



PENNY DREADFUL



A
MAGE
THE ASCENSION

Novel in Eight Parts
and an Epilogue

BY
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Penny Dreadful™

A Mage: The Ascension® Novel in Eight Parts and an Epilogue

Part One

In which Penny experiences Winter in Springtime, Peter smells a rat, an ugly man is overcome by beauty, not to mention bitterness and brute force, Neville calls a war council, and Blackrose presents her “signature fragrance.” This followed by a visit to the Alexandrian Club, where Penny makes a Wilde assumption, the merest suggestion of black humor gives rise to little amusement, and we are reminded not only of the Language of the Fan and of Flowers, but of the curious Code of Handkerchiefs. After which Penny chooses a new fragrance, dances upon several graves, and an attractive gentleman makes an even more attractive offer.

Kevin Andrew Murphy



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Mister Mistoffelees said I would know when and how to begin my Book of Shadows, and when a four-hundred-year-old talking cat tells you something, you should probably listen. At least if you're an apprentice witch who's trying to fake it as best she can.

I hope this works for the *how*, but regardless, it'll have to do, because we've definitely reached the *when*. Last night the weirdness threshold hit the "That's one big Twinkie" level, and as I've said in the past, you don't have to be Shakespeare to understand signs and portents. The moon didn't turn to blood, and I don't think a lioness whelped in the streets either, but they didn't need to, because not only have the churchyards yawned forth their dead, but the corpses have gotten dressed up and gone clubbing.

Trust me on this. I'm a witch, and I know whereof I speak. If you don't believe me, you can ask my cat.

But the time has come, the Walrus said, to talk of many things, not the least of which being witchcraft and the walking dead, so let me begin:

Last night I went to Winter. As in *A Winter Gone By*, San Francisco's Goth scene for Saturdays. I don't know if you're much into the club scene, but if you are, you know there are scenes and scenes. Some, like Country and Heavy Metal, can support clubs for the whole week. Others, like Techno, Industrial and Goth, can only pack one club on any given night, even in a place like San Francisco.

Here in the City, clubs open like morning glories and fade just as fast. Temple and Tear Garden have folded and fallen, The House of Usher has suffered the same fate as Poe's, and even the Waydown, which I helped put on, has gone the way of Babylon the Great: She's fallen and she can't get up.

Sort of.

Don't be confused. It's fairly simple, actually. Winter, in reality—or at least the rest of the week—is Club Arte, one of the beautiful old dance halls left over from the big-band period. When the crew that runs Winter shows up, however, it's transfigured and ennobled into A Winter Gone By, and all that Club Arte gives it is the space, the architecture, and the all-important liquor license.

That's the way it goes with micro-clubs and traveling parties: They owe their existence not so much to the spot as to the people and props that make them up. Goths crews are nomads who pitch their black lace wherever they can find, and even the crews who lose their clubs mix and match, join each other's tribes, and form new caravans.

Which is why, last night when I went to Winter, I was also going to the Waydown. Or, I should say, I was going to Winter to make it the Waydown, because unlike the other crews who put on the S.F. Goth clubs, mine, the Hollow Ones, has just a bit of an edge. Namely, magick.

Like I said, I'm a witch. Or mage, if you want to be really politically correct and pretentious, but I ask you, what do *you* call a woman who dresses all in black, then accessorizes it with the talking cat to match? Right. Though I don't worship the Great Mother Goddess or, for that matter, the Christian devil, and the same goes for the rest of us Hollowers. We're all mages, though the proper terms for us vary with our specialties, the current crew having everything on the membership roster from witches and wizards to enchantresses and necromancers.

Anyway, I'd gotten dressed to the nines—high-button boots, high-collared mourning gown, hair done up in a bun set off by spit-curls, merry widow hat, antique hat pin with an even older silver

penny for the head, and, as star accent, my vintage headmistress chain, knotted flapper-style so as to best display (and more importantly not lose) the curious little silver key which had once belonged to the Elector of Saxony. Really, Witches' Honor. I may not have the actual provenance, but let me assure you, my pendant was and is the Elector's long-lost Silver Key, a.k.a. the Silver Nutmeg, so named since, if you play Eighteenth Century Transformers with it, it actually does compact down into an attractive little silver nut that you'd probably stick in a shadow box and forget about if you didn't know what it was.

I, however, most assuredly *do*, and after the adventure I had to go through to get it (or really, to realize what I already had), I didn't intend to let it out of my sight, let alone off its chain. It's that valuable.

Yet, as Scheherazade said, *that* is the subject of another tale. At the moment, the Silver Key was being nothing more than a classy Goth fashion accessory, and suffice it to say that with the addition of the Elector of Saxony's play-pretty, I had everything to complete my outfit but for the black lace parasol (which had eluded me thus far). And thus attired, I got to Winter unfashionably early (i.e. ten).

Then again, it's not as if I had anything better to do. My apartment hunt of the afternoon before had gone abysmally, and that's saying something, since next to 'Penny Dreadful,' my chosen *nom de Goth*, my second-most-common sobriquet is 'Lucky Penny.' Most days I can find anything I'm looking for (such as, just to give an example, legendary silver baubles once owned by the long dead rulers of long dead German republics) without even breaking a sweat.

But at that particular moment, my faith in Serendipity was being put to the test. Or at least I was seriously beginning to consider whether I should attempt a little Catholic voodoo to grease the wheels—for example, burying a statue of St. Joseph (patron saint of homes, families and real estate agents) in the middle of Golden Gate Park—and whether that would be any more productive or enter-

taining than my as-of-yet fruitless search for an appropriate and affordable apartment for an apprentice witch.

Of course, general annoyance at the state of housing in San Francisco wasn't my only reason for visiting Winter. I'd also made a promise to meet with the rest of the Hollowers, and excepting Neville, I'm the responsible one. Which is why I'd also been entrusted with one of the seven seals.

No, not *those* seals (or at least I hope not). Our seals are these silver bulla, like the Pope uses on official documents, except the Pope makes his out of lead, and so far as I know, he doesn't use them as fashion accessories either. We melted down a silver candlestick from the Old St. Francis (where we used to hold the Waydown), sacrificed some personal token of power (also of silver, if we could manage it: I gave up the St. Christopher medal I've had since I was six, which hurt, but if it doesn't, then it's not a sacrifice, by definition, and Sasha'd already dropped her Star of David into the crucible so I wasn't about to be chintzy), then poured the resulting alloy onto ribbons and stamped it with Neville's Eye of Horus seal ring, a.k.a. the right Eye of Ra, the sun god.

This, of course, reverses the seal, making the Lunar Eye, also known as the Udjat (or Weidjot if you read Budge, but then he mangles his Egyptology), mark of blessing and protection for travelers and wanderers. Something pretty appropriate for us Hollowers, in my humble opinion, but more than that, when you get all seven seals in one room, the power of the Waydown is back, since we tied it all in with magick and witchcraft and enchantment and so forth.

I had the orange ribbon (we'd followed the Roy G. Biv scheme you learn in high school chemistry, and for that matter, ritual magick) and was using it as the choker you need to set off the type of gown I was wearing, the Udjat Eye taking the place of the more usual cameo brooch. Which was nice, since I'd found a pair of earrings to match—right and left so as to keep watch—and, while I'll admit that that's not much of a feat, what with all the occult shops in the area not to mention Rosicrucian Park down in San Jose, they were just the right size to not only complete my set of silver

accessories, but also do the twin task of drawing attention to the bulla at my throat at the same time as making it appear to the great unwashed as nothing more than a pretty-shiny I picked up at Ren Faire.

Camouflage is very important when you're a witch. In ages past, you could fly your broomstick across the face of the moon and not have people bat an eye, or at least not have to worry about them calling 911. But in our current jaded age, not only is it inadvisable to do showy magick right there in front of God and everyone (not that I think it ever was, mind you), but it can also be rather bad for your health, or at least your social life, to get pegged as a real witch by anyone outside of the club. Which isn't to say that you can't wear a membership pin out in public, or even the tools of the trade, but it's a lot better be seen with a bit of fashionably occult jewelry than it is to be caught wearing a pointy hat. Every day may be Halloween in our little cobwebbed corner, thank you Ministry, but in the cold cruel world outside the cemetery gates, Halloween comes but once a year, and the rest of the time the pointy hats are reserved for dunces.

But you can't be a girl without learning how to play dress-up, and so, with the Orange Badge of Gothness thus prominently and not so prominently on display, I got to the lounge just in time to meet the Blue Ranger and Captain Indigo. Ahem—I mean the bearers of the Blue Eye and the Indigo Eye, namely, Peter and Neville.

Peter had his bulla suspended from the miniature C-clamp in his left earlobe, the ribbon dangling down as an accent to his hair while the silver took the place of the little fishing weights the pierce-and-stretch crowd usually favor. It still looked painful, but then again, that's the general idea, at least if you're going for Goth-Punk S.F.-style. (And believe you me, Mr. Blue is no stranger to pain, since when we created the Udjat eyes, he gave up the one bit of silver he possessed—a crown, and no, I'm not talking about the type you wear on your head. I'm talking about the type you have to pull out of the back of your mouth with a pair of needle-nosed pliers, then get replaced at the dentist's at great expense. But, as I've said, a sacrifice isn't a sacrifice unless it hurts.)

Pete's our resident necromancer, though he looks for distractions (like silver crowns and the loss of same) to keep his mind off it. In other words, he's in denial. While there are those who aspire to Gothness, there are some who have it thrust upon them, and "Spooky Pete" is firmly in the second camp. I'm not certain of the particulars, but I've gathered that he once had a near-death experience, and ever since then the dead have been talking to him nonstop, though Peter just wishes they'd all go away and leave him alone. Especially Thaddeus, who's this Victorian lawyer he has for his spirit guide.

I'm not sure if I believe in Thaddeus (after all, I've never actually *seen* a ghost), but I once asked Mister Mistoffelees, and he gave me his "Of course— isn't it obvious?" look. And all I can say is that if I can believe in talking cats, I can certainly believe in ghosts. Especially dapper Victorian gentlemen with sword canes.

Peter saluted by way of looking up from his glass and raising it to me slightly—or him the equivalent of a friendly smile and wave—while Neville just looked at me blandly, said, "Penny," then went back to staring at the ballroom.

"And a pleasant evening to you both." I set my lunch pail down on the bar with a slight clank and took the seat Neville indicated offhandedly, careful of my skirts. Peter scowled, making his nose ring flip up for an instant, while Neville's soulless expression didn't change. That was to be expected, since according to both Mister Mistoffelees and Peter, he doesn't have one. Which figures rather neatly with the old-fashioned Scandinavian-style wizardry he practices when he actually stoops so low as to work a spell.

Mostly, Neville supervises and directs, even though he looks all of a tall, gangly nineteen, and no matter how *wyk* he is in the ways of wizardry, he's still never figured out how to dye his hair properly; the blond roots show through almost everything.

But if you know anything about fairytales like I do, you know that the classiest class of wizards are the ones without souls, and no, I'm not talking about the wannabes who sell out to the powers of darkness and sign in blood on the dotted line. What I'm talking

about are the wizards who take their soul, or more specifically, their death, and go lock it in a safe deposit box somewhere—Kostchtchie the Deathless, et cetera—and while I don't think Neville's quite that old, he isn't obnoxious and doesn't advertise, so he shouldn't have a Prince Ivan coming after him any time soon.

Last night, he was wearing a nice but unremarkable black wool turtleneck with the Indigo Eye around his neck as a medallion—very plain and understated, as per his usual style—while his cartomancy deck, which he'd made out of the *Gashleycrumb Tinies*, was lying on the bar behind him, face up.

Call it morbid curiosity, but I glanced over to see which *Tiny* it was cut to, and while the top line (which refers to which child at the moment happens to be dead) was lying in shadow and thus not readable without leaning over and being really obvious about it, the bottom line read, *sucked dry by a leech*.

That, I knew, was supposed to go with *F is for Fanny*, but with Neville's cards, you could never be certain. I'd had occasion to borrow them once, and while Mr. Gorey may have intended the *Tinies* to go one way, all I can say is that Neville's deck occasionally turned up illustrations and epigrams that went quite another.

Anyway, I sat down and got my usual—amaretto and Coke—and Mister Mistoffelees unwound himself from my shoulders and stalked down to the end of the bar where he likes to watch the dance floor from. I know, cats aren't supposed to be in bars, but black cats also have black cat bones, as a matter of course, and, if you're familiar with medieval legend (or, for that matter, rhythm and blues) then you know the metaphysical significance of the fact.

If not, then let me make a quick aside: According to popular medieval superstition, if you suck on a black cat bone, it gives you the power to turn invisible. Provided, of course, that the cat that it came from was pure black without a speck of white, that you've got the right bone, and obviously that someone killed the cat in the first place, specifically boiling it alive at midnight on the night of the full moon, since it's rather hard to get a cat to part with its bones otherwise.

Topping that, modern blues lore credits black cat bones with the power to make the sucker sexually irresistible, among other perks, which of course accounts for skyrocketing number of cat murders since the middle ages, and the plain fact that you can't adopt a black cat from the Humane Society for two months on either side of Halloween. (Try it if you don't believe me.) Though frankly being invisible and sexually irresistible at the same time seems like an exercise in frustration, at least if all the legends are to be believed.

But getting back to the matter at hand, Mister Mistoffelees is, in fact, a pure black cat without a speck of white, and while I've seen no indications one way or the other regarding sorcerous sex-appeal (not being a female cat), all I can say is that if a pre-Renaissance witch's familiar can't manage a 'somebody else's problem' field, then we're all in a bunch of trouble.

Of course, Mister Mistoffelees wouldn't refer to it as that (or, for that matter, crib any line from *Hitchhiker's Guide*). Being the old-fashioned sort, he'd probably use one of Neville's terms and call the effect the "Cloak of Mist" or "Veil of Indifference" or some other classy catch phrase. If, of course, he chose to call attention to it at all, which isn't very likely. Aside from it being completely out of character for a cat (and you haven't learned the meaning of 'secretive' or 'mysterious' until you get a cat who's also a professional witch's familiar), calling attention to yourself is exactly the sort of thing that will ruin that form of invisibility. It's like saying, "Why look! Isn't that the Purloined Letter over there?" Once you point something out, you can't hide it from anyone who's in on the secret. The cat's out of the bag, so to speak.

The point to the Purloined Letter effect is to hide in plain sight while not running into the usual 'invisible man' problems of people bumping into you or setting drinks on your tail. Any number of people had no doubt already noticed my cat, but had simply assumed that that he was a stuffed toy, or that I had permission, or that maybe he was against the City Health Codes, but it wasn't any of their business, so why should they bother?

Now all this, of course, was nothing unusual. I mean, unusual for us. Neville and I are usually the first to get anywhere, Peter always acts like a cross between Hamlet and Eeyore, and my familiar finds endless amusement sitting right there in plain sight and watching the Goths.

Nothing was unusual either in Blackrose being the fourth to show up. Blackrose is another witch, but more of the type with the B, if you take my meaning, especially when she gets really pretentious and calls herself an enchantress. Though I probably shouldn't badmouth her too much. After all, one of her feather boas saved my butt once, and while she doesn't have my knack for finding neat stuff, with what little she does find, she can do some amazing tricks.

Last night was no exception. Her dress was sheer black silk, her latest feather boa was also black with strands of iridescent Mylar sparkly, and her usual 'Elvira-meets-Tina-Turner'-do was done up rather fetchingly in a topknot, held together with a wine velvet ribbon, the Crimson Eye at the front. The beaded clutch purse was a nice touch, and on the whole, she gave the impression of an escapee from the *Gorey Mystery!* credits, down to running in in a series of tiny steps, feather boa trailing from one hand, clove cigarette trailing smoke from the other.

"Neville, darling..." Blackrose began, fawning over him in a calculated scene while Neville remained only slightly more impassive than Mr. Spock.

That was when Peter moved. "Fuck..." he swore (which was nothing unusual for Peter either, if you know the man), slammed down his drink on the bar, and stalked away.

Nothing was too unusual in this either, but the look in his eyes...

Well, something you should know (though you've probably figured it out already): Peter has the Sight. He can see the dead, and while I don't have that gift, sometimes I catch glimpses of things reflected in his eyes. Spooky Pete's eyes are like cold, gray mirrors, and they're haunted. Literally.

But what I saw in his eyes wasn't a ghost. It was Death.

It was only a split second, only a flash, but then Peter was past me, and I heard him mutter, “Out of my way, you fuckin’ black-robed bastard,” as he shoved empty air to one side and barged into the men’s room, Mephisto Waltz’s cover of *Paint It Black* blaring like Satanic theme music as the door slammed shut.

That clinched it. I grabbed my lunch pail and sprinted after him, with only a slight stumble as Mister Mistoffelees sprang to my shoulder. Like you’d guess, a witch doesn’t go anywhere without her familiar, though as his claws sunk in, I really wished I’d worked better shoulder pads into my gown.

But that’s neither here nor there. A cold chill washed over me and Mister Mistoffelees hissed as I put my hand on the door, disco lights spangling across both, but I pushed on through into the forbidden chamber to see Peter glaring at the corner.

The empty corner, I might add, save for where someone had listened to the soundtrack too much and decided “Hey! Let’s be really Goth and paint the urinal black!” (Yes, there is such a thing as being too Goth.)

But like I said, Peter has the Sight, like a cat, and Mister Mistoffelees backed him up by hissing again as Peter snarled, “Get away from her, you fuck!”

I still didn’t see anything, but Peter had switched over fully from Eeyore to Hamlet in the famous “Rat! I smell a rat!” scene where he stabs Polonius hiding behind the tapestry. And while there aren’t any tapestries in the men’s room of Club Arte, there was an answering hiss from the air over the blackened urinal, and the next second, Peter reached out and grabbed the air and spun it around.

You know how I mentioned Purloined Letters and ‘Somebody else’s problem’ fields? Well, somebody else’s problem suddenly became my problem, because the air shimmered like someone had just pulled aside a tapestry, and that moment I was staring right at a vampire that Peter had by the shoulder.

And not just any vampire, ‘cause this one was the ugliest sucker I’ve ever seen, like what you would expect if Ted Turner took the old German silent classic *Nosferatu* and colorized it. Yes, the colors were

that wrong, the critter's face this horrible, ghastly blue, like an anemic Smurf, all except for the fangs, which were long and yellow and dripping with red blood, and I don't know how I could have missed it except that it was so supernaturally ugly that I'd probably blanked it out of my mind until Peter grabbed it. Which is presumably what the thing wanted.

