He might be fine."

"He's not. I know it!" Kari cried.

Alonzo pulled her into his chest and wrapped his arms around her. Great heaving sobs wracked her body and as she glanced at Tommy, Amanda felt a twinge of sympathy for the other girl. It must be terrible to lose the one you love to somebody else, and then believe he's dead, only to have him come back and then disappear again.

It didn't make her like Kari any better, but at least she felt a little sorry for her. Tommy grabbed her hand and squeezed it as though to reassure her that she had nothing to worry about.

TWELVE AMETHYST

The stronger we grow, we can't be stopped
Deveraux strength cannot be topped
Flowing, twisting from within

A reflection of ail our sins
Blessings, cursings all must flow
As we await our greatest foe
The sleeper walks, but we must wait
For she alone can determine her fate

Michael was the first to open his eyes. He leaped to his feet, immensely pleased. Eli and James were conscious a moment later. Michael couldn't help but smile at the wary look in James's eyes.

That's right, boy, just remember that I could have killed you at any time I chose. You'd do well to stay on my good side.

James rose quickly, his features taut. Eli did not fare so well. He lay unmoving for several minutes. His eyes didn't even blink. Just when Michael started thinking he might have to do a healing spell just to get his son off his carpet, Eli sat up with a yelp.

James sneered, and Michael felt a twinge of embarrassment for his eldest. Or is it embarrassment of my eldest? No matter. There would be time to take care of the two young men later. But for now—

"Time to celebrate," he announced with a laugh.

"I can't believe we did it," Eli said, shaking his head as he slowly got up. "We conjured the Black Fire and killed Holly."

"A day to be remembered in history." James smiled.

"As will be the day when we put you on the throne of skulls," Michael commented.

James flushed but met Michael's eyes. The kid knew that Michael would probably kill him. He also knew that Michael needed him, for now.

As long as we have an understanding.

Michael rubbed his hands as he walked toward the window. Outside he could see the smoke from the dozens of fires plaguing Seattle. The effects of the torrential floods were also in evidence. Yet his own house and his block had remained untouched by the destruction. Good neighbors are hard to find, he thought sardonically.

He rubbed his hands together. "I'm feeling generous, boys." With that, he waved his hands and every-thing stopped. The ocean monsters disappeared back into the sea, the fires were snuffed out, and the rain ceased. The clouds parted, and thin watery sunlight started pouring through. Michael stretched his hands toward its life-giving rays.

"It's good to see you, old friend; by God how I've missed you." And the sun shone down on Michael Deveraux, casting its life and approval on all his plans, all his work. And he smiled as

the people of Seattle dropped to their knees and offered prayers of thanksgiving to whomever had stopped the carnage.

Tri-Covenant, Seattle

"I don't like it," Sasha announced as she turned off the television.

"Thousands dead? What's to like?" Amanda muttered.

"No, not that," Sasha said, waving her hands in the air. "It's the fact that he just stopped. Why?"

"He feels he has accomplished his purpose," Pablo answered quietly.

"But how can that be?" Nicole asked. "Holly's alive."

"We know that, but maybe he doesn't," Tommy suggested. "I mean, it would make sense. From some of the things she's said, we figure that he showed up there in the Dreamtime. He must have thought that she was killed."

"By the Black Fire," Armand supplied. "She's been muttering about that constantly." Amanda shuddered. "It's a terrible thing to see," she said, her voice holding both awe and fear. Tommy wrapped an arm around her.

"He must think he killed her, and in the state that she came back, she's probably not registering on his radar," Silvana said carefully.

A hush descended on the group. In the silence they could hear Holly muttering to herself. Each fought the urge to look, but looking at her was like watching a car accident. It was such a horrific sight that it was hard to look away.

Simply put, Holly wasn't herself.

Specifically, she seemed to be possessed by so many demons that no one was sure if Holly was truly even in there. She sat in a corner, bound in a strait-jacket that Alonzo had found at a local hospital. At the same hospital he had managed to liberate some tranquilizers and had given one to Kari.

With a collective shudder they turned back to one another. "We have to do something. We can't just She held out her hand to her sister. Nicole looked down at the birthmark in Amanda's palm, then at her own. Holly bore the final third of the lily. Together, they made a powerful triumvirate.

Firmly, she put her hand against Amanda's, and then the two of them reached out toward Holly.

They were rappelled against the wall, and slid crashing down to the floor.