"Leave us, mortal!" it hissed, and that's when I noticed where the blood had come from: Dorothea. Dorothea isn't one of us Hollowers, but we know her, and she's a hanger-on at most of the clubs. Her main problem is that she's too pretty for her own good, and even then she was still pulling it off, for all that she was slumped unconscious in the urinal trough, one arm thrown back languorously over the side.

Peter slammed the vampire up against the wall. "You don't know what the fuck you're dealing with, you ugly freak..."

The vampire laughed. "What? A ghoul? Some foolish hunter?" He gave a leer worthy of Goya or Brueghel the Elder. "Go away, fool. The prince has given me *carte blanche* to take whomever I want. Take care that it isn't your own pretty face I spoil."

"That would be a very foolish decision, nightgaunt," said Mister Mistoffelees, still sitting on my shoulder, and the vampire stopped laughing, looking to him. An expression of extreme unease worked its way across his ugly features as he looked from Mister Mistoffelees, to me, then back to Peter, and you could almost hear the gears click in his head: talking black cat; girl in black; talking cat + girl in black = witch & her familiar; guy with witch & familiar =

"That's right, you fuck," Peter hissed, and the vampire shrank back into the corner, "I'm a necromancer, and you're dead meat, you fuckin' sewer rat."

Peter had probably said the wrong thing, or maybe it's just the old common wisdom that you don't corner sewer rats, especially ones with three-inch fangs, but the vampire suddenly recovered some of his backbone and reached out and grabbed the lapels of Peter's pea coat. "Pretty boy, I could destroy you. You have not seen ugliness till—"

At that moment one of the toilet mints chose to levitate out of the urinal and hang suspended in the air between the two of them, abruptly silencing the creature with the pure surrealism and doing this even more so when it sunk itself like a hockey puck into his mouth.

“Thanks, Thad,” Peter said, then grinned at the flabbergasted bloodsucker. “You ain’t seen ugliness till you’ve seen your soul, you fuckin’ rat. Look into my eyes, and you’ll see what I’m fuckin’ seein’ right now.”

The vampire did, and I’m glad I wasn’t seeing what was in Peter’s eyes right then, because the look of abject horror and revulsion in the monster’s eyes was bad enough. His mouth fell open in shock, the toilet mint falling to the floor, and a low squeal came from the back of his throat as he tried to crawl away.

And then he shrank down in the corner, but literally this time, getting smaller and furrier and uglier as Peter continued to give him the evil eye, then dropped him and kicked him and said, “Fuckin’ sewer rat.”

The vampire changed, from a mangy version of the giant rat of Sumatra, to a rodent of unusual size, to nothing more than a large, diseased, sewer rat.

It looked up in terror, then darted for a hole in the opposite wall, but like I said, I have a cat, and if Mister Mistoffelees hasn’t learned how to catch a rat in four hundred years, we’re all in trouble.

A brief fight ensued in the lone stall and behind the toilet tank, then a moment later my cat emerged, proudly dragging the remains of the dead rat.

Of course, I wasn’t taking any chances. The rat had been dead to begin with, and while badly clawed and mauled by Mister Mistoffelees, I didn’t feel safe until I’d skewered it on a Number Two pencil and locked it in my lunch pail.

Mistoffelees turned his back on this and fastidiously began washing his paws—old bit of business between us involved me locking him in another lunch pail, and although that was while he was engaged with his previous “Mistress,” it’s still a sore point—and

Peter said, "I'm death-tainted. You help Dorothea," then turned to the air and shoved it, snarling, "And you stay away from her, you skull-faced asshole! She ain't yours. Not yet..."

The door flew open on its own, and a cold wind swept through the room with a soft rustle like owl wings, Peter stalking after it. But the only note that my cat made of this was to stop and switch paws.

I didn't ask, it probably being one of those "obvious" things, and anyway, I had Dorothea to worry about. She was badly hurt, mostly from blood loss, and the wounds on her neck were still bleeding. And I don't know what idiot in special effects came up with the cute mosquito bites you see in vampire movies, but all I can say is that the real ones bleed like pigs. I slapped my hand over them to prevent any further blood loss and turned to my familiar, who was still nonchalantly washing himself. "Mistoffelees!" I grated out, the stress evident in my voice. "If you would be so kind as to go get Sasha?"

"Mister Mistoffelees," he corrected, pausing for a moment. "It was you yourself who renamed me. And I believe young master Peter has already gone to do just that."

He went back to washing himself until a minute later when the bathroom suddenly became very crowded. Sasha was there, and aside from what Goth wear you can gather from Lane Bryant (and the Green Bulla almost lost amid a treasure trove of costume jewelry), she looked like just what she is: a kind, chubby Jewish girl from New York, who will one day make a wonderful grandmother. Sasha is also a bloodstopper, having the healer's gift to an extraordinary degree. She shooed me aside, and all she had to do was wipe her hand over Dorothea's neck, and the puncture wounds faded to bad stage-makeup insect bites.

"Poor little lamb," Sasha crooned, moistening her handkerchief with spit and wiping away the worst of the blood, while Dorothea lay there, her natural beauty making her look for all the world like she was Camille or the sufferer in Fuselli's *Nightmare*, lying in a silken bed instead of reclining in the "I see a urinal and I want to paint it black" trough of the men's room of Club Arte. "Lucky you

and Peter got here in time, Penny. She's lost a good bit of blood, but it's nothing some bed rest and chicken soup won't cure."

I'd looked at her, and in my unprofessional opinion it was a lot worse than what could be cured with chicken soup, but then again I wasn't Sasha, and my chicken soup wasn't her chicken soup.

"Mrowww?" inquired Mister Mistoffelees, coiling his tail around one of Sasha's legs, then leaping onto the rim of the urinal.

"And you too, of course, precious Mistaw Mistophewhees..." Sasha crooned, scratching him once behind the ears, and he purred, curling contentedly onto Dorothea's chest and kneading the front of her dress.

A familiar can really help a witch with her spells, and I certainly don't mind sharing the wealth, though Mistoffelees is a sucker for Sasha. As you might expect, anyone who can seal a punctured carotid artery with just a pass of her hand can also give one heck of a cat massage.

Baron, Sasha's S.O. and our crew's jack-of-all-trades, came up next to her, his Mohawk a foot-and-a-half if it was an inch, just below it the violet and silver of his Seal, the ribbon twisted into a headband. Then he tilted his head, and I saw it was just another one of the extremely detailed tattoos he used for his magickal workings, not the actual bulla. Though if you've seen Baron's tattoos, you know that telling the pictures from the reality is a dicey thing; you can never be quite certain which is what.

"Let's get her out of the tweak skull," Baron said, practical as always. His voice betrayed more education than he liked to let on, along with a certain Ivy League lilt that led me to think he'd been brought up to wear monogrammed sweater-vests and be called Skip before he'd finally broken free and joined the counterculture.

Regardless, Sasha had no objections to removing Dorothea from the urinal, and I certainly didn't either. Baron leaned over, his tank top all but a formality, muscles flexing under his tattoos. And I swear, the Popeye on his left bicep (which had somehow taken the place of the mermaid that had been there last week) pulled out a can of spinach, popped it, and gobbled it down as Baron lifted Dorothea

out of the urinal, apparently oblivious to the spontaneous animation and copyright violation going on on his arm.

Baron backed out the door with Dorothea, Mister Mistoffelees still purring on her chest and Sasha fussing over her, which left me in the men's restroom with Brent, the last and latest addition to the inner circle of our merry band.

Brent has the yellow ribbon, which he was wearing in the style of a POW/MIA armband—the only thing that kept him from being the world's most nondescript Person in Black—and if Peter is Eeyore, well, Brent has to be Rabbit. He's always worrying over something. "Is she...dead?" he asked, shuddering.

I shrugged. "Not if Sasha has anything to say about it." I took a moment to wash up in the sink, finding an actual clean bar of lavender soap. Whatever miracles Sasha had worked for Dorothea had been too late to save the sleeve of my gown, however, and I did a hasty Lady Macbeth imitation. "Don't worry," I said. "I think she's patched up worse. Worst case she'll need a blood transfusion."

Brent looked slightly relieved, though not very, although neither reaction was surprising. He has this phobia of death only matched by Peter's dislike of the dead, and I believe it comes from the fact that Baron and Blackrose put him through a rather nasty version of the 'Death and Resurrection Show,' involving Baron's wicker-man tattoo and Blackrose's copy of *The Curious Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (which she got from me, but what the hey, I already have the first publication, so I could spare a paperback).

Of course, Brent had been going to betray us to the Men in Black (the nasty, creepy sort you see on *X-Files*, not to be confused with the Persons in Black or Ladies in Red), so I suppose it's fair, though a little bit extreme. Extreme in that when all Baron and Blackrose needed was some simple mesmerism, they decided to drive the point home by incinerating Brent, then using a little alchemy and some Lovecraftian voodoo to reconstitute his ashes on Blackrose's kitchen floor—though if you've seen her kitchen, that's enough to put the fear of Jesus into someone by itself.

But Blackrose's kitchen-witch alchemy bound his loyalty to the Hollow Ones at least as well as a swinging pocket watch (and far less conventionally, which is all to the good). And that let us send him back to the New World Order (the Men in Black's latest code name for their secret clubhouse, thank you George Bush) to tell them we were just a bunch of inept wannabes with an exaggerated reputation—and they, in turn, sent him back to watch us in case any real mages ever show up. So it isn't a big deal for us to trust Brent now, or at least as far as we trust Blackrose.

"I hope she lives," Brent said. "Dying is...bad."

"Yeah, I know," I said, patting him on the back and ushering him out of the men's room. Not that I have any personal, firsthand knowledge of death, mind you, but Brent goes on enough about it that you have to feel sorry for him, or at least want to shut him up. And whatever dying's like, it probably doesn't hold a candle to being whammied into a rat, beat up by a cat, then staked with a Number Two pencil like the former vampire in my lunch pail.

Once I got out to the main lounge, the war council had already assembled, though Baron and Sasha were absent, along with Dorothea. Mister Mistoffelees, however, launched himself from the top of an urn to my shoulder, so I made the assumption that he'd done as much work as he needed to, and Baron and Sasha had taken Dorothea back to their apartment to be nursed back to health.

The votive candle in the middle of the coffee table glowed like a Chinese ghost lantern, touched, I was certain, by Pete's necromancy, and I took my place in the spare loveseat beside Brent, my Eye making the fifth point of a protective pentacle and completing the séance-style privacy charm. Though before I could even arrange my skirts, Blackrose was already gushing, "Penelope, dearest, how very shocking. Peter has told us all about it."

Peter, I was certain, had done nothing of the sort. When he isn't swearing, the man is as frugal with his words as a Japanese poet, and Blackrose wanted to hear all the juicy details.

I really didn't want to go into it just yet, and if Blackrose hadn't been busy kissing up to Neville, she could have seen it herself

firsthand. Not as if it were some treat I would pay to see twice, mind you, but still...

I perched my lunch pail on my knees, hands on top. "I have a rat-on-a-stick in my lunchbox. What are we going to do about it?"

Neville has that air of regal authority that you only see in people who are very old, very powerful, and have the common sense to exercise that respect only when it is very important. This was one of those times, and Neville raised two fingers, crossed, for silence, and said, "Penny has cut to the heart of the matter. What *are* we going to do about it?"

"Toss the rat in the furnace and have done with it," Peter said from the arm of the couch where he sat, his back halfway to the group.

"Impractical," said Neville, as if he had seriously entertained the thought. "I know these nightgaunts, and the ones with the horrid countenances are...clannish. If one disappears, others will come to search for him, and they may, by hook or crook, discover who and what we are. They would then pass on that information to those who would do us the most harm." He glanced to Brent until Brent nodded, wordlessly signifying that yes, the conspiracy to end all conspiracies had its connections, and the pug-ugly vampires could whisper of our existence to some other nameless lurker-in-the-shadows, who'd pass on this gossip to Hitler's Bavarian Illuminati and maybe the Theosophical Society, who would then trade secrets with some other mysterious group, and after a week of cloak-and-dagger telephone tag, word would get to the New World Order (or whatever the MIBs choose to style their clubhouse next week) that the Hollow Ones are something more than just a gaggle of silly Goths who play with Tarot cards and host the occasional dance club—and poor Brent would have one heck of a time convincing his superiors otherwise without bringing suspicion on himself.

Of course, even though I'm Illuminated (in the Robert Anton Wilson sense, as opposed to Baron, who's illuminated in the small i sense as well), I won't even begin to go into the intricacies of who puppets what, and what group controls who, or even if any of the

secret societies and ancient brotherhoods actually exist, and if they do, whether they're truly Enlightened (with the capital E) or are just old boys' clubs with a fondness for rituals and secret handshakes and no true understanding of the metaphysics behind them. I mean, my uncle Don's a Mason, and if you believe the conspiracy literature, they run everything, but all I think he controls is a weekly poker game, and—while I'd love to be proven wrong on this—both my sixth sense and my cat tell me that he can't even do card tricks, let alone True Magick. (As Mister Mistoffelees remarked after we went over for dinner one night, the Masons have apparently relaxed their standards since the middle ages.) And have you ever met a Templar, excepting the Masonic version? No? Thought not.

Regardless, let me just say that the MIBs are members of some Illuminati clearinghouse that styles itself "The Technocracy"—even though until recently I'd just thought that the Technocracy (or "Technocracy, Inc.," to be proper) was nothing more than an old 1930's socialist group that operates out of a storefront on Balboa, gives out free literature, and holds occasional seminars at the Main Library. But according to Brent, the two are related only in the vaguest terms (secret global conspiracies unable to sue for trademark infringement), and in any case, the Technocracy (the secret one, not the storefront on Balboa) has enough power to cause us Hollowers no end of grief if it ever finds out that we're something more than just interestingly lost souls with a penchant for black and pretensions to witchcraft, and that in fact we've actually gotten into the global conspiracy game ourselves, with auxiliary leagues in other cities and double-agents and spies and everything.

Of course Neville, being who he is, didn't need to spell this out. A look or a glance is more than sufficient, and after the barest nod to Brent, he looked back to the rest of our circle, cocking his head slightly. "Any other suggestions?"

Blackrose waved her ever-present clove cigarette, which she had had the occasion to fit into one of the long, black cigarette holders they had in the twenties. Together with the topknot and feather boa, it made her look like an underage Goth version of Auntie

Mame. "Maybe we could go to a vampire with more power—their king or queen or some such—beg their pardon and ask for a truce?"

Sometimes Blackrose shows rare sense, and I could tell from Neville's expression that she'd hit on the answer he wanted. "Eminently sensible. Are there any other thoughts from the group?"

Peter cocked his head, listening to the air. "Thad says it's called a prince—the King Vampire dude. He says the vamps hang out downstairs at the Alexandrian Club." He listened to the air for another moment. "Thad doesn't know who the prince is, but the head honcho at the Alexandrian is some guy called Sebastian. Says he's a fop, whatever that means." Peter listened a moment more, then gave a rare smile. "Oh, an art fag."

You can see why having a necromancer in the group can be useful, even if he can be a bit rude. Though from what Peter has said in the past, I've gathered that Thaddeus has been assigned to Peter to give him a bit of spit and polish, not to mention tact.

Neville placed one finger to his lips, considering. "You realize we wouldn't be at this juncture if it weren't for your actions." Peter looked at him sharply, and Neville held up his palm for silence. "I am not faulting you for getting involved, mind you, simply for the vulgar way you dealt with the situation."

Peter sneered, making his nose ring flip up again. "Vampires turn into rats. Everybody knows that. Watch *Dracula*."

Neville chose not to pursue the matter, and Brent leaned forward then, his expression turned as rabby as the General in *Watership Down* (which is to say, not very), and you could see his former (and still current) calling as a Man in Black. "We have to threaten them."

Neville cocked his head, looking askance at this, and Brent explained himself further: "We need to negotiate from a position of strength. We can't just go in acting like it was all an accident or a misunderstanding—they won't respect that—but they will if we let them know that we have a bullet with their name on it if they try anything against us."

"Or a Number Two pencil with their name on it, but same thing," I chimed in. Everybody looked at me, but I feel I should stick up for

Brent, because, at the very least, he offers a fresh perspective, and he shouldn't be dismissed out of hand. "I think Blackrose and Brent are both right, to an extent. We need to ask for a truce, but we can't be mousy about it. Umpteenth Ferengi Rule of Acquisition: Ask for more than they're willing to give. That way they can feel good when you back down, and you can still get what you want." I smiled. "Trust the Queen of the Hagglers on this one."

Neville nodded gravely. "I believe we shall, unless there are any objections." He glanced around. "Now, who shall bell the cat?" Mister Mistoffelees meowed grumpily at the choice of metaphor, pricking my shoulder with his claws, but Neville continued on, unheeded. "The mission will require a person of tact and diplomacy, a certain degree of reserve and decorum, and a measure of outright brashness." Blackrose preened, smiling and tapping the ash from her cigarette, and Neville looked at her coldly. "The obvious choice is Penny."

Blackrose looked shocked, and seemed about to protest, then abruptly shut her mouth. Sometimes, as I said, she shows rare sense, and instead she just took a frantic drag on her long-stemmed cigarette as Neville turned to me.

"Penny, are you prepared to go to the nightgaunts, bearing an olive branch, and if need be, a sword?"

I glanced around. Blackrose had an expression somewhere between envy and dawning relief, while Peter looked troubled. Rude as the man can be, he cares deeply, and I don't need Mister Mistoffelees to tell that he has a crush on me. Not that he lets it show in anything aside from sneers and grumbling, most days.

I glanced to Brent then, who had his mouth set in a hard line, even more deeply troubled, though much more unreadable. Then I looked back to Neville. Not to toot my own horn too much, but I really was the obvious choice, and honor among Goths and all that, so I had no alternative but to accept. "Alright," I said. "I might as well go tonight. Strike while the blood is wet, as it were."

Neville nodded. "Is there anything you might require?"

Aside from a major life insurance policy? I glanced around the circle, ending at Blackrose. As Neville indicated, I know something about peace offerings, and asking someone's help is always a neat way to bury the hatchet. That's probably one of the Ferengi Rules of Acquisition too, but regardless, I smiled at Blackrose as winsomely as I could. "Could I borrow a bit of your special perfume?"

Blackrose paused, then smiled in return. "My signature fragrance," she corrected gently, but beamed because the spotlight was on her for a moment. That, of course, is the problem with Blackrose: She pouts when she isn't the center of attention, and for a mission of diplomacy, that is *not* a desirable trait. Especially when dealing with someone as peacocky as a foppish vampire must be. But still smiling, she opened her clutch purse and took out a dark rose crystal vial, handing it to me with great ceremony.

With a smile and nod I accepted it, putting a drop behind each ear, one on my left wrist, and an extra helping on my right where my sleeve had been soaked in Dorothea's blood. The perfume ascended in a choking mist of musk rose, tea rose, rock rose and attar of every rose that Blackrose could get her hands on, along with the omnipresent clove oil, but I held my breath, as gagging would *not* have been politic.

Instead, I just smiled, replacing the stopper, then handed it back to Blackrose. She put it in her reticule and I chafed my wrists together. The scent of roses rose up even more strongly, and I hoped that, among all the buds and blossoms in Blackrose's wild potpourri, there was at least one of the wild mountain roses which Bram Stoker had enumerated among Dr. Van Helsing's list of A-1 vampire repellents. After all, it was either that or walk down to the Stinking Rose and chow down on "thousand garlic" chicken before I hit the Alexandrian Club, and I didn't think that I could pull off being such an ingénue as to not know that vampires had a major garlic allergy.

Wild mountain roses were another matter, and with luck, Blackrose's perfume would at least counteract the scent of fresh blood on my sleeve. I had half a mind to stop home and change, but if you know how long that takes with a full Goth ensemble, then you

realize that I wouldn't have time to make my move while the body was still cold, so to speak, without running the risk of calling too close to sunrise. And while I don't know much about vampires, you don't need a terribly shrewd guess to realize that they probably get edgy once it's past the Witching Hour.

I glanced back to Neville. "If I'm not back by morning, send Brent. He'll know what to do."

Brent nodded, as did Neville. In the case of outright war, the obvious choices to send against vampires were Brent and Baron, as they're both creditable fire mages, and everyone who's watched enough Hammer flicks knows that fire is just as effective as a cross against bloodsuckers, and a little more reliable 'cause you don't "gotta have faith" to make it work. But unlike Baron, who tends to showy effects like having his dragon tattoos breathe flame and his Merlins and Gandalfs shoot fireballs, Brent knows a little bit more about covert operations and can disguise his flaming death spells with simple coincidences like "Guess what? I brought a flamethrower!"

With Brent, there's also the added bonus of him being able to enlist the aid of the Men in Black, and since I have no great love for either group, having an old boys club filled with bloodsucking undead fiends get raided by the creepy, spooky branch of the NSA (No Such Agency) seemed like a wonderful way to get revenge on both, not to mention busting me out—assuming the vampires were the type to take prisoners.

I stood up, steadying Mister Mistoffelees atop my shoulder, then holding my lunch pail in front of me with both hands. I lifted it slightly. "This is all I should need. And a kiss for luck."

Before he could even move, I leaned over and gave Peter a quick peck on the cheek. As I said, he likes me, and if I was about to march off to my doom, the least I could do was say goodbye to the one who cares about me the most. Like I said, I think I see things in his eyes sometimes, and as they say, love is stronger than death (and much nicer too).

Peter was shocked into silence, so the only response was “Fate be with you, Penny” from Neville as I broke the circle and took my cat and my lunch pail full of rat-kabob down the stairs and out the front door. There was a brief flurry of “Leaving so soon?” (response “I shall return!”) as I left the club, the joke something that only I (and possibly Mister Mistoffelees) got, then I went and began to crank up the car, to the usual amount of oohing and aahing from the line of those getting ready to present their I.D.

Yes, the parking gods had been with me again, and I’d found a space right in front of Club Arte. Which, with a fully restored Stutz Bearcat, is something to be desired, and not just because it gives me a chance to flaunt it in front of the scene. It also lets me prove that Chivalry is not dead, or at least that Covetousness and Envy have taken to wearing His old clothes, and likewise with Machismo (the updated male form of Pride).

Dating tip for those girls in the audience: Just the same as guys can use spiffy new cars to “get chicks,” girls can use classy old cars to get guys. As proof of this, the embodiments of the three more helpful (or at least easily manipulated) Deadly Sins came forward in the persons of Bob, Karl, and Max, the last of whom is less charitably (and more accurately) known as Steroid, or What-happens-when-good-little-bodybuilders-go-Goth. Max is kind of cute (if you like the five-feet-tall/five-feet-wide type) though the main part of his charm is his bulldog puppy friendliness and eagerness to please. The spiked collar, leash and harness only enhance this effect, and while I’m a nineties kind of girl, it’s easy enough for me to back it up about a century and play the fainting lily in need of a strong young gentleman to crank up her car.

Max will take any excuse to flex his muscles and make his nipple rings stand on end, and cranking up my car certainly qualifies, even though under the hood it’s as much Volkswagen and Jaguar as it is Bearcat. I’d scavenged bits and pieces of everything to get it to run, and while it certainly starts easier than it would if I’d kept everything perfectly ‘period,’ it can still be a bitch to crank up. And call me Tom

Sawyer, but if someone else wants to pay for the privilege of painting Aunt Polly's fence, I'm not going to stop them.

Bob held Max's leash, giving Max and my car equally appreciative glances, while Karl stood there and gave everyone his "No, you may *not* touch my monkey" look, one hand the hood and the other signaling to me with a supervisory air (though I could hear what the engine was doing just fine) while Mister Mistoffelees sat on the dash in place of a plastic Jesus, and I sat behind the wheel as the engine turned over.

It roared like a bear, then purred like a kitten (hence the name, Bearcat), Max put the crank back, and Bob pulled his and Karl's pet back as I pulled away from the curb. I blew Max a kiss—gaining a puppy's grin in return, and gaining him a sharp jerk on the leash and a sharper rebuke from Bob—and with a hey-nonny-nonny, I took off down Broadway, off to find the lair of the vampire, or at least the exclusive men's club that was their *extremely* old boys hangout.

Now a bit you should know about San Francisco. The old 'gentlemen's clubs' are as much of a fixture as anything else, and so well hooked into the establishment that not even the rallying power of NOW has been able to dislodge them, not that anyone has really cared much one way or the other. Until last night, I'd dismissed them as a bunch of grandfatherly old coots who liked playing with politics and city government and pinching the occasional girl on the butt. To find that they were a bunch of *bloodsucking* grandfatherly old coots came as a bit of a shock, but then it would probably come as a bit of a shock to them to find that the Goth clubs were crawling with witches and warlocks.

The Alexandrian Club, while hardly the oldest (at least in its current incarnation), is still the primmest, richest, and funkiest of the lot, and after hearing that it had vampires in the basement, it made me wonder what the Bohemian and Pacific-Union Clubs had hiding in theirs.

Regardless, I didn't bother to speculate overmuch since I was now having to deal with the San Francisco street system. The joke goes that they had to have the 1906 earthquake and fire just to redo

the street patterns, and if they were worse before, well, all I can say is I'm glad I was not around then. Basically, San Francisco's problem is that the City is laid out on a grid map, but the original city planning commission failed to notice that nature had put some hills in the way. Fourteen of them to be exact, and then to confuse matters, public works put in a series of one-ways, no-right-turns, and no-left-turns, such that there is no simple way to get anywhere.

The Alexandrian Club is near the Palace of Fine Arts, and that means that there's a particularly nasty loop that, if you get on it, takes you all the way down to the Richmond District before you can make a U-turn. Instead, I tried an approach by way of Lombard Street, then turned on Baker, then, lacking my St. Christopher medallion, as I've mentioned, I just clutched my Udjat eye and made a hasty prayer to Marduk, God of Cities, and it should be inferred, city planning.

Marduk was pleased, or maybe He just thought I deserved to go to a gentleman's club filled with vampires. Either way, I got a straight shot right alongside the Alexandrian and was even able to pull up into the carriage drive which is now the valet parking loop.

There is really something to be said for owning a Stutz Bearcat. One perk most people don't usually consider is that it gets you immediate and prompt valet parking service. In fact, a scuffle nearly broke out between the parking attendants, and while two of them were arguing—all very quietly and discreetly, mind you—over who would park my car, the third seized the initiative and came and opened my door, offering me a white-gloved hand to alight from the running board.

I gave him the keys, along with brief instructions on how to operate the crank, and I'll admit it, I was enjoying myself, even if it was just by impressing Renfield and the rest of the Parking Attendants of the Vampires. There is a true pleasure in making a good entrance and being appreciated, and I could tell that the Alexandrian Club had been designed for that.

It's one of those early twenties things, built when labor was cheap and war profiteers weren't, with lots of sandstone and gargoyles and

architectural flourishes and flounces that practically scream *Beaux Arts! Beaux Arts!* I went up the steps, over which the red carpet had been quite literally rolled out, lifting my skirts slightly with my free hand, and the doormen swept these beautiful oak and beveled glass doors open and bowed at the same time, which is a more difficult trick than it sounds. Mister Mistoffelees purred appreciatively as we entered, and so did I.

If the exterior had been designed to impress, then the foyer was intended to make you get down on your knees and grovel before all the opulence, and I almost did, except that I still had my mission, and Mister Mistoffelees would have given me reproachful looks for months to come if I so debased myself while in his company. One thing having a cat for a familiar does is teach you how to act haughty.

Oh, but still, you should see the place. Oak paneling, parquet floors, and Persian carpets worth some sultan's ransom spoke of money and the desire to rub people's noses in it, the whole room suffused by honey and ruby light from real, honest-to-God-and-all-His-heresies vintage Tiffany lampshades, with the exception of discreet track lighting put in to highlight a collection of paintings and photographs that the curators of the De Young would give their collective eyeteeth for (not that the guys in the basement need them).

I glanced around, as if it were all beneath me and I had better things to occupy my time—no mean feat, if you know my passion for antiques—and off to the right I spotted a reception desk tastefully set back in an alcove. An extremely pretty—and even more androgynous—redhead stood behind it, dressed in a loose white lace shirt with sleeve garters and a ribbon tie. The whole ensemble gave me the general impression of male, though it may just have been the way she chose to dress for the evening. But since he didn't look like a vampire (or at least not like the one I'd encountered in the men's room of Club Arte), I guessed that he (or she) was another part of the collection like the paintings and the carpets and the Tiffany lampshades.

I went up, as nonchalant and elegant as I could pull off, setting the lunch pail with the fateful rat-on-a-stick on the walnut counter, then stroked Mister Mistoffelees' tail and smiled. Winsomely, or at least so I hoped.

The redhead smiled back, showing eyeteeth that while very white, were not very pointed at all, and still didn't give me any clue as to sex (not, mind you, that I really cared, since he—or she—was still extremely easy on the eyes). "Are you a member, or with a member, or expecting one?" His (her?) voice was soft and formal, either a sweet tenor or a rich contralto, depending on how you considered it, but designed not to offend under any circumstances, and she (he?) made frequent pauses so I could interrupt whenever I felt like it.

Well, while I was probably *with* a member, said member was currently *en brochette* in my lunch pail, and in any case he certainly wasn't dressed for the club, since the Alexandrian is the sort of place that seems to go for tux and tails, and not the sort that go on rats.

I reached into the waist pocket of my gown and took out my calling card case, and no, I don't mean the plastic variety that all the phone companies are trying to sell you. I mean the proper Jane Austen *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility* type with the lady's name in fancy script printed on the front, designed to be put on a silver tray and taken to the master or lady of the house so that he or she can read the name, then decide whether to invite them in or plead to being "indisposed," which is a polite way of telling someone to buzz off.

I took out a card and presented it to the cute, non-fanged redhead. "If you would be so kind as to see that this gets to Sebastian. I must speak with him on a matter of some urgency." (There are many useful points of etiquette you can learn from reading Jane Austen.)

The redhead paused, taking the card. "Mr. Melmoth has a number of other engagements. May I say what this is regarding?"

I thought back to what the Nosferatu had snarled in the bathroom, and what Peter had heard from his spirit guide. "Yes. You

may tell Mr. Melmoth that this regards a *carte blanche* from the prince, and some unpleasant business that transpired because of it.”

The redhead blanched, which, if you know any redheads, looks really awful, sort of jaundice yellow but with freckles, but all the same, he (or she) recovered nicely: “I will see to it at once. Please, have a seat.”

I didn’t, but that’s part of the ‘cat’s haughtiness’ that Mister Mistoffelees is teaching me. Instead, I strolled over to the paintings (which I really did want to get a look at), all the while racking my brains as to why the name of the foppish vampire downstairs was giving me an intense case of *déjà vu*.

Sebastian. Sebastian Melmoth. Mr. Melmoth...

I was almost ready to give up on it and go about discovering one of the lost Monets (which I think the painting I was looking at might have been), when it hit me: “Melmoth the Wanderer.”

Just so you know, Melmoth the Wanderer is the protagonist of a story by Oscar Wilde’s uncle, where this guy is damned to walk the earth forever. Also, when you add ‘Sebastian’ to the front of it (as in ‘St. Sebastian,’ the gay martyr), it’s the name that Wilde took for himself after he got out of prison (for no other crime than being gay a century before it became fashionable, and being more indiscreet about it than most) and went to Italy, where, after looking at some particularly garish wallpaper, he gave the world’s wittiest last words: “Decidedly one of us will have to go.”

You can’t be a Goth without being able to get literary allusions (so speaks a woman who’s named herself after a Victorian pulp thriller), and I was ready to give full points to the vampire who’d named himself after Oscar Wilde, when a cultured, British-accented voice said, “Miss Dreadful?”

I turned, and my heart stopped almost as dead as the rat’s in my lunch pail.

“Or may I be so forward as to call you Penny?” The speaker was tall, with a mane of long, wavy, brown hair, and this outfit that looked like Willy Wonka gone evil—a modified version of the ‘Ted Look,’ if you know anything about the history of British costume,

though less Rockabilly and more Edwardian, with swallowtail coat and top hat and a huge, oversized, floppy bow tie—but done over in intense blacks and reds and vermilions. All except the bow, which was a vivid and shocking Grateful Dead tie-die, and gave the impression of someone who'd taken their mourning for Jerry Garcia just a little too far. "I've encountered quite a few Penny Dreadfuls in my day, and enjoyed all of them, so it feels most odd to be formal." The droll look on his long-nosed (and just a bit dissipated and jowly) face changed to an expression of concern, and he took off his hat and held it in his hands to exhibit a matched set of Michael Jackson rhinestone gloves. "My dear young lady, are you all right? You look as though you've seen a ghost."

Actually, a vampire, but that shook loose my tongue anyway. "Mr. Wilde, may I presume?"

The speaker—and trust me, he was Oscar Wilde, if you've seen even one of his photographs, and down in the Castro you can't throw a rock without hitting one of them—had his turn to look shocked, but recovered much more quickly than did I. "Oscar Wilde," he chided softly, "died a long while ago, a martyr to bigotry and prejudice and causes which are greater than the both of us. Please, let him rest. Martyrs are far more pleasant than messiahs, and *much* easier to deal with. You may trust me on this. And please, call me Sebastian."

"And the wallpaper?" I said, before I even knew the words were out of my mouth.

"It went," he replied with a devilish grin, stepping closer.

I thanked my stars for Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde both, since their books had taught me how to deal with uncomfortable situations: When all else fails, mind your manners. I curtsied briefly, then extended my hand, wrist bent, for the pleasantries. "Please, call me Penny."

"Charmed," he said, kissing my hand, and there was a brief, almost electric shock. Then he held on and inhaled deeply. "My goodness," he remarked, still nuzzling my wrist, "what a delectable fragrance. You smell almost good enough to eat. What do you call it?"

“Blood and Roses,” I replied, hoping The Smithereens would excuse the liberty, and I was very glad I’d finished my monthlies a week and a half ago, otherwise I’m afraid he might have acted like my sister Helen’s dog, Murgatroyd (who is otherwise a perfectly nice dog, as dogs go, except that once a month he can’t leave well enough alone). I also wondered what else Bram Stoker had been wrong on. The garlic?

Sebastian Melmoth relinquished my hand only after once more touching my knuckles to his lips and breathing in the scent, almost salivating. “I feel very lucky to have found you here this evening, Penny, and you’ve certainly gained my interest. But these are matters which must best be discussed in private?”

“Very much so, Sebastian. If you would be so kind?”

“Certainly. If you would be so kind as to step into my office, I shall be so kind as to let you delight in my presence.”

I didn’t know whether or not to take him seriously, but then again, you have to consider the source. The redhead at the front desk pulled aside the swing door to the back, while Oscar—I mean Sebastian—leaned over and gave him (or was it her?) a deep and passionate kiss, then opened the door behind the desk himself while his aide nearly swooned into her (his?) night clerk chair.

Sebastian’s office was nowhere near as opulent as the foyer, but it was still tasteful and elegant, with fine Queen Anne furnishings grouped around a Hollywood movie mogul’s desk, and a series of portraits of Oscar Wilde, including the inevitable Warhol quartet. Or maybe they were portraits of Sebastian Melmoth, but same difference.

He shut the door behind me, then slipped off his twinkling gloves and laid them and his top hat atop a Picasso bust in a motion suspiciously reminiscent of Gene Wilder’s penultimate scene in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. “May I offer you any refreshments?”

Before I could politely decline, Mister Mistoffelees spoke up, “Do you have any blood and milk and human hearts stewed in wine?”

Sebastian had the wit for which Wilde was so famous and didn't miss a beat. "There was a bankers' convention last week, I'm afraid, and what with the demand and the rise in the market price... Alas! We simply couldn't justify keeping it on the menu. My humblest apologies." He shook his head gravely at my familiar, then gave a charming smile. "Blood and *cream*, however, we can do. And you, Penny?"

"Just a Coke, please. I'm driving."

He laughed delightedly and went to the wet bar tucked into the expensive rosewood paneling off to the right, selecting various bits of etched glassware, then opening the refrigerator. "Diet?"

"Please."

"Blood type?"

"Innocent," said Mister Mistoffelees. I should probably point out that before I joined up with him and gave him a name from *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, Mister Mistoffelees was Grimalkin, the familiar of a Nephandus witch (Nephandus meaning something like "I sold my soul to Satan and Cthulhu at the same time, ha-ha!") or at least that's what I've been able to gather).

Mister Mistoffelees doesn't talk about it much, but after four hundred years in *that* sort of company, he's picked up a few peculiar tastes. Namely for things like blood and human hearts, though as he has an equal liking for fresh cream and sushi, it hasn't been much of a problem. Not that he should really care or even comprehend the moral dilemma. After all, he's a cat.