"Okay, okay," Amanda said unhappily. "I don't think we're going to be able to get near her."

"Then we need to try something else," Nicole said. "Yeah, but what?" Silvana asked.

"An exorcism." Sasha said the word they had all been trying so hard to avoid. "We're going to have to try to drive the demons out of her."

"Can it be done--I mean, truly?" Nicole asked, turning to Philippe.

Philippe raised an eyebrow. "I have heard of such things, but I have never actually seen it done." The others of his coven nodded agreement.

"I saw one once when I was very small," Tante Cecile offered. "My grandmother cast a demon out of a man. I remember how terrified I was."

There were a few murmurs, and then the group turned to Sasha. With Holly incapacitated and Jer missing--well, his spirit, anyway--they had all seemed to look to her for leadership. By right, Philippe should have taken up the reins, but he had subtly deferred to her.

It's not because he's afraid of leading, she thought. He just knows that he and his group are the relative newcomers and that the others would feel more comfortable with me leading, partly because I've been here longer and am older, and partly because I'm a woman. She shook her head. Truly he was wise beyond his years.

"Amanda is right. We must try." She glanced at Holly.

"And soon. It's too dangerous to leave her like this for long; she has too much power to have it uncontrolled, or, controlled by the wrong forces." She took a deep breath. "Tonight, we'll try tonight."

Michael, Seattle

"Tonight," Michael declared, smiling at Due Laurent. "We'll deal with the rest of the coven tonight."

His ancestor nodded. "I understand your wife is among them."

Michael knotted his jaw. "Ex-wife. I figure she and I are long past due for a talk." Due Laurent chuckled. "You know, in my day, there was no such thing as ex-wives. Either your wife was your wife, or she was a sacrifice." Michael smiled. "You know, I think you had something there. Yeah, I think it's time we get back to good old-fashioned family values."

"Speaking of family," Laurent added, "you should keep an eye on your older son."

"Eli?" Michael made a dismissive gesture. "He's harmless. Besides, he wouldn't dare lift a finger against me."

"Don't be too certain. Your leaving Jeraud to burn in the Dreamtime doesn't sit well with him."

Michael laughed. "I have a hard time believing that. The boys hate each other. I have it under good authority that Eli even tried to kill Jer several times the last couple of months. I believe poison food was the last attempt...."

"This may be true, but I would watch very carefully." Laurent raised one brow as he gazed at his living relative.

Michael pursed his lips. The Due wasn't often wrong. Still, it seemed implausible. He would have to think about it later. Now, he had to prepare for the night's sacrifices.

Eli turned his athame over and over again, watching how the sharp edges caught the light. He remembered the day he and Jer had blessed it, feeding it their own blood, together. Deveraux blood.300Angry, he slammed the dagger down on the table by his bed. For months he had been trying to kill Jeraud. Now, his brother was most likely dead and yet he was not rejoicing.

Dad shouldn't have left him. Jer's always been his favorite.

If Michael Deveraux could leave his Jer, a son he had begged Sir William to save, where did that leave him? Eli had always known his father was ruthless, that he had best watch his step. He just hadn't believed his father would kill Jeraud. Now Eli was faced with the realization that neither was he safe from his father's sword.

Michael was powerful, but Eli was certain that he still couldn't take down Sir William by himself. He needs James and me to create the Black Fire. So long as he can't do it himself I'm fairly safe. I just have to watch my step. Of course, I could always stand with Sir William against Dad.

Eli shuddered. If there was one person who frightened him more than his father, it was Sir William. He shook his head, unwilling to ally himself with the leader of the Supreme Coven outside of the usual hollow protestations of loyalty expected of the coven members. Better the devil you know ...He picked the athame up again and watched the jewels refract the light. I'm going to miss that bastard, he thought, surprised. At least with Jer he had always known where he had stood. Also, hating Jer had given him focus, a focus he sorely needed now.

He glanced at his watch. He was due to meet James in a half hour. It would take that long to meditate enough so that he wouldn't try to rip his throat out upon seeing him. At least Jer never took my women, he thought bitterly.

Tri-Covenate, Seattle

Sasha's hands were sweating and she dried them yet again against her robe. Half an hour before, Pablo had informed the group that he thought Michael was stirring, preparing for something.