"Oh my, you are in luck," Sebastian said with gracious amusement. "After the bankers' convention, I was afraid there wasn't any innocence left in the City, but we keep a few of these just for the Ventrue." He held up a bag of blood with an unusual checklist: A+, male, teenage, virgin, choir boy.

'Virgin' and 'choir boy' are not necessarily synonymous with 'innocent,' but if they weren't, I hoped my familiar would have the good manners not to complain, at the same time as I knew that if he didn't get the treat he'd been promised, he most assuredly would.

I took a seat in front of the desk and watched as Sebastian gaily decanted the blood into a carafe—monogrammed SM in Bockland script (the fancy Art Nouveau typeface used for all the Summer of Love posters)—put it in the microwave and nuked it. Then, while he was waiting, he brought me my diet Coke in a matching Nouveau tumbler with a bow and flourish. “For you, Good Penny.”

“And me?” asked Mister Mistoffelees as I took the glass.

“Patience,” said Sebastian, going back to the bar and pouring cream and red wine into a bowl from the same set, removing the blood from the microwave just before it could make the annoying beep. He added an equal measure of blood to the cream and wine, stirred it with a coffee spoon, then filled his own glass and came back to the desk to join us. He sat back in the producer’s chair with the ease of the aforementioned Hollywood mogul and set out my familiar’s treat without spilling a drop.

Mister Mistoffelees leapt down to inspect the crystal bowl, which Sebastian had placed off to the left side. After a few disdainful sniffs, he at last decided it met with his feline approval and began to daintily lap it up.

Sebastian raised his monogrammed glass of blood, “Cheers!” then took a sip. I did as well with my diet Coke, which seemed nothing more than the regular kind, and then I broached the subject: “There was a bit of unpleasantness at the Club Arte an hour or so ago, and we were hoping you might be of assistance.”

“Unpleasantness?” Sebastian inquired. “Also, and I must apologize for this, I’m uncertain which ‘we’ you are referring to. Since you look nothing like good Queen Victoria, except for sharing a fondness for black lace, may I assume you are from the Collegium Hermeticum or the Sisterhood of Salem and are speaking on their behalf? We’ve had members stop by before, but the visits have become increasingly infrequent, and I’m afraid we’ve done something to offend.” So saying, he took another sip of blood.

I didn’t know anything about the Sisterhood of Salem, though the Collegium Hermeticum was a name I’d run across in the papers of Aries Michaels, the wizard of Nob Hill (and from whose estate I’d

scrumped the Golden Pear, though as I've said, that's another story). But Ferengi Rule of Acquisition number umpteen and three: Always let them think you know more than you do—it gives you something to bargain with. "I'm sorry, I'm not at liberty to say." I smiled. "I come here representing the Hollow Ones."

"The Hollow Ones?" Sebastian repeated. "'We are the Hollow Men, We are the stuffed men, Leaning together, Headpiece filled with straw'?"

"Alas,' yes," I confessed, completing the opening stanza of T.S. Eliot's poem and the theme of our extended coven. "We haven't announced our presence because, quite frankly, we hadn't any reason to."

"And now that has changed?"

"I'm afraid so." I tried to dimple, which is hard to do when you're actively thinking about it. "A member of your club came to our club and displayed the most abominable behavior."

"Namely?"

I dropped the bombshell, though I was certain the payload was insufficient. "He tried to kill Dorothea in the bathroom. When we told him we took exception, he laughed at us and said the 'prince' had given him *carte blanche* to 'take' whomever he wanted." I put my hand on my lunch pail. "Peter lost his temper, and, well, this is the result."

I undid the catch and reached inside, letting the lid fall back with a suitably dramatic clank. Unfortunately, there is the simple fact of physics that when items get shaken around (as in the rumble seat of a Stutz Bearcat), the lightest usually float to the top. There is also the corollary of Murphy's Law which states that whatever you want out of your purse, it's not going to be what you reach in and grab.

"Oh my," Sebastian said gravely, "am I to assume that Bertrand—for that is the only Kindred I know of who recently acquired a *carte blanche*—has been transformed into a pad of Hello Kitty stationary or a plush frog?"

I'd set down the note pad, along with my Keroppi. One fact not usually known, but you can't be a Goth girl—at least a perky Goth,

which is the category I fall under—without a heavy devotion to Hello Kitty, Little Twin Stars, and most of all Keroppi, who’s Sanrio’s rip-off of Kermit the Frog and looks like an Anime version of Muppet Baby Kermie, only cuter.

Sebastian picked up my Keroppi and held him up in one hand in the classic “Alas, poor Yorick” pose. “Ah, Bertrand, I knew you would suffer some horrid fate, but I never thought of this.” He paused, considering. “Though on the bright side, your appearance is improved much for the better.” He looked to me, holding the doll so its frog eyes could regard me too. “Will he return to his natural shape if kissed by a handsome prince, or will a handsome queen suffice?” He then gave a conspiratorial glance to my Keroppi. “Though I don’t know whether I could bear to kiss such a one as Bertrand, after all the vile things he’s said regarding my personage.”

“Ahem,” I said, taking out the Number Two pencil along with the rodent *en brochette*. I held it up for a moment, then dropped it on the desk between us.

Sebastian gazed at it for a long moment, then Keroppi joined it. “Oh dear,” said the vampire.

“Or ‘rats’ as the case might be, but yes,” I said, wondering what the hell I was doing attempting to outwit Oscar Wilde. Ahem, Sebastian Melmoth.

He rallied quickly: “I’d always heard the pen was mightier than the sword, but I see I’ve overlooked the lowly pencil.” He poked it with the tip of his finger, but the rat remained frozen with *rigor mortis*. “Poor Bertrand. His appearance hasn’t improved in the slightest, though at least he now wears a form in keeping with his nature.”

“Peter’s sentiments exactly,” I said, and then came the time to make the unreasonable demand: “To keep unpleasant instances like this from happening in the future, the Hollow Ones request that the members of your club stay out of the rest of the clubs in the city.”

That got his attention, but his expression turned droll again as he said, “Out of the question, my dear. Simply out of the question. For many reasons, not the least of which being that no less than one of

the clubs is *owned* by a member of our jolly company, and it would be unforgivably rude to bar him from his own property.” He smiled then, pouring on the charm with a high pressure hose. “Besides, would you really wish to deprive yourself of our presence?”

His face was sweet and seductive, very handsome even with the chubbiness. He picked up his glass of blood and swirled it, and I was drawn into the well of his eyes, deep and violet.

Then the monogrammed glass dropped to the desk and shattered, blood flying everywhere, and the spell was broken along with the etched lettering. Sebastian sat there, stunned, looking at the four parallel scratches on the back of his hand, beading up with dark blood.

“*That*,” said Mister Mistoffelees, “for trying such a trick on my Mistress.” He paused and daintily licked the blood from his claws. “Also, what is a blood doll? The nightgaunts behind the panel in the wall keep whispering about them, intimating that my Mistress is one.” He gave his paw a last lick, making certain that the fur was clean and black, then said, “I’m uncertain whether I should take exception to this as well.”

Sebastian’s face flushed and I actually saw fangs for a moment, but he found an easier—or at least safer—target for his ire. He swiveled his chair around faster than I would have thought possible and pounded on the wall behind him. “Quiet down in there! Not only is it rude to whisper in theatres, but it makes you miss what you paid to hear!” There was a brief cry, as I supposed pointy ears were removed from the vibrating panel, and then whispered silence.

He swiveled the chair back around, fangs gone and his expression turned soft and apologetic. “I’m very sorry, Penny. Not only was that unforgivably rude of me, but worse yet, I was caught. And I would be dreadfully embarrassed were it breathed beyond these walls that I tried to sway you with anything other than pure wit.” He gave a naughty-little-boy grin so perfect that it could only have come after years practice—about a hundred, unless I missed my guess. “Can I rely on your silence?”

"I don't know, Sebastian. Can I rely on your honor as a gentleman?" With the rat-on-a-stick out of my lunchbox, I was able to reach down to the bottom and take out my black peacock fan, snap it open, and flutter it at myself in the manner that says, in the language of the fan, *You're a prick*.

Oscar Wilde, having lived in the right century to understand this, looked away, possibly also since peacock feathers are thought to possess the Evil Eye, in addition to being sacred to Hera, Patron Goddess of Pissed-Off Women. (Just watch a few episodes of the new *Hercules* if you don't believe me.) "Such behavior is unbecoming of either a gentleman or a scholar, so I suppose not," he admitted softly, then glanced up. "But will you indulge me in this one thing regardless, Miss Penny?"

I can also do a creditable Scarlet O'Hara when the mood strikes me: "Will you keep your boys out of the clubs, Sebastian?"

"What is a blood doll?" Mister Mistoffelees inquired a second time.

Sebastian was very flustered, and not just by the assault from two fronts. The skewered rat lying alongside my Keroppi in the pool of blood on his desk probably had something to do with it as well, along with the multiple Evil Eyes being flashed by my peacock feather fan.

He turned to Mister Mistoffelees first, as my cat was lashing his tail back and forth like a metronome and had already proven himself to have a hair-trigger on his claws. "Ah well, *this*," he said, picking up the blood-soaked stuffed animal, "is a blood doll."

"My Mistress is a toy frog?" Mister Mistoffelees inquired, his strange talking-cat voice filled with utter bafflement (and that's saying something).

Sebastian proved himself a gentleman as well as a wit in not responding. After all, there are some lines so open that there is no sport in using them, and my cat had already played the straight man once that evening. That, and the simple fact that Mister Mistoffelees' tail began to lash double-time as he cocked his head at Sebastian and the frog, his eyes beginning to glow green.

“Merely a jest,” the vampire said, dropping the new ‘Keroppi-in-a-blender’ toy, and gave an affected laugh. “Actually, a blood doll is simply a young lady—or gentleman—who enjoys sharing blood with one of our Kindred. They tend to dress in black as does your mistress.” He laughed again, nervously, smiling at the tail-lashing cat, and evidently stressed by the need to give a straight answer.

I fluttered my fan again, the eyes getting his attention. “Dorothea dresses in black—and she may be into a bit of kink as well, possibly even drinking blood—but honestly I don’t recall her wearing a crimson handkerchief in her back left pocket, or anywhere else on her person for that matter. And even if she did, I don’t think she ‘enjoyed’ being drained dry and dumped in the urinal, just the same as I don’t believe she would have enjoyed being ‘taken,’ no matter what ‘prince’ gave who a *carte blanche*.” I gave the fan the brisk twitch that means *Asshole!* and pursed my lips. “That being as it is, will you vacate the clubs—apart from those that your ‘Kindred’ own—and will you give us a list of which clubs those are?” I folded the fan with a snap and poked the pencil sticking out of the rat, making it move an inch across the pool of blood.

Sebastian pursed his lips. “Penny, please, do not be so bold so soon....” He ran his tongue along the inside of his upper lip, either cleaning off the blood-scunge or testing the length of the eyeteeth, I’m not sure which. “You ask for so much, and while what you show is...impressive...I don’t believe your numbers warrant a boon of such scope.”

He smiled then, showing his teeth, sharp, white, and blood-free. “We have been here a very long time, longer than you have been alive...unless, of course, you possess some beauty secret to rival that of Persephone, and I’m sure I would have noticed you if you did. Honestly, if in all my many years I’d seen a lady such as yourself, I would have remembered her, and I don’t recall us ever meeting before.” With this he held up one hand, admiring his nails, as if he could see his reflection in them. Which, even if he *could* see his reflection, would have still been some trick.

Finally he looked back to me. “Given this circumstance, I must believe you Hollow Children are new to the scene, and while obviously powerful, you are few enough in number that we’ve simply overlooked you. Which is only to be expected, after all. From what I understand of you magicians, entering into your august company requires prayer, fasting, sacrifice, some long personal seeking, and an inner quest for enlightenment. Cowards and slugabeds need not apply. Whereas with my own lot...well, much as I hate to deprecate my own kind, but a nip and a sip, and you’ve made the trip.”

“Nice quip,” I finished for him.

“A mere slip of the lip.” He waved to either side, accepting my admiration and calling for an end to the jest at the same time. “Regardless, I believe I make my point? You’re initiations are long and hard, and while many aspire, most fail. While with ourselves, well, I first heard it applied to tortilla chips, but the adage ‘Crunch all you want, we’ll make more’ would certainly seem to fit.” He grinned toothily. “If it came down to a war, I’m sorry, but I’m sure you know what befalls the smaller forces in any engagement, no matter how powerful—They perish, like poor prideful Bishop Hatto, nibbled to death by the mice.” He pushed the pencil and the *rigor mortised* rodent back an inch towards me. “I’m sorry, my dear, it’s simply out of the question. The ball is in your court now; make your next offer.”

I tapped the folded fan against my gloved palm, the gesture which means *You’re trying my patience, fuckhead*, then after contemplating the various responses, chose to volley back the original metaphor: “True, we are small in number, and if it came to a war, we would most likely perish. But in any war, when there are small yet skilled forces, I believe you get what is called ‘guerilla tactics’?” I drew the fan through my hand, the gesture which conveys hatred, then snapped it open and fluttered it, batting my lashes. “And in such times, the life expectancy of the presidents and generals is, shall we say,” I gave an offhand wave, “*short*?”

“But of course,” Sebastian allowed, “yet if you take out one general, well then, Penny, the next that gets put in place is a mere puppet for the powers behind the throne. And a mere parting strike

is hardly worth your life, even something so short as a mortal span....”

“True,” I fluttered the fan, “but then I’m sure you’ve heard of True Names, Sebastian—or should I say, ‘Mr. Wilde’?—and what a mage can do with those? Death needn’t be the end of the matter...” I lowered the fan and smiled wide, showing my teeth this time. “Are you familiar with the theory of the Four Humors, good sir? Blood, Phlegm, Black and Yellow Bile?”

“Well, yes, but—”

I cut him off with my smile and a flourish of the peacock’s eyes. “There are those who believe that vampirism—or would you prefer I be Politically Correct and say ‘Kindredism’?—is merely caused by an imbalance in the Four Humors, a lack of that most precious of bodily fluids, causing a loss of joy and good humor and all things sanguine...and a corresponding hunger for that which will fill the emptiness.”

I was making all this up as I went along, out of bits of Sister Bernice’s Chaucer lectures and basic Shakespearian hoo-ha, but the metaphysics are as sound as anything medieval, and it certainly sounded good at the moment, at least to judge from Sebastian’s expression. “Correcting such an imbalance would of course be a difficult, if not Herculean, task, but simply skewing the colors of the Four Humors—in place of Blood causing a lack of, say, Black Bile—would then cause an absence of melancholy, and a corresponding craving for, well...” I shut my fan by degrees, ticking one vane over another such that, as I knew, the peacock eyes merged one into another, focusing their baleful effect in a deadly countdown.

Sebastian Melmoth sat back in his chair, what little blood he still possessed draining out of his cheeks. “What you are saying, madame, is that if I don’t accede to your wishes, you’ll turn me into a happy shit-sucking vampire?”

“Well,” I said, stopping the countdown and snapping my fan out to full size, “yes. A rather vulgar way to express the thought, perhaps, but I think you’ve pretty much summed it up. If you say no, you may just have to start looking for gentlemen who wear brown handker-

chiefs in their back right pockets in place of crimson ones in their left.”

The vampire steeled his hands against the desk, his fingers nearly gouging the wood. “You’re bluffing,” he said simply.

I drew the fan back through my gloved hand, folding it, then dandled it from the string, the same way a gentleman of a bygone era would toy with his watch fob. “Oh, I don’t know... strawberry...vanilla...chocolate...lemon sorbet...they’re all delicious, depending on what you like. And you know what they say...” I swung the fan full circle and flipped it up into my hand, “once you’ve tasted chocolate, you can never go back to vanilla. Or strawberry, for that matter. Ask the Good Humor man.” I pointed the fan straight at his heart, but sideways, angled like a dagger, instead of feathers up, which would have meant I was propositioning him. “Do you want to risk it, Mister...” I began tilting the fan such that he could see the Eye of Hera, “...Wilde?”

Sebastian reached out and took hold of my hand, still around the fan, and looked at me, eyes pleading. I glared, and Mister Mistoffelees growled low in his throat, warnings both. “Please,” Sebastian said, before I could protest, “Penny—if I may still call you that—please, listen to what I say. It’s not that I don’t desire to accede to your wishes, but I can’t. My kind enjoy the nightlife too much to ever give it up, and my Clan hasn’t enough control to enforce such a ban over the entire City, even if it proved necessary.”

Mister Mistoffelees growled a warning again, and Sebastian realized he still had hold of my hand. He released it and I took it back, snapping open the fan and fluttering it furiously. “Please, forgive me. That was very forward, but I’ve strived so hard to have good relations with your kind, and I don’t want to compromise them. The most I could promise is to have certain mortals and certain clubs declared off limits.”

“For what?” I inquired.

“For hunting, and for the Embrace—being ‘taken’ as you put it. *Carte blanche* would not be valid there unless you gave it your stamp of approval.”

I thought a bit, particularly regarding stamps and seals and Neville's Eye of Horus seal ring, and a plan began to form. "You were able to spot me for what I am, Sebastian. Am I safe in assuming that you have the Sight, and that most of your 'club' do as well?"

He smiled. "Not all, but enough. What do you propose?"

"This symbol," I said, folding my fan and indicating the Udjat Eye at my throat—not, on hindsight, the best gesture when facing a vampire—"This symbol is the crest of the Hollow Ones. We will mark it on the backs of the hands of those we claim as under our protection, and place it on the doors of those meeting places we consider ours." I paused, holding up the folded fan like an exclamation point. "That includes the restrooms."

"And how will you accomplish this?" Sebastian inquired.

I dimpled, and this time it wasn't a trick, since I really was proud of myself. "Magick ink in the rubber stamp pads of the clubs. That should work like a charm."

Sebastian nodded gravely. "If not be one itself. But these clubs—I hope they are limited to a reasonable number?"

"Seven," I replied. "One for each night of the week, one for each of the Hollow Ones' Circle of Seven."

"Circle of Seven?" Sebastian echoed, the name obviously having some meaning to him beyond the usual. At a blind guess, I'd say it's because mystic orders always have circles of some number, and some earlier coven had probably thought it was a cool name to call themselves too.

"Yes." I unfolded my fan and waved it idly. "Myself, Neville, Peter, Baron, Sasha, Blackrose and Brent. The seven leaders of the Hollow Ones of the City. And the seven clubs we claim as our own: So What? Sunday; Death Guild, Monday; Roderick's Chamber, Tuesday; Bondage A-Go-Go, Wednesday; Bedlam, Thursday; Labyrinth, Friday; and Saturday is for A Winter Gone By."

"It sounds like a nursery rhyme."

I fluttered my fan. "There's a great deal of power in nursery rhymes and children's stories. I shouldn't have to remind *you* of that, 'Sebastian.'"

“*Touché*, dear lady. No indeed, you need not.” He looked grave. “You must realize, however, that if your clubs are declared Elysium, then the Kindred will be attracted to them. Indeed, many will look upon them as safe haven and sanctuary.”

“So long as they mind their manners, we really don’t care.” I paused. “One of each of us will be at each club each night of the week. You will know us by this exact seal, different only for the color of the ribbon.” I pointed to the bulla at my throat again (not, as I said, in hindsight, the best move to make around a vampire, especially one who thinks your perfume is “delectable”). “Any members of your club who go there must come and give us a token, recognizing our authority in our own demesne and their willingness to abide by the compact.” I searched for inspiration and was rewarded by the stench of Blackrose’s ‘signature fragrance’ which I’d been wafting at myself for the past several minutes. “I believe a single red rose would be appropriate.”

He paused, and I believe he would have blanched if vampires still did that. “A single red rose?”

I paused myself, for a moment thinking Bram Stoker had been right after all, and that wild mountain roses really did give vampires the heebie-jeebies, regardless what they thought of their perfume—possibly the sight of all those pointy little wooden stakes—but only said, “Well yes...you know, the old Greek token for secrecy, *sub rosa*, ‘Under the Rose’ or ‘In the Name of the Rose’ or however it’s supposed to go?” I was also more than a bit befuddled, since while the reference was a little obscure, I was pretty certain that Oscar Wilde, if anyone, had the benefit of a classical education, as opposed to just reading all the books behind the counter in my Aunt Marta’s antique shop like I had. “After when Eros gave a rose to the god of silence, whatever his name was?”

“He never did say,” Sebastian responded, recovering nicely with a polite laugh at his own joke. “It’s refreshing to find a young lady who studies the classics—though hardly surprising given your calling—but when you first mentioned the Queen of Flowers, I was at first put in mind of a slightly different interpretation....”

With that, I realized that while Greek myths and Romanian peasant superstitions were all very well and good, Stoker wasn't the only writer of his age or nationality—Wilde was most certainly another—and given the sensibilities of the era in which they both lived, the common symbolism of the Language of Flowers would be the first thing which would occur to Ireland's great wit. Common for the Victorian Age, that is. But following *that* line of interpretation, a single red rose, depending on the shade, and which nineteenth century almanac you consulted, could mean anything from *Simple Love* to *Deepest Embarrassment* to *I want to have wild carnal sex with you right now*.

I raised an eyebrow, then shrugged. "Well, Rosemary for Remembrance would probably be more apropos, but they don't exactly sell it on every street corner. And it would catch looks in the Clubs regardless." I flipped the fan open and fluttered myself, glancing off the other way. "Not that everyone's up on their symbolism to begin with, and a red rose makes a better token than most."

"Very much so," Sebastian said at last. "A rose for a Penny is a dreadfully good price, a veritable bargain in fact, all things considered. Though the significance of its bloody pledge..."

I thought about it a bit more. To wear a flower over your heart meant that you'd accepted the sentiments of the giver. To place it in your décolletage meant you'd think about it. In your hair meant caution, while smelling it sent various other signals, such that a Victorian vampire might...

I looked to Sebastian and grimaced, pressing the open fan to my breastbone in the gesture meant to convey *Shocked affront!* "Mr. Melmoth," I said at last, "if anyone wants to bite anyone else on the neck, or do anything else of such an intimate nature, I believe the proper social convention, in this century as in any other, is to *ask* first." I flustered the fan, looking around to convey how scandalized I was by *The very idea!* even though honestly it makes perfect sense if you look at it from the perspective of the bloodsucking dead. Especially with all the flowers they'd had thrown on their coffins.

Let this also be a lesson to my fellow witches and other practitioners: Symbols are what you make of them. And while a rose by any other name may still smell as sweet, that doesn't mean that when you say it with flowers that the recipient will receive the same message you're trying to send, or even be consulting the same phrase book; with as out of touch as some of the vampires doubtless were, there'd probably be some clueless wonder who'd think he was pledging fealty to the House of Lancaster unless it was explained otherwise.

After cooling myself down, I looked back, waving the fan in a grand and magnanimous gesture. "Very well," I said, "I won't say that the idea is completely out of the question—this is San Francisco, after all, and far be it from *me* to tell consenting adults what they can and cannot do and with whom—but if you and your 'Club' are going to do nipping or nibbling or anything else of that nature with anyone from *our* Clubs, then you better make sure they have a big bright crimson silk hanky *and* a Kewpie doll sticking out of their back left pocket, and that you ask them and make sure they're really into blood sports and they're not just some clueless fashion victim. And for anyone who doesn't know the hanky code, you clue them in, while as for the roses, tell everyone we mean them in the ancient Greek sense—secrecy and a promise of friendship, nothing more—since I'm sure your club members would prefer that to having to show up in a sandwich board that says, 'Hey everyone! I'm a vampire! Can I come in?'" I closed the fan slowly so as to make my point. "Fair enough?"

Sebastian Melmoth pursed his lips, taking a long moment before he finally spoke. "Quite." I paused, realizing I had just reduced one of the world's great wits to nothing more than monosyllabic understatement, but then he continued with, "Is there anything else you might require so that peace might be preserved, dear, dear, dear Penny?"

I smiled at his emphasis on the 'dear,' not meaning so much precious as pricey, and stood up. "Only that you know that we will be most upset if the compact is broken, in any way, shape, or form.

And we know who you are and where you live. Figuratively speaking, of course.”

I dropped my fan back into my lunch pail—the gesture which means *Come, let us be friends* (the dropping, not the lunch pail, that is)—and shut the catch with a soft click. “Come, Mister Mistoffelees. We should be going.”

“Yes, Mistress,” said my cat, leaping to my shoulder and coiling his tail around my neck.

Sebastian Melmoth stood up. “Please,” he said, picking the rat up by the pencil and dropping it into the wastepaper basket with the same gesture I’d last used for the fan, “let me at least offer you our hospitality. The Nosferatu show us in a very bad light, when they show themselves at all, and I feel obliged to give you something to remember us more fondly by. After all, our other Clans are far more personable and pleasant, and moreover, it is common wisdom and manners to speak well of the dead.” He stroked the fabric of his psychedelic tie. “And if you decide you do not care for our company, then at the very least you owe it to yourself to stay so that you may tell your friends, truthfully, that you danced upon our graves.”

He’d turned on the charm, but far less supernaturally this time, and I realized that I’d been playing hardball all evening. Snubbing him now would guarantee an enemy, or at least some less than flattering—though very witty—remarks once I’d left.

“I believe I’d like that very much,” I said. “But first, if you might have some fine and private place—aside from your grave—from which I might telephone my friends? Peter, as I said, is rather bad-tempered, and I wouldn’t wish to endanger our newfound accord.”

“But of course, Pretty Penny,” said Sebastian, kicking his chair backwards so it thumped the wall (and thus made the point to any eavesdropping Nosferatu). He then came around the desk and offered me his arm, which I accepted, and he led the way back out into the foyer, then through the great doors into the club proper.

Opulence was still the order of the evening, mixed with a few carefully ripped blue jeans and painted leather jackets, but on the near wall of the main lounge was a bank of telephones, each in a

glassed-in mahogany booth. Sebastian extended a handful of silver change, which I accepted, then I shut myself away from the sounds of the Alexandrian.

Mister Mistoffelees was watching, but I wasn't taking any chances, so I pinched my left earlobe repeatedly with my right hand (Old folk charm: It makes eavesdroppers bite their tongues, and no, I did not make this up), then dialed Club Arte.

It's never easy to find someone when you call a club, but at least Blackrose's outfit was distinctive enough that you wouldn't get many mistakes. After describing Auntie Mame in mourning (and being briefly troubled by the idea that if she was Mame, then that made me Vera Charles, given the nature of our relationship), I got her on the phone. "Penelope, darling," she breathed, though I quickly cut her off and gave her the lowdown, including my plot to enchant the hand stamps of the various clubs.

"Well, certainly, it can be done, but where are we going to get the magick ink?"

I rolled my eyes. As I said, Blackrose knows a fair bit about enchantment, but she knows nothing about procuring supplies. "Oh please, Blackrose. Peng Fang's in Chinatown has been selling 'paint your own sutra' kits for years. I'll get one if you don't have the time." I thought a bit more about magickal inks, and the formulation thereof, then just about gagged since the booth was very warm and close and my perfume-soaked sleeve was right under my nose. "By the bye, Blackrose, if I might ask, just exactly what *did* you put in your 'signature fragrance'?"

I don't know if you can hear someone preen across a telephone, but I swear I did. "That would be telling, Penelope dearest."

I was losing patience. "Yes, it would."

There was a pause, as I think Blackrose took a drag on her ever-present cigarette, considering, then she said, "Well, I couldn't reveal *everything*, Penny dear—secrets have power, you know—but, well, if you really must know, then musk rose for Charm, Japan rose for Sweet Illusions, and leaf rose for Hope of Something More. And of course Cloves for Dignity. Those are the major notes."

Wonderful! I'd put on a perfume hoping to repel vampires and instead had gotten something designed to attract men. Then blooded it, which is an ancient way to increase anything's magickal power.

I probably should have figured. A rose is a rose is a rose, *except* where Blackrose is concerned, and while I knew the significance of the various colors and ways the flower might be worn, I'd forgotten that there's an entire sub-lexicon for all the different varieties. And for all that she comes off as a poseur most days, it had been a mistake to assume that my longtime rival had just gone to the local *botanica* and said, "Roses! And lots of 'em!" without any rhyme or reason to her choice. Blackrose is a kitchen witch if there ever was one, and while she might not have my talent in procuring supplies, or for that matter coming up with substitutions, when she does have the right ingredients and the right recipes, she can do some pretty nifty tricks, and it was simple dumb pride that made me assume that everyone else would find her 'signature fragrance' as repellent as I did. "Any wild mountain roses?" I asked hopefully

"Oh no..." Blackrose responded, shocked by the mere suggestion. "Those signify 'Charming Simplicity.' I'm much too complex for such things." She paused. "But they might do very well for you."

"Thanks, Blackrose," I bit out, reminding myself to be polite. After all, she had been nice enough to lend me her 'signature fragrance,' and it had been my own 'charming simplicity' which made me forget to ask her if it might have any magickal properties beyond the power to make me want to hold my breath. "That's just what I needed to know. But for now I'm off to mingle with the 'die and take it with you' crowd. Ciao!"

I hung up on her, then went out of the booth. "Powder room?" I asked immediately.

Sebastian pointed discreetly to a nearby door, and I made a beeline for it, followed by a quick visit to the facilities, both because I needed it and because I didn't want to look too obvious by immediately rushing to the sink to do another tribute to Lady Macbeth.

Miscalculations, however, seemed to be the order of the evening. When I emerged from the stall, the white marble and flocked wallpapered chamber was as silent as the tomb it superficially resembled, or at least as a tomb's supposed to be, and I got a number of funny looks from the dead women. And I quickly learned that while vampire ladies *do* cast reflections, and use the mirror for makeup the same as any other women, they *don't* as a general rule make use of the porcelain fixtures which lie beyond the pretty paneled doors.

Or at least that was the general sense I got. Conversation had stopped dead—and if you're a woman, you *know* what a rare occurrence *that* is in the powder room, and what it signifies—and as I made my way to the sink, I had an urge to say, "What lovely toilets! And so *clean*. You'd think no one ever used them!" but instead just said, "Towel please?"

Shocked by the break in the silence, the attendant fumbled for a moment before handing me a small towel, which I proceeded to stuff under the hot water tap. The vampire ladies then watched in frank amazement as I set Mister Mistoffelees and my lunchbox to one side, so as to not get either of them wet, then took the towel and scrubbed my wrist, then wiped the perfume from behind my ears. After which I grabbed another towel from the attendant's stack and patted myself dry.

I handed the attendant both towels. "Something strong, if you could."

The woman merely gestured toward the bottles that stood in a row behind the taps, and I suddenly realized that not only were all of the Alexandrian Club's perfumes terribly expensive, but moreover every fragrance in the collection was also notoriously potent. Something which made sense if you were a dead woman trying to cover up the scent of embalming fluid, or at very least making up for the lack of a pulse, the warmth of which is what makes perfume vaporize.

I shrugged. Oh well, if I had all the perfumes of Arabia to choose from to sweeten my little hand, then I might as well pick the most

expensive. It's not as if the vampires couldn't afford it. "This one, please." I touched a finger to the bottle of Joy, the world's most expensive fragrance, if not necessarily the best.

The attendant wetted the stopper for me and I anointed myself behind the ears, after which I took the bottle and splashed about five hundred dollars worth—roughly a quarter ounce—onto my sleeve. The scent was sweet and floral, and while I'm no expert at perfumes, I'm guessing that the main note is woodbine, which you can get for five bucks a quarter ounce at Ren Faire, and translates as 'Fraternal Love' in the Language of Flowers. Which was just fine by me. I had enough 'Charming Simplicity' on my own to gag a hundred vampires, so who needed wild mountain roses anyway?

Next time I'd just go for the Thousand Garlic Chicken.

After chaffing my wrists a bit to spread the Eau de Joy, I returned the bottle and stopper to the attendant, a smile to the shocked looks of the lady vamps, then collected my cat and my lunchbox and left.

Sebastian was still waiting outside the door, and he introduced me around to the regulars, including a couple of the women who followed me out of the powder room. I would have rather beaten a hasty retreat, but I was there as Hollower Ambassador, duty called, and therefore I had to stay, even if I made an occasional *faux pas* in the code of undead etiquette. Like, for example, using the toilet.

Whatever. I did my best to be as gracious and charming as a living girl could, and after a while, I was feeling like the Unsinkable Molly Brown, after she's crashed European high society but before she's crowned Queen of the World. Part of this was probably due to the fact that the pool room had acquired the original bar—that's right, the incredible baroque monstrosity both used in the movie *and* tended by Molly in actual history—and I was plied with drinks until I quite literally let my hair down and led the crowd in a rousing chorus of *Belly-Up to the Bar, Boys!*

Of course, it was either that or let Mister Mistoffelees perform *Everybody Wants to be a Cat!* complete with the chopsticks and bouncing piano. My familiar was just a little buzzed from Sebastian's wine, and while I am very proud of the fact that my cat knows how

to sing and play keyboards (a talent he evinced only last week after I'd bought him the long-awaited *Aristocats* video—this in lieu of sacrificing babies in his honor the next full moon, something his old “Mistress” had done to amuse him, and no, I am not making this up either), I also realized, tipsy as I was, that letting my familiar perform Disney numbers would weird out the few regular, mortal members of the Alexandrian Club—and the sight might just tweak the vampires too.

Belly-Up to the Bar, Boys! was probably not the best choice of songs either—especially with the “delectable” fragrance that had been formed by the mixture of Dorothea’s blood and Blackrose’s perfume, which seemed to linger despite my best efforts to adulterate it with ‘Joy’ and ‘Fraternal Love’—but as I said, I was drunk, and regardless, I managed to pull off a creditable impersonation of Molly Brown, dancing out of the way of the drunken (or perhaps just hungry) patrons, being a world-class tease, and only kicking over a few glasses in the process.

Of course, one side of me knew that my newfound popularity came from Sebastian (not to mention the rats in the walls) having told everyone that I was “somebody important,” as well as someone you wanted to have on your good side unless you wanted to end up as an undead rat shish kabob. Or worse yet, become known as the vampire with the shit-eating grin. (Not, mind you, that I’ve ever attempted that particular spell, or even been the least bit responsible for anything of that order myself, though Peter, from what I’ve seen firsthand, has so far turned a vampire into a rat and a mad doctor into a pig, and could conceivably fill out the entire Chinese zodiac if he loses his temper a few more times.)

As for whether I myself could really make someone eat shit and die (or really, die and eat shit), or drink out of the toilet, or become known as a snot-sucking fiend (which, come to think of it, explains the nose-biting vampires of Greek mythology with fair accuracy), I wouldn’t really know where to start. Chaucer and Shakespeare, and for that matter, Hippocrates, may have written all sorts of things about the Four Humors, and I may be able to extrapolate a fair bit,

but spells regarding how to put the precious and not-so-precious bodily fluids on spin-cycle are something I've yet to encounter, and trust me, I've read a fair bit.

Of course, the vampires didn't need to know that, and the implied threat of my peacock feather fan seemed more than enough to keep them at bay, for all that I'd just bought it to accessorize my outfit in part of a vain attempt to make my eyes look a little less gray and bit more blue-green. But praise be to Hera anyway, Queen of the Gods and Patron Lady of angry women everywhere.

Regardless, the evening wore on and the club wore down, I worked on sobering up, and I at last sought refuge at the buffet in the grand dining room. Something both Mister Mistoffelees and my sixth sense had picked out, but the Alexandrian Clubbers who we'd pegged as vampires—generally speaking—were grossed out by regular human food. Or maybe they just found something threatening in the way the toothpicks were stuck into the Swedish meatballs, I don't know, but for the most part they avoided the room. Which was just fine by me, since the only other alternative (aside from leaving, and that would have required a cab at this point) was locking myself in the toilet, and I'd already committed that breach of etiquette once this evening.

I'd piled up a plate with the aforementioned meatballs (dripping with bright red lingonberries) when I noticed eyes upon me. Very sad, very handsome, and very troubled *undead* eyes, to be exact, or at least my sixth sense warned me about the undead part. After hanging around enough of them for an evening, you start to get a sense of who's got a taste for blood and who doesn't. Mister Mistoffelees' warning claw in my shoulder probably also had something to do with my presentiment.

"May I help you?" I asked, *hors d'oeuvre* plate poised in one hand.

"I hope so," the man said softly. He was on the short side of average, dark hair, dark eyes, with a good tan aided by some men's bronzing powder of the type used solely by the very rich, the very vain, and, as I'd discovered over the course of the evening, the very dead, to give his cheeks a bit more color as well as partially disguise

a perpetual five-o'clock shadow. He was also wearing a Rolex, an expensive white dress shirt, and this wonderful paisley vest with the watch chain and everything, along with a red silk handkerchief in the breast pocket. Which, so far as I know the handkerchief code, simply means he's a snappy dresser and hadn't a clue regarding the oddsignificance the counterculture or even his fellow club members would ascribe to it were he to wear it anywhere else. "You have a pretty soul."