Could he be about to attack? All the more reason we need Holly to be herself. Sasha took several deep, cleansing breaths. The furniture had been cleared from the center of the room, and candles

had been laid out on the points of a pentagram formed from herbs spread on the floor. She clutched her silver dagger tighter. She was sorry now that Kari was upstairs in a drug-induced sleep. They really could have used some of her research skills for this.

Armand and Tommy carried Holly into the room and placed her on the floor in the center of the pentagram. Her eyes were glazed and she was still muttering quietly to herself. She rocked back and forth slowly.

The others filtered into the room slowly, each holding a candle and each standing as far back along the perimeter as they could. No one was sure what exactly was going to happen, so Sasha had decided that they should stay as far back as they could. She noticed that along with the candle, each of the men, with the exception of Dan, carried a cross. Tommy lifted his in a salute with a smile that seemed to say, "What can it hurt?"

When at last they had all taken their places, Sasha began. "Goddess, hear us, your servants, as we form a sacred circle tonight. Bless us, and bless your chosen one."

"Blessed be," the others murmured. "We place her in the center of the pentagram and we recognize the five points of balance. Fire, we call upon thee to drive out those creatures that have taken up residence inside this body. Mighty wind, we pray thee sweep them back from whence they came. Earth, heal this body whose life springs from you and ground her spirit that it might stay. Water, nourish her spirit, for she has been wandering for far too long in a dry and desolate plane. And last, we call upon the spirit, the fifth and final element. Return to your rightful place. Holly, be with us once more!"

The herbs caught on fire, and the pentagram burned and shone with an unnatural light. Holly had stopped muttering and was looking down at the fire. Suddenly the head snapped back, and the eyes, which had looked so glossy and vacant, filled with a malicious hate.

"No!" The voice that came out was not Holly's. Amanda screamed and clapped her hands over her ears. Wind whipped through the room, extinguishing all the candles.

Holly's face contorted and changed into a snarling mask with two-inch fangs and glowing red eyes. "We will kill it first," hissed a serpentine voice.

"Yes, yes, we will," confirmed another.

Holly began to seize uncontrollably. Her bowels released, and a putrid stench filled the air. Red fire blazed from her eyes as she dug at her face with her fingernails. The saliva that rolled down her chin was green and fetid. As though she were a doll, she was flung around the room.

"Holly, hear me, I know you're in there! Fight it!" Sasha shouted above a keening sound she had heard only in her nightmares. Holly was asleep. Or, at least she thought she was. Someone was trying to wake her. They pushed and she pushed back. She opened one eye and saw the woman with red hair. Who was she again? She was somebody's mother, Jer, Jean ... she couldn't remember. Couldn't be that important if she couldn't remember. She closed her eyes again.

Holly's mouth gaped open, and Sasha watched in shock as two spirits pulled themselves out of her chest. They were scabby, hideous creatures with snakelike skin and jaguar claws. Once outside of Holly, they flew, circling the room at an impossible rate. She tried to track them with her eyes but failed. She didn't even see them when they slammed into her, one on each side.

She fell hard and she heard the sickening sound of bones snapping. She began to scream as she could feel their claws digging into her throat and chest. One was trying to punch its way through her stomach. The other began to climb inside her mouth.

Frantic she stabbed at them with her dagger, slashing herself in the process. She heard the others screaming, and someone caught her wrist in midair as she was about to bring the knife down into her chest to kill the demon riding her there.

"Get it off!" she sobbed.

"Kill it, kill it! And if you can't, kill me!" Then there were hands everywhere, helping her, holding her, and the demons left. Slowly, she sat up, pain knifing through her cracked ribs. She glanced over at Holly and froze. Holly's face was frozen in the look of a death mask, but from the open mouth emanated loud, hysterical laughter.

As she watched Sasha stabbing her own body with the knife in an effort to kill the demons, Tante Cecile felt like she was five again. Images from the exorcism that had been long suppressed came flooding to her mind and she fell to her knees retching. As the others scrambled to help Sasha, she tried to push her mind into the memories, to remember what her grandmother had done, how she had defeated the demon.

She muttered a calming spell over herself, but it did no good. She glanced over to see Sasha sitting up, clutching at her ribs. She was bleeding from half a dozen wounds in her chest and stomach region. Let them all be shallow, she prayed. Alonzo helped her out and ushered her quickly from the room. Pablo was huddled in a corner, his eyes wide with terror, rocking himself. For one terrible moment she thought that he, too, was possessed. Then she remembered that the boy could read minds. The horrors he must be seeing in Sasha's and Holly's!