I rolled my eyes, forgetting both the neat paisley and the handkerchief for a moment. "I hope you're not going to say that I remind you of someone you once knew. I don't know how many times I've heard *that* line tonight." (I was, as I said, still a little tipsy, and my tact had gone on vacation with my sobriety.)

He laughed softly, shaking his head. "No. My wife was...a very different woman, and you don't look like her at all. It's just that I have a problem, and I thought a woman of your...talents...might be able to help me, or at least point out someone who might."

Vampires, as I discovered last night, are very adept at skirting issues, at least in public. With the exception of the time in Sebastian's office, I don't think I heard the word "blood" mentioned even once the entire evening. It was always "I think I'll go downstairs for a drink" or "a nip" or "a bit of refreshment," and I gathered that the really exclusive, undead-only club *really was* in the basement. I entertained brief thoughts of the catacombs beneath the Theatre of the Vampires in *Interview*, but aside from wanting to ogle Antonio Banderas, going downstairs didn't hold much interest—not that I was likely to get an invitation, or to accept one either.

But as I was saying, the euphemisms and double-speak were going at a rate you usually only hear in drug circles ("Do you *indulge*?" "Do you *partake*?" and I had a brief flash of inspiration about the comedy of errors you'd get when a Deadhead started talking with a vampire), but nevertheless, I was getting sick of it and wished for a bit of plain talk. "Is there anywhere we might speak in private?"

He smiled. "One of the conference rooms upstairs may be free."

“Lead on,” I said as I attempted to balance my lunch pail, the plate, and a glass of white wine. (Okay, so sobriety could wait. Worst case I’d call a cab.)

My new vampire escort gallantly took the perilous plate of meatballs, introducing himself as he did so: “Alexander Gorian.”

“Penny Dreadful,” I replied, raising my wineglass in lieu of a handshake. “Though I’m sure you already knew that.”

He smiled back, a nice smile, and I decided I liked at least this one vampire, Sebastian right about the other Clans being more personable. Whatever the “other Clans” were, aside from prettier.

Bravely, Alexander balanced the plate of meatballs and its many miniature stakes in one hand as he opened the door, ushering me out into the hall and up the stairs, boldly presenting my plate of *hors d’oeuvres* to fend off whatever other “Kindred” wished to kiss-up to me. The vampires recoiled in horror, Swedish meatballs seeming to work where wild roses didn’t, or at least where the regular sort had failed. As for garlic, I hadn’t opportunity to test that, as there hadn’t been overmuch of it at the buffet.

Regardless, one of the upstairs rooms was indeed empty—apart from a used condom lying on the conference table—but Alexander had the good grace to ignore it, and so did I. He shut and locked the door behind us, then set down my plate and pulled out a chair for me at the end away from the condom.

“Thank you.” I ate a meatball, laying the toothpick on the side of my plate in what I hoped was a non-threatening manner. “Please, have a seat.”

He sat down opposite me, then put his head in his hands and ran his fingers back through his hair in the classic, “Ah! The weight of the world is upon me!” gesture. “I don’t know where to begin...”

I took a sip of wine. “What do you need?”

“Help,” he said simply, then went on to elaborate: “You see, my wife died a while ago, and I have two young children. Two young *living* children, if you take my meaning. I can’t take care of them during the day, they’re driving my housekeeper nuts, and I can’t send

them to school or they'll start saying, 'Well yeah, my daddy's a vampire.'"

According to the folklore I knew, the children of a vampire didn't have any bones, which was either grotesque or silly, depending on how you looked at it. But from what Alexander had said so far, it sounded like his kids were regular bone-in children.

As for how a dead man could father children, I also had a number of theories, including A) He'd fathered them before he became a vampire, B) His wife had used some magick fertility rite to help her conceive, C) They'd used a sperm bank, like any other couple where the husband was sterile (or prone to fathering boneless children), or D) the legends were as wrong about vampiric infertility as they were about rosewater being vampire repellent.

Or maybe the kids were adopted. Whatever, I could still see the problem. Children like to play, and all I can say is that if *my* father had been a vampire, "Hey, let's nail daddy in his coffin!" would have been a really fun game. And that's just off the top of my head. I'm sure a couple kids who had time to think about it could come up with something far more inventive.

Alexander had the look of a vampiric father who'd woken up one too many times to find his hair and makeup done, and call me softhearted, but I could sympathize with his plight. "You need a governess, right? One who won't freak at the idea of working for a vampire?"

He nodded, clearly relieved that I understood his situation. "Melanie knows how to read, a bit, but Malory... Well, he's only four. I've tried to teach them myself, but between business and Kindred politics and...my drinking problem..." He gave me a look of exasperated desperation. "Have you ever considered how few hours there really *are* in a night?"

I'd never really given the matter much thought, but now that he'd brought it up, I realized what a truly short span of time there was between dusk and dawn, especially once you'd locked yourself in a coffin for the rest of the day.

His eyes reflected the fact that I understood, or at least had a basic grasp of the concept. “And that’s why I need a governess.” He smiled in hope and supplication. “Do you know anyone who might be available?”

I thought about the mages I knew. Sasha would be kind and wonderful...and she’d have the children walk all over her, magick or not. (As I said earlier, one day she’ll make a wonderful *grand-mother*, though the mothering part in between will probably drive her nuts.) Baron would be amusing, but too weird for kids who needed a little stability in their life. (How can kids have a stranger upbringing than having a vampire for a father? Well, having Baron as a tutor would be a pretty good start.) Blackrose, in my opinion, would raise children about as well as Auntie Mame, while Neville, Peter and Brent were simply *not* the child-rearing type.

Which left me.

Call me a sucker for lost causes, but when people need help, I give it to them. Also, as I’ve said, I pride myself on being able to find anything, anywhere, no matter what it is, and so far that talent hasn’t failed me yet.

Alexander had come and asked me to find him a governess. I, for my part, had been searching all afternoon for a new place to hang my pointed hat. And so far as I could tell, the magick compass needle in my head was indicating a common solution to both problems.

“I suppose the position comes with room and board?”



“Of course,” he said quickly. “I have a large house up the coast.”

You can’t run from Fate, and in the case of Serendipity, you probably don’t want to. I smiled, the needle coming firmly to rest with a chorus of *I’ve Got a Brand-New Pair of Rollerskates, You’ve Got a Brand-New Key*. “How much are you paying, and when do I start?”

Alexander smiled back, and as I said, I’ve decided I like his smile.

Or maybe I was drunk.

But however you slice it, I got the job.



Penny Dreadful™

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Part Two

Regarding packing and fairytale witches; the making of books, and the binding of same; a call to Italy, and the closing of shops; Penny's arrival at her new domicile; the acquaintance of Señora Duarte and Roland; Melanie Gorian, Malory Gorian, and Bruno the Bear; and with special attention to the Art of Origami and the wisdom of Rabbi Loew, and how Penny takes the Lord's name in vain, and the unexpected good which results from this.

Kevin Andrew Murphy



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Evening, Sunday, the 28th of April

To say that Sunday was spent uneventfully packing would be an outright lie; Fate is seldom that kind, or convenient.

At least not if you're in my line of work.

Regardless, the morning, at least, passed in a state of relative calm: I woke, showered, wrote the first entry of my Book of Shadows (which you just read, unless you're the type who skips the first chapter of a book), then began to chow down on the last of Grimm's granola.

I should probably put in a brief note regarding my previous adventures, including who Grimm is and how I came to be staying at his place and eating his granola. Grimm (Bryce Grimm for those of you into first names) is a friend, colleague, and co-conspirator of mine. He's also a fellow mage, as well as my fence.

Grimm runs *Grimm's Occult Specialty Shoppe*, the Haight's most authentic, if not hippest, magickal paraphernalia store, in the upstairs of which I had just showered and was in the process of eating the aforementioned granola. As for how I came to be there, that is the matter of a previous tale, but I'll give the gist of it here:

I stole the Golden Pear (a clockwork marvel containing the secrets of the Philosopher's Stone, the medieval alchemists' mystical McGuffin) from the estate of Aries Michaels (a card-carrying member of the *Collegium Hermeticum*). Not having the Key (and

not being an alchemist even if I did), I fenced the Pear to Grimm, in exchange for cash to bolster the now-fallen Waydown and its Halloween Ball. Grimm (in a rare and shocking display of bad sense) then showed the Pear to Jodi Blake—the bitch-witch who is Mister Mistoffelees’ former “Mistress”—and she stole it from him. I stole it back (not as yet realizing that Jodi was the *Kama Sutra*’s answer to Baba Yaga), in the process catnapping Mister Mistoffelees and burning down the Michaels’ mansion.

This, of course, incensed Jodi (who was left with nothing to wear save a red leather dominatrix ensemble) and she came after me and challenged me to a magician’s duel, which, through luck and I think a bit of Fate (not to mention a little help from my friends) I won, gaining as the prize not only Jodi’s sworn word that she’d never bother me or mine again, but Mister Mistoffelees in the bargain. (Actually, my bargain with him was separate, but same net result.)

Of course, the moral scruples of women who sacrifice babies to amuse their cats not being very high, Jodi has already broken her word at least once. Item A for the prosecution is the fact that she went after Peter and tried to get him to sell his soul to her good buddy, the demon Charnas—and if that’s not bothering me or mine, then I don’t know what is. Not, of course, that I have this on authority from Peter (I mentioned how tight-lipped he can be), but it was mentioned to me by Mister Mistoffelees, who was told it as an FYI by Thaddeus, Peter’s spirit guide, and since both should be in a position to know, I’ve taken it as a reasonably safe assumption.

This being the case, I’d given up the lease on my old apartment and moved into Grimm’s, for the simple reason that the wardings—particularly the “Get thee hence, foul sorceress, *and this means you, Jodi*” spells—are a lot more potent there than they were on my old building (where they were practically nonexistent). Plus, Grimm has gone to Europe to arrange the auction of the Golden Pear (and the Silver Nutmeg, the Elector of Saxony’s mystic Key, which, as I’ve mentioned before, I’m holding for safekeeping), and needs someone to house-sit in the meantime, not to mention run the shop.

So can you see why I jumped at the chance to go play nanny at a vampire's mansion?

Right. San Francisco has become just a little hot for my tastes, and even if Grimm has "Aroint thee, Jodi!" mystically etched into each window, that still doesn't mean she can't brazen her way in the way she did before.

So it was with great trepidation that I heard the banging on the door downstairs, making me pause mid-crunch. Grimm's *Felix the Cat* clock read 1:36, and I put down my spoon and went to the window.

Like a lot of shops in the Haight, Grimm's *Occult Specialty* does a fair share of its business on Sunday, and I couldn't get away without opening just a little for the tourists. I was an hour late already for the posted time, but even that didn't explain the banging.

I pulled open the window, swallowing my mouthful of half-chewed granola, and stuck my head out. "Is there something you need?"

It always pays to be polite in the Haight—you never know who forgot their pills, or who took too many—but the face that looked up at me made me just about jump back and hit my head on the window frame. Down on the sidewalk below me was a classic witch—hag's wrinkles, milky eyes, only a few teeth, et cetera—just like the old crone from the end of 'Snow White.' If, of course, the Wicked Queen had done her hag costume as something like Ren Faire meets Stevie Nick's grandmother. "Need?" cackled the crone in the multicolored, multilayered skirts, veils, necklaces and shawls. "What might I need? The question will be, Pretty Penny, what will you need? What might make your tale just a little more complete?"

She was a witch, that much was certain, straight out of the Brother's Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen. Or the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic—you never could tell—but I didn't have any dwarves telling me not to talk to her, so I called out, "Sorry, I've got plenty of combs and corset laces already. Apples too."

The old woman cackled again. "Ah, you will have read the tales then. Read them and wrote them and set your pen to paper. But now

that you have begun your tale, how will you clothe your pretty child? What shadows will you wrap your book in? Rags and tatters, or velvet gowns? Sackcloth for a cinderwench, or a dancing dress for a princess? For see, here I have the jewels that your story was meant to have."

Out of her rhinestone-spangled shawls she produced a jeweled rectangle the size of a high school yearbook, and she held it up and tilted it back and forth like an item for sale on the Home Shopping Network. The facets caught the sun, white and red and rainbowed black, silver and gold and ivory, and then, before I could fall out the window, she tucked it back into the gypsy scarf collection that passed for her clothes and broke the spell. "Pretty, yes? You want the bit of glitter, little magpie? Come down, and let me in, and we shall set the price."

I pulled back and shut the window, my heart pounding in my ribcage, my eyes still dazzled with the sight, and I swallowed a last bit of granola caught in my teeth. Some things were just too weird.

For a panicked second, I considered that the old hag downstairs might be Jodi, but I quickly dismissed that idea. It just wasn't her style. The Jodi I had met had been a bitch-witch of Joan Collins meets Joan Crawford proportions, and even if she showed her true age, she would do it with a lot more elegance and restraint. Also, she would be a lot less over the top, since aside from the completely overdone fortuneteller outfit, the woman downstairs just reeked of fairytale witch, not to mention having more salesmanship than Snow White's stepmother and the lamp-selling magician from 'Aladdin' combined.

"Mister Mistoffelees?" I managed. "Could I get a bit of advice?"

The bundle of black fur on Grimm's dresser put up a head and yawned, then sat up and stretched, hooking his claws into the antique silk brocade pillow I'd given him and scratching once or twice. Then he turned to me, green eyes glowing slightly. "Yes, Mistress?"

I pointed to the window. "Should I go talk to that old woman out there?"

Having a classic witch's cat is a very useful thing for an aspiring sorceress; for one thing, a familiar won't even blink at strange remarks or questions.

Mister Mistoffelees just jumped down from the dresser onto the rocking chair, then to the floor, then padded over and leapt up onto the windowsill and looked out.

He glanced back, giving me his "Isn't it obvious?" look. "Yes." He blinked. "It doesn't pay to keep Fate waiting."

And Destiny doesn't knock twice. I got the meaning and dashed down the stairs, through the bead curtain and into the front of the shop. Then I was frantically unfastening Grimm's thirteen (count 'em) magically enspelled deadbolts.

By the time I had them open, the old woman was gone. But lying on the doorstep, like some sort of fairytale foundling, was a bundled shawl with a calling card lying atop it.

I picked up the card which was hand-lettered in spidery Copperplate with the name *Madame Cleo Verthank*. I then flipped it over and read the inscription: *A gift and a responsibility. Fare thee well, little magpie.*

I paused, glancing up and down the street for a glimpse of the old woman, then picked up the bundle and brought it inside, locking the bottom three locks with one hand behind me.

Some things are best opened in a ritual space, but I still wasn't certain, so I didn't take the bundle into Grimm's *Sanctum Sanctorum*. Instead, I just cleared a spot on the counter between all of the 'Angel' cards (Yes, you too can send an archangel through the United States Postal Service) and looked at what I'd been given. It was Brussels lace, hand-tatted cobweb silk, shot through with gold and silver threads and spangled with rock crystal rhinestones which formed the bodies of the embroidered spiders. Worth a bundle, but more than that, the threads almost hummed with Destiny, and if something that precious were used for a wrapping, I hardly dared to guess what the bundle might hold. With hesitant fingers, I pulled back the shawl.

I caught my breath, dazzled by the sight below. It was a book, or really, I should say, a book cover, encrusted with jewels and ivory inlay, and an intoxicating perfume rose up from the leather.

Quick bit of bibliography here. You *can* judge a book by its cover, or at least a cover itself. You know how everyone in high school took butcher paper and made jackets for his or her ‘valuable’ textbooks, then decorated them in the boring moments of class? Well, just the same way, folk in the middle ages made fancy covers to dress up the even more valuable books. The really elaborate binding boards had jewels and gilding and filigree and all the rest worked into them, and were often looted from libraries by people who couldn’t read, but knew the value of gold and jewels.

It was one of these I was looking at: two boards of ebony with ivory inlays, silver corners set with garnets and spinels and clear white gemstones cut *en cabochon*, then gold vermeil over the silver, jet cabochons on the ivory, and more garnets studding the leather that held the boards together, and likewise with the band that was meant to go around the book. The lock was silver, set with jet, with a gold key on a diamond chain, another spinel for the head.

A number of calculations were going on simultaneously inside my skull. One was for the straight value in materials and workmanship, ranging from several thousand to a couple million, depending on whether the white gemstones were optical quartz, white spinels, or flawless medieval diamonds (and though I didn’t have a jeweler’s loupe handy, the vote for the diamonds was high). The next was for the age, since while the cut of the gems, the design, the vermeil, and several other factors I won’t go into said *Sixteenth Century Spanish*, the condition of the leather and the wood was too perfect. Apart from a couple cobwebs and a bit of dust, the hide was supple enough that the piece couldn’t have been older than the early part of this century, though the scent and the perfume told me that it had to be of a much earlier vintage.

The last part of the calculations was the most confusing, as well as intoxicating. I knew the smell of Spanish leather (which is subtle and distinct from the mixture of oils used for either Russian or

English), but there were other notes and perfumes mixed in as well—magickal ones, if you get my drift—and between the blending of the oils and the setting of the gems, a powerful spell was at work. And while my sixth sense is well enough developed to be able to spot things like that—especially terribly obvious ones, and even more so after my experience with Blackrose’s ‘signature fragrance’—I couldn’t tell what the meaning of the particular weaving might be, other than “Protect the tome that lies within these covers and keep it safe from all harm,” et cetera, ad nauseum.

I wrapped it back up in the shawl and took it upstairs, piquing the interest of Mister Mistoffelees as I came back to Grimm’s desk where I’d been working on my Book of Shadows.

I set down the bundle next to it, pushing aside the inkwell (Yes, I’ve decided to be really old fashioned, and besides, I have a nice *Mont Blanc*), then unwrapped the shawl. Mister Mistoffelees gave the leather a slight sniff, then sat back as I undid the hasp and folded back the boards.

The inside was much plainer—plainer meaning that various magic squares and diagrams had been burnt into the ebony then rubbed with gold dust—but I took my Book of Shadows and lay it inside, fitting each of the corners into the tabs, then closed it, admiring the winking red and white of the jewels. It was a perfect fit.

Of course this, in and of itself, was not surprising. My Book of Shadows (as you can no doubt tell, since you’re reading it) started out as a large artist’s blank book folio, folio being the coffee-table book size that has been standard with Western printing back to the time of Gutenberg, or at least the *Nuremberg Chronicles*. That someone would make a slipcase for a wizard’s grimoire in those dimensions is sort of to be expected, since folios look a lot more impressive on a lectern than do quartos or duodecimos (regular hardback and paperback size).

But the omen bells were going off right, left and center regardless, since as anyone who’s read their fairytales knows, when an old hag gives you a present, it’s generally something pretty important.

“Did you have a chance to speak with her?” Mister Mistoffelees asked.

I grinned sheepishly. “No. It took too long with the locks.”

My familiar switched his tail. “Unfortunate. That will make things more difficult.”

He jumped down to the floor and padded off to investigate an intriguing dust bunny, and as I said before, you don’t know the meaning of ‘mysterious’ until you have a four-hundred-year-old witch’s cat for a familiar.

I knew better than to pursue the matter. If he wanted to tell me more, he would, but in his own sweet time. Instead, I just picked up the book in both hands and looked up at the cobwebs in the corner of Grimm’s bedroom, “Thanks, Madame Cleo—I think,” then set down my gift from my new fairy godmother and went about the packing.

Luckily, I had already stripped my belongings down to the bare essentials—two steamer chests full—along with a long bundle consisting of a few Turkish carpets and accent rugs I’d inherited from my great-aunt, wrapped around various posters and wall hangings. And while the posters could just as well have gone into storage along with my bushels of Mardi Gras beads and miscellaneous knick-knacks, the rugs are another matter altogether, being something I won’t trust to even the most heavily guarded storage company, and the ‘U-Store’ lockers where I keep everything else are far from that.

Anyway, I got the trunks and rugs down the back stairs (not an easy trick, even with Grimm’s luggage dolly), then opened the door to the garage, pausing as I saw my car parked there. Which wouldn’t have been at all unusual, except that apart from vague recollections of tying on a few more last night in celebration of my newfound job and safe haven, I hadn’t the faintest idea how I’d gotten home. And if you can’t remember what you were doing at the time, then you were definitely too drunk to drive.

I went back upstairs, to where my cat sat perched on the edge of the windowsill, watching the passersby on the sidewalk below.

“Mister Mistoffelees?” He glanced back, signifying that I had his attention. “Do you know how we got home last night?”

He yawned. “Yes.” My cat then went back to looking out the window, my question answered.

I knew that if I asked if he cared to elucidate, he’d either answer yes or no to that too, and that would be the end of it. So instead I asked a proper question: “How did we get home?”

“I drove,” my cat said smugly, not turning around.

I paused, digesting this information. He drove. My cat drove.

I blinked. After all, I don’t see why I should have been so surprised. Only last week he’d evinced a talent for playing the piano, and on the rare Saturday nights when we’d stayed home and watched television (like this past winter when I’d had the flu), Mister M had taken a particular liking to ‘Toonses the Driving Cat’—though I hadn’t realized he’d been taking notes. I thought of what it would have looked like to anyone out on the streets last night—an authentic Stutz Bearcat with a drunken Goth-witch passed out in the passenger seat while her black cat familiar stood on his hind legs and drove the car.

Even without Mister Mistoffelees’ black cat bone, there are some sights which warrant a ‘somebody else’s problem’ field on their own, no magick needed, and that is definitely one of them. I’m certain that any number of people had sworn off alcohol and several other drugs after seeing us, and if I hadn’t previously dealt with similar things, I might just join them—and I still think I might regardless. “Umm...” I said, realizing something else, “...hadn’t you tied one on yourself?”

“Yes,” Mister Mistoffelees admitted, “but the Stutz was sober.”

Only a familiar could come up with logic like that, so I didn’t bother to point out the discrepancies. Having your car being driven by a cat and having your car being driven by a drunken cat come to pretty much the same thing, since I doubt Mister Mistoffelees pays too much mind to things like traffic regulations. As he’s said before, human laws don’t apply to cats, and I don’t think he’d make an exception for silly little things like the rules of the road.

Even if some things are your problem, there is such a thing as denial, and it's a very useful coping mechanism. "Umm, thank you, Mister Mistoffelees."

"You're welcome, Mistress. I enjoyed myself. It was very amusing."

I didn't dare ask "how" it was amusing, or "in what way," since I know some of what my familiar had thought was "amusing" in the past. Instead, I just shrugged, went down and opened the shop long enough to sell a few packs of Tarot cards to random tourists, then gave Grimm a call.

It took a little for the connections to be made, but at last I got the hotel operator. Unfortunately, I don't know much Italian beyond *al dente* and *tira misu*, but I managed to make it pretty clear what I wanted: "*Signore Bryce Grimm, per favor.*"

The operator only had to listen to my atrocious accent and hybridization with Spanish before she said, in perfect European English, "I'm sorry, miss. It's very late here. May I take a message?"

"He's expecting my call," I lied. "This is very important."

Luckily, international hotels are used to dealing with weird guests, and I got through. "Morning, Bryce. It's Penny."

There was a brief snort, followed by, "If this is Penny, it better be good."

"Sure," I said. "I found a new place to stay. I'm moving to a vampire's mansion where I get to play nanny."

"What!?" There was a pause filled with the international static, then, "Don't tell me more, Penny. Someone may be listening to the line. You think you'll be safe?"

"Safe enough, so long as I watch my neck. Not to mention the rug-rats of the night."

There was a sigh. "Good. Leave the keys where we discussed. I'll see if April can take over." Pause. "Is the... other half of the merchandise secure?"

I picked up the Elector of Saxony's Silver Key, still on the chain around my neck (albeit folded up into the Nutmeg so as avoid

impaling my breasts in my sleep), and squeezed it tight. "Safe as houses, Grimm. Considerably safer, in fact." Which, after all, was the absolute truth, silver trinkets not being susceptible to termites, earthquakes, or, for that matter, plummeting down cliffs into the Pacific whenever there was a rainstorm.

"Good. Glad to hear it. You take good care of the item."

"Love you too, Grimm," I chimed back, then heard the click as he hung up.

I know, it wasn't a very cheery conversation, but Grimm knows me, and I know Grimm, and anyway, it was his dime. I left the keys in the ritual room, locked everything behind myself, then left by way of the garage, Mister Mistoffelees sitting atop the jewel-encrusted, shawl-enshrouded, Book of Shadows in the passenger seat (as opposed to behind the wheel), the rest of my gear stowed in the back.

I headed north, across the Golden Gate and up the coast, following my sixth sense as well as the sheet of directions that Alexander had given me.

A good ways up along the Marin headlands, off to the left, I spotted the private drive with the Gorian family crest, a cockatrice rampant, which is heraldic shorthand for a serpent-tailed, bat-winged chicken with a crown and an attitude. Same device as the Del Rey fantasy book seal or the Lindt Chocolate logo, come to think, though the Gorian crest is classier than either, and the gates opened like magic the moment I cut across the oncoming lane of Highway 1 and drove up.

Of course, I didn't have any prickle in the back of my neck to tell me that it was actual magick, so I think it was just an easy guess that someone was watching the security camera and that I was expected. And since there aren't too many Goth girls driving Stutz Bearcats with their familiars riding shotgun, whoever was in the guard shack had a pretty safe bet that I was A-okay.

I felt like I was filling out some panel in a Gorey picture book, something with a caption like *Penny proceeded up the carriage drive, mindful of the cliffs*, and honestly, it was very much like that. At one

loop of the road a section of the bluff had fallen away, cypress trees and all, making a quick shortcut down to the beach. Assuming, of course, that you had a car with four-wheel drive that could handle a seventy-degree grade, boulders, tree trunks, and finally a fifty-foot vertical drop at the end.

My Stutz being not quite in the Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang class (though it would be neat to have a flying car), I just followed the regular path, winding my way up through the cypress trees of the point until I got to the house.

The mansion was designed to impress, but more with money and taste than gothic creepiness. I was faintly disappointed, but 1950s Italian-Villa-meets-California-Hacienda architecture is still quite nice, and the Gorian Estate especially so, with that wonderfully aristocratic Mediterranean feel you get among the upstate California gentry, like something you'd see featured in a back-issue of *Sunset* magazine.

But if the house was impressive, the setting was even more spectacular. Windswept cliffs flanked by cypress trees dripping with Spanish moss have always been one of my favorites—and one of the most gothic things you can get in Northern California without getting into rickety old Victorians—and the long promenades and marble balustrades disappearing over the edge of the cliff only accentuated the stark natural splendor.

Two people were waiting at the bottom of the long white stairs that led up to the house, a tall woman in a dark brown dress with green embroidery, and an even taller man with a bland expression and a chauffeur's uniform.

"*Señorita* Drizkowski," said the woman with a not entirely forced smile as I came to a stop, "you have come to deal with the children."

With a shake and a rattle, the Stutz died as I pulled the choke.

The chauffeur was around to my side of the car and opening the door before I could say anything, and he loomed over me, as tall as Lurch from the Addam's family—though better looking. "Uh, thank you," I said, stepping out of the car and coming around to where the woman with the Spanish accent was standing. I tried to

remember Alexander's briefing from the drunkenness of the night before. "You must be *Señora Durante*." I put out my hand.

"*Duarte*," she corrected, taking my hand and squeezing it in a crushing grip to make her point. She released it then and gave another smile, a genuine one this time, though not a very nice one. "You must be tired from your trip. It is a difficult drive for those not used to it. Though you must also be anxious to see the children?"

What at first sounded like a statement changed slightly into a question at the note of hope in her voice, and as I took my aching hand back, I made a snap analysis of the situation: *Señora Duarte* looked on me as an interloper into her personal space, and she didn't like that, but even more than that, she didn't like dealing with the children, and was grateful for the fact that someone was going to take them off her hands.

What I said next would set the tone of our whole relationship, and as I've said before, having a cat for a familiar is very useful. "Meowww?" inquired Mister Mistoffelees, sitting forgotten behind me.

I quickly turned around, gathering him into my arms along with my bundled Book of Shadows, grabbing my lunchbox almost as an afterthought. I hugged the Book and Mister Mistoffelees to my chest, stroking my familiar with my off hand, and smiled, hoping to win favor by the mere fact of having a cute and cuddly animal slung over my arm like a stuffed toy.

Señora Duarte's face became a mask of revulsion. "So, you have a cat. I was not informed of this. I cannot abide cats. They are nasty, filthy creatures who drag mice and rats into the house."

Mister Mistoffelees looked at her, and after a moment—and despite still being held under the armpits like a rag doll—said in his usual unusual talking-cat voice, "I cannot abide housekeepers. They throw the mice and rats out."

I believe I also mentioned the trouble a familiar can be? Well, if I haven't, take that as an example. I hugged Mister Mistoffelees and my Book tighter as I kissed any chance of a good impression goodbye.

Señora Duarte's eyes narrowed, almost as green as Mister Mistoffelees', but not glowing. Then she looked to me. "So. It is true. You are a *bruja*."

"*Brujah!*" echoed the chauffeur in a deep, almost Lurch-like voice.

"*Bruja*," *Señora Duarte* snapped, the accent differently placed, turning on him for a moment. "It means 'witch,' imbecile! See to her bags, then take her car and place it in the carriage house."

The chauffeur, huge as he was, stepped to, picking up one of my antique steamer chests with one arm, and hoisted it onto his shoulder, which was an impressive feat even with his size. I boggled for a moment as he set back up the steps, then looked to *Señora Duarte*.

"Roland is quite strong," She smiled evenly, "as am I."

"You think my Mistress has not seen ghouls before?" Mister Mistoffelees inquired.

There are reasons, as I said, why a witch has a familiar, even with the awkwardness they can sometimes cause, and I picked up on Mister Mistoffelees' hint, even though I didn't have time to sort out the mythological particulars. "Please, let's not get off to a worse start." I smiled back at *Señora Duarte*. "Just show us to our rooms and let us freshen up, then you may take us to the children."

The reminder that I was going to take the children off her hands sparked some much needed pleasantness into the woman's expression. "Of course. The children are very eager to see you, *Señorita Drizkowski*. But let us have an understanding." She paused, looking me in the eye. "I have served the Gorian family for a great many years, and do not think for an instant that you could take my place, even with your little tricks, *brujiita*. The only reason you are here is because the Master requested you."

"The only reason," I countered, "is because I like the Master, and because I like children. Which, I am certain, is not the case with you."

She smiled back, a jaguar's grin. "Let us hope then, for both our sakes, that you are up to the task. Come along, *Señorita Drizkowski*."

She turned, and Mister Mistoffelees growled in satisfaction, I think because we'd just made another cat back down. Whatever, I still just followed her up the steps, hoisting my familiar onto his usual place on my shoulder (since he was starting to squirm), and went in through the front door, passing Roland as he ducked out en route to get my other trunk. Ducking quite literally, though only slightly, so I guesstimated him to be six-nine or six-ten.

The inside of the house was even more impressive, spacious and airy with plaster everywhere, including a number of Arabesques and Mexicali roses done as frescoes in red and metallic gold. There was tilework on all the floors, laid with inexpensive Persian rugs—the type mass-produced in China (despite the name), but still not cheap—and whoever had done the original decor had obviously gotten a special on wrought iron, though all the fixtures had the faint rust patina that came from the salt air.

We went up a landing and down a hall and came upon the larger of my steamer trunks, sitting beside a heavy oak door which looked like it had been salvaged from a Spanish monastery—as did a great deal of fixtures inside the house. *Señora* Duarte pursed her lips for a moment, then seemed to think better of whatever she was going to say. Instead, she just pulled out a key ring that would be the envy of half the lesbians in Berkeley and selected a large iron key that dated back at least a century and bespoke a lock that could be picked with a screwdriver (no challenge, except for noise factor). She then inserted it into the expected lock, there was a click, and the door opened with the silent glide of well oiled hinges.

“This will be your room.” She looked down her nose at me. “I hope it meets with your approval.”

I stepped inside, looking around. An Ozark folk art chifferobe, knotty pine ladder-back chair and roll-top desk, and a four-poster bed spread with a quilt done in the ‘Union Square’ pattern in red and blue calico. A spare quilt lay folded atop the tole-painted Pennsylvania Dutch hope chest at the foot.

And on the far side, taking up most of the wall, was a picture window framed with stained glass poppies and lupines, dying the

room orange and cobalt blue. I'm not quite certain as to the meaning of the golden poppy in the Language of Flowers—yellow means 'Wealth,' while red means either 'The Consolation of Sleep,' 'Pleasure,' or 'Fantastic Extravagance,' depending on the book you consult—but at a blind guess, I'd say 'California Dreaming' or 'Pleasant Fantasies' makes sense. Yet as for the lupines, those mean 'Voraciousness' in every book, and if it weren't for the fact that you see the two growing together in the wild, I'd be seriously worried about the glazier's intentions. Lancets to either side of the panorama window held more wildflowers, as did the carvings on the seat below.

Entranced, I walked in and over, looking out at the gardens and the cliffs. The ocean was a path of silver as the sun sank below the horizon, the air of the room warm with the last of its rays and scented with rose potpourri and lemon oil, signifying 'Love,' 'Zest,' and 'Goth girls who read too much into things.'

The room met with my approval and then some. "This will be lovely, thank you." I forced myself to turn away from the view and the beautiful furnishings and look at *Señora Duarte* instead. "When can I see the children?"

It was a quick peace offering, but a sound one. "Just as soon as I fetch them." She paused. "One thing—please do not open the hope chest. It contains effects of the Master's late wife. I did not expect this room to be used for some time."

"Of course," I agreed readily, attempting my best to smile as *Señora Duarte* nodded, then left the room, her embroidered skirts swishing against the edge of the doorframe.

"Where's my bed?" asked Mister Mistoffelees once she left.

"Right here." I set him down in the mission rocker in one corner. "I'll get your pillow just as soon as Roland brings the other trunk."

Mister Mistoffelees sniffed the horsehair cushion, then tested the leather once or twice with his claws before settling down into a bundle of black fur.

I glanced around the room, eyes coming to rest on the hope chest, my curiosity prickling, and I reminded myself to be careful what I wished for—I might get it. Especially in my line of business.

Quick aside here, but you can't get more gothic than a dead woman's trousseau, excepting a picture of her over the mantel and a room left "untouched" since she passed on. A locked chest is one of the classics, and even though the one in my new room probably didn't contain anything more interesting than a set of linens and a childhood doll—or at most a few old love letters and a scrapbook—from the moment I saw it, I was itching to take a peek.

In point of fact, I still am, since I also fancy myself a good enough judge of character to be able to guess that *Señora Duarte* had told me about it just so she could get me in trouble with "the Master."

And I have to say, while Alexander definitely does not have the usual run of estate for a vampire in a gothic mystery (my main source of information on the subject), he's certainly hired the right housekeeper. *Señora Duarte* seems to be in the running for the 'Mrs. Danvers' look-alike contest, or at least I wouldn't be surprised if she kept a highlighted copy of *Rebecca* in her bedside table.

For that matter, Alexander has also picked the right chauffeur, or at least central casting did pretty well for voice and body type. But to get back to the story, Roland ducked in, easily lugging my second smaller, albeit heavier, steamer trunk, along with the bundle of my Great-Aunt Eudora's Turkish carpets. "Where do you want these?"

"Over there, next to the chifforobe," I said, and he smiled, impressed, I guess, that I knew the proper name for a highboy with a mirror on top.

Or maybe not. "Nice car," he rumbled. "I haven't seen a Stutz in years."

I set my lunchbox down atop the desk, along with my Book of Shadows, still wrapped in Madame Cleo's rhinestone-spangled shawl. "It's got a lot of Volkswagen under the hood. And lawn mower parts."

He glanced down at me, though not with the condescending look *Señora Duarte* had used. It's just that men that tall are just used to looking down at people, as a matter of course. "You did the work yourself?"

There is a certain pleasure, I must admit, in shocking people's preconceptions. But I wasn't going to grind it in. I'd already made enough enemies for one day. "Yeah, I'm pretty handy with a socket set." I tossed off a few more automotive particulars to prove my credentials, he bandied some more back, testing me, and it ended with a genuine bit of respect, as well as invitation/permission for him to look under the hood and putter around when he had time. Probably the moment he left the room.

God knows the car could use it, 'cause while I'd had a bit of help from my youngest brother, Harry, neither of us are professionals, and I'm certain there are things that could be improved upon. Even for the Queen of Jury-Riggers, and her brother, the Prince of Auto-Shop.

I decided that I liked Roland, who was as relaxed as men that big usually are (i.e. He didn't have anything to prove, and didn't need to do anything to frighten or impress people other than stand there), in addition to being fairly nice looking—brown hair, blue eyes, and while his features were definitely not model caliber, he did have an excellent smile. Though I was (and am still) wondering about the "ghoul" business, since so far as I've read, ghouls either A). Eat human flesh, B). Eat bugs like Renfield in *Dracula*, or C). Both.

And while I hadn't seen what sort of legs *Señora* Duarte had under her skirts, Roland didn't seem to have the goaty cloven-hoofed type Lovecraft had described. Really big, really long legs, yes, with really big shiny black boots, but nothing that outlandish, so I just guessed he might be a bug-eater like Renfield or the one in *Fright Night II*. Which wasn't as much of a freak-out as you might think. After all, if you live around San Francisco, bug-eating is perfectly normal in comparison to some of the practices, and anyway, I was already working for a vampire so I shouldn't get too weirded out by the idea of other supernatural critters in the area.

Señora Duarte stepped into the doorway, announcing her presence by flipping the light switch and banishing the shadows of sunset with the sudden glow of the overhead light. "The children—" she began, and then they pushed their way past her skirts.

“So wow, are you the new nanny? Are you like the nanny on teevee? She dresses a lot prettier.”

“Why are you dressed like Mary Poppins?”

I was saved from immediate answer by *Señora Duarte*. “*Señorita Drizkowski*, let me introduce Melanie and Malory. Melanie is six, Malory is four. They’re your responsibility now. Roland, come with me. We have matters to attend to.”

“Six and a half,” Melanie corrected as *Señora Duarte* left, Roland ducking out behind her with an apologetic grin.

I should probably describe the children, since when I’m reading a book, I always like to know what people look like. Melanie is tall and pretty, with dark blond hair that she’ll probably grow out of sooner or later (and regret the loss of ever after, even once she discovers peroxide) and bright blue eyes, and when I met her, she was got up in an overly frilly red dress which I could tell she hated. I guessed it had been picked out by *Señora Duarte*, probably as some twisted mixture of attempted guidance and revenge.

Malory is smaller—as you’d expect for a four-year-old, though small for that age too—with his father’s eyes and dark hair. And a much healthier color (as you might expect as well). When he came in, he was dressed in a blue jumper, and had a bedraggled and much loved teddy bear tucked in the crook of one arm, head turned out so it could look at me—same way I’d held Mister Mistoffelees earlier. “Why are you dressed like Mary Poppins?” he repeated, his voice soft and grave like Cindy Lou Who’s in *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*.

In clear fact, I *was* dressed like Mary Poppins, at least the Julie Andrews incarnation, except that the buckles on my shoes were Austrian crystal instead of diamond, and I hadn’t been able to locate a parrot-handled umbrella. “Well,” I said, “I’d found this dress in a secondhand shop, and I didn’t think anyone else would get the joke.”

Malory looked grave and nodded, accepting this explanation, while Melanie just said, “The Nanny gets her clothes at Bloomingdales.”

“Well, yes, but we don’t have a Bloomingdales out here. At least not yet.”

Quick note of cultural literacy: If you want to understand kids, check out a few of the shows they watch. Same as adults, kids make references to the things they know, and most of what they’re talking about won’t sound like gibberish if you know whereof they speak.

Of course, my experience is more with *Nanny and the Professor* than *The Nanny*, but I’d still caught enough snippets when channel surfing to get the general idea—nasal-voiced New York clothes horse gets job as nanny. Similar idea here, except I’m a Goth from San Francisco, and I’d like to think I have a more pleasing vocal quality.

Malory wandered over to the rocking chair and reached out his hand.

Mister Mistoffelees put up his head and said matter-of-factly, “If you pull my tail, I’ll scratch you.”

Malory looked grave. “My daddy’ll bite you.”

“Yes,” said Mister Mistoffelees, “but you will still be scratched. And your daddy’s not here.”

Malory took his hand back and frowned, hugging his teddy bear. “Bruno’s here. He won’t like it either.” Malory hugged the bear tighter so that it leaned forward to stare at Mister Mistoffelees. “My mommy gave him to me.”

Mister Mistoffelees narrowed his eyes, and they glowed, preternatural slits of green witchfire, and the light was reflected in the teddy bear’s glass eyes.

Then my familiar blinked and cocked his head, his—and the teddy bear’s—eyes back to normal. “Hello, Bruno,” my cat said conversationally. “Let me give you some professional advice: If I were in your place, I’d caution my Master to keep his hands to himself. Or at very least to ask permission before he reaches out and grabs.”

Malory hugged Bruno tighter and the teddy bear made an “Umph!” which both Malory and Mister Mistoffelees listened to respectfully. Malory then looked gravely at my cat. “May I pat you?”

Mister Mistoffelees cocked his head the other way. “Yes. If you do it nicely. And don’t pull my tail.”

Malory reached out, then began to pat my familiar, gingerly at first (as you might expect), but gaining confidence as Mister Mistoffelees began to purr.

Melanie looked at me, her eyes round. “You are a witch, aren’t you?”

I almost said, “Whatever gave you that idea?” but refrained. A lady doesn’t take an opening that wide, and it’s not fair to cap on children anyway—unless of course they start it.

Instead, I just sat down on the edge of the bed, letting the quilt bounce with the mattress. “Well, yes, but more of the Mary Poppins sort than the *Wizard of Oz* type,” I said, wondering if Mary Poppins or Phoebe Figalily were going to show up because I was representing myself as a member of the Magickal Nannies Guild, and if so, whether they’d blast me for operating without a union card or just hand me a membership application and an invitation to the monthly tea.

Either case, I was still in for it. “Actually, I’m a governess. You know what that is?”

Melanie looked serious. “Kind of like the President?”

I shook my head. “No, but good guess. A governess is sort of like a teacher and a nanny rolled into one.”

“Are you going to teach us how to do magic?”

I hadn’t considered this, but I probably should have. After all, anyone my cat chooses to talk in front of either believes in magick already or else is something supernatural to begin with. And kids who’d seen their dad turn into a bat would have pretty high expectations for a governess. “Maybe. Let me show you something.”

I got up and went over to the desk, gathering up Mister Mistoffelees en route so as to draw the attention of Malory, then slid out the chair and lifted the front. It rolled up with a ratcheting clatter, and my familiar leapt from my shoulder to the top of the hutch while I took down my Book of Shadows and placed it in the far corner.

For my high school talent competition, I'd done a little stage magic, and while I've gotten a bit more authentic since then, you can probably imagine how I took down my lunch pail, a.k.a. Bag of Tricks, and showed it off. Observe the *Nine Inch Nails* stickers on this side, note the *KMFDM* stickers on that side, and pay close attention to the top, where, in the place of honor, we have the emblem of *The Penny Dreadfuls*, with the "The" and the finial "s" carefully razored off.

Then, with the same Vanna White gestures, I undid the catch, revealing a mélange of combs, club flyers, and all the usual. I reached down to the bottom and felt around until I came up with a cellophane package filled with gold foil squares.

Thank the gods for *Hello Kitty*, Bast in particular. The little instruction books I'd gotten as a kid had taught me the ancient and arcane eastern art of origami, and the children watched as I quickly and deftly folded a crane.

"It's a pterodactyl," Melanie said as I held it up.

"Actually, it's a crane," I placed it in her hands, "an ancient and sacred Japanese bird."

Melanie looked at it, obviously torn between having something pretty and shiny and the plain fact that it was nowhere near as impressive as a talking cat, or, for that matter, having a vampire for a father. "I thought you were going to teach us magic."

"I am." I touched the crane with one finger. "If you fold a thousand of these, each perfect, you get a wish."

This seemed of interest to Melanie, but then she realized the scope of the number. "A thousand?"

I nodded. "Each perfect. But it works. The last person I know of who did it was a girl about your age. She wished for an end to nuclear war, and, well, look what happened to the arms race."

"The what?"

"Exactly," I said, not bothering to mention that the kid in question had actually died of radiation poisoning at crane number seven hundred something, but that enough people had picked up where she left off and finished the rite.

Malory tugged on my dress. "Make me one. That flies."

"Say please," I said. "That's the magick word."

"It is?"

I nodded. "Anything that gets you what you want is magick. And 'please' is the most simple, everyday white magick word you can know."

"Please," Malory said.

I took out another sheet, a pale blue one this time, and did a slightly simpler folding of the crane pattern, leaving a thicker neck and tail.

"Make it fly," Malory said, then added, "please."

I held up the crane, pinching it at the base of the neck, and tugged the tail. The wings flexed and flapped with each tug.

Malory looked as unimpressed as only a child who has grown up around vampires and just discovered a talking cat can be. "It's not flying. Not for real."

I could have given him a speech about using your imagination, or about how fun it was to "pretend," and all the rest of that, but I knew it wouldn't be any use. Mister Mistoffelees had already tipped my hand, and both kids were looking at me with a look that said, *Alright, magick lady. Show us the good stuff. We know you're holding out on us.*

You're probably wondering, since this is a Book of Shadows, when I plan to put down a couple of actual spells. Well, honestly, from all that I've learned and gathered, most of magick is technique and theory, and if you don't know that, a list of spells isn't going to do you much good. Just like you can have all the recipes you want and they won't be any help unless you already know how to cook.

"Alright," I said, then to the kids, and now to you, the reader. I took the blue crane down onto the desk, inverted it, then carefully unfolded the head. Then I reached into my Lunchbox o' Tricks and got out my *Mont Blanc*, not to mention the inkwell. Then, carefully, and with great ceremony, I took it out of its case and showed the Gorian children how to refill a fountain pen.

They were unimpressed, but honestly, this is all part of magick. If you know anything about the arcane arts, you already know the importance of virgin parchment and fresh quills and so on. If not, let me explain it in terms of science—sterile implements. But a freshly opened package of *Hello Kitty* origami papers works great for the first, and my *Mont Blanc* (which has never been used by anyone but myself) works fine for the second, and India ink, which used to cost a fair price in the middle ages, can now be purchased at any art store, and it's easy enough to add essential oils and any other magickal adulterants you might want. Or you can just go down to Chinatown and steal the ink out a 'Paint Your Own Sutra' kit if you don't want to take the time.

Likewise, if you know any Hebrew mysticism, then you know the tale of the Golem of Prague, upon which the Frankenstein legend is based. Basically, Rabbi Loew decided he wanted a servant, and instead of just putting out a 'Help Wanted' sign, he made a man out of clay and wrote the name of God on its forehead. And his golem got up and made itself useful until, like Frankenstein, it went berserk and ran around Prague, and the rabbi had to whack it on the forehead with an eraser to stop it before they both got burned by the angry villagers. Of course, that's paraphrasing, but you get the general idea.

Ever since then, wizards have written *The Word* on little slips of paper and stuck them under the tongues of statues or in their ears when they wanted to cause trouble, but the theory is still the same. Magicians argue over which *Name* is proper, and while I'd bet money that *INRI* was not the name used by Rabbi Loew, I was raised Catholic. And if I could swallow transubstantiation of the Host, then I could handle animation of the origami.

I carefully penned in the Latin name for Jesus, and then, just for a little bit of extra heresy and sympathetic magick, flaked off a spot of blood from the inside of my lunch pail and sprinkled it over the ink.

The crane started to twitch and quiver under my fingers like a bird that, well, has its neck unfolded, so I quickly sealed it up, then nearly tipped myself backwards in the chair as it suddenly took off.

Malory squeezed his teddy bear till it umphed, and even Melanie looked suitably impressed. And I'll have to admit, I was pretty darned pleased with myself too, since I've never done anything that showy or blatant. And this pride in my mystic powers lasted until I noticed my fountain pen bleeding all over my fingers.

Bleeding quite literally, I should add, because the miracle of transubstantiation had gotten a little carried away, and the ink was now transfigured into bright red blood and my pen was fountaining like a severed artery, with far more liquid than a *Mont Blanc* should reasonably be expected to hold.

One thing they'd tried to teach me in catechism is that you don't mess with Jesus or things exactly like this can happen. Unfortunately, I hadn't taken it to heart, and likewise with the advice from my fellow mages regarding vulgar magick and paradox, which is the New Agey way of talking about the exact same thing. In other words, most wizards are subtle, not because they are quick to anger (or because it makes them soggy and hard to light), but because, in the end, it causes a lot less grief.

Let me explain. Witchcraft is the art of bending the way of the world to your will. If you bend it in compliance with general, natural laws, if anything goes wrong, Murphy's Law will still generally happen in normal, everyday ways. Like if I try to fix my car and throw in a few minor charms and a prayer to Hephaestus, worst thing that can happen is an engine fire.

If, however, you put your faith in things like Jewish folklore and Catholic miracles, and then try playing God—even if it's for something as frivolous as animating an origami crane—well, then, you'd better be prepared to deal with things like fountain pens squirting blood.

And this was the tableau when my new boss walked into the room: me with my fountain pen spurting blood onto the wall, while an origami bird flew circles around the room (unable to land, since

it had no legs), Melanie and Malory watched in wonder, and Mister Mistoffelees sat there with his eyes glowing bright enough to compete with the ceiling lamp, obviously fascinated both by the trapped bird and the yummy blood spilled all over the desk.

If he'd asked me for milk right then, I probably would have hit him.

However, it is another law of magick that out of the mouths of babes great wisdom is often spoken, and Malory was no exception, performing as miraculous a transubstantiation as had my fountain pen as he said, "Daddy, she made blood for you. Now you don't have to go way."

With that, a ruler-slap from the Catholic higher powers suddenly transmuted into a blessing for the house, and Alexander came round the bed, wonderingly put out a finger into the fine red stream.

He brought it to his mouth, tasting, and his expression changed to the "Wow—chocolate!" look you get from children when they suddenly find that they like something they at first weren't too sure of. Then he began to lean forward like it was a drinking fountain, (which, in a sense, it was), so I handed him my *Mont Blanc*.

Alexander sat down on the edge of the bed, color coming back into his cheeks as he nursed from my fountain pen. This lasted about a minute until either God chose to be merciful, or Heaven decided that enough was enough, and their Divine object lesson was *not* meant to be a Slurpee for the Damned. Whatever the case, my pen stopped impersonating the Vial of Hastings. Or at least so to judge from Alexander's expression, who looked just like a vampire who had been expecting another mouthful of yummy blood, only to find that he's suddenly sucking ink.

He laid off, with a grimace and a "Bleah..." sticking out a black tongue, then he reached down and dipped up a fingerful of the red blood clotting on the floorboards, I guess to wash the taste out of his mouth.

"My God..." he breathed, a beatific expression spreading across his face as he handed back my fountain pen. "Whose blood was that?"

“Uh, God’s, I think.” The fountain pen burped out another dollop of blood, chastising me for my lack of faith—after all, what did I need, a miracle?—or maybe that was just the last jot of the paradox that New Age mages talk about.

“God is good,” Alexander said, though I don’t think he was making a pun. His expression was too beatific, or just plain stoned, for that, and then he said, “That’s my curse. I can only drink the blood of the good, and you don’t know how hard that is to find.”

Mister Mistoffelees blinked in a green flash, “Easier than you’d think,” then leapt to the floor and began lapping up the rest of the blood, eyes slitted still watching the origami bird.

I set the pen down on the desk, wondering what I was supposed to do for an encore and what Mary Poppins would do in the same situation. Probably launch into a musical number, but somehow singing ‘Just a Spoonful of Sugar!’ didn’t seem all that appropriate.

Annie Lennox fit the mood a bit better—‘Little Bird,’ in particular—but I didn’t burst into song, only undid the catch of the left-hand lancet and popped it open, letting in some fresh ocean air, and more importantly, letting the origami bird fly out before Mister Mistoffelees pounced on it.

Call it an inkling, but if Heaven was displeased with me for taking the Lord’s name in vain—not to mention using it for parlor magic—then you could just imagine the response to me feeding it to my cat. And that doesn’t even go into what Malory’s reaction would be.

I had an urge to magick away the bloodstain too, but as the accident with the pen proved, the arcane arts are not something to be used frivolously, plus I really didn’t know what spell I could cast or what song I might sing to make it go away. Excepting ‘A Spoonful of Sugar,’ which, on second thought, might actually work, though I don’t think I could have handled a bouncing, Disney-animated bloodstain just then—even assuming everything went the way I wanted, which wasn’t terribly likely after what had just happened. (And I don’t even want to think of what could have happened if I picked something from *Jesus Christ, Superstar* or *Godspell*.)

"Melanie?" I said, and I think I kept my voice from cracking. "Do you know where Mrs. Duarte keeps the cleaning supplies?"

"Yeah," Melanie said, "but she keeps them locked up."

"Do you know how to get into them anyway?" I reached up and pulled out a hairpin, handing it to her.

Melanie grinned, accepting the hairpin, and dashed out of the room.

After the miracle of the fountain pen, Alexander seemed ready to accept anything, or at least didn't blink at the concept of his daughter knowing how to pick locks, or that I'd been able to guess this and was encouraging it.

"Bye-bye, bird." Malory looked out the window, waving, and waving Bruno's paw for him. "Bye-bye."

Mister Mistoffelees looked up from the blood and sniffed, then seemed to think better of whatever he was going to say and just went back to lapping up the pool before Melanie returned with the cleaning supplies.

I came over next to Alexander. "That was an accident," I said, grinning weakly. "The blood, I mean." I offered him a hand up, then realized that it was still covered with yet more of the blood. "Umm..."

He took it as I hesitated, but didn't kiss it, as you might expect, only stood up and grimaced. "An accident?"

"Well, yes," I said, retrieving my hand, and looked around for something to wipe it on other than the bedspread. "Is there a bathroom?"

"Through the door on the far wall," he said, and, embarrassed, I dashed on through.

I didn't even look at the fixtures, other than to quickly find the light switch and the sink. And then, for the third time in two nights, I played Lady Macbeth and washed blood off of my hands while in close proximity to a vampire.

And you wonder why I believe in Fate?

Some people's lives seem to run in predictable patterns. Trust me, I know whereof I speak, and how to read signs and portents, and it's common wisdom among mages that the Weird Sisters have it in for them. Or maybe it's just that since we're a little more aware than most people, we can spot when the Loom of Fate starts repeating itself. Or it might just be that God has a sense of humor, and a fondness for running gags in particular. I'm not sure, pick the explanation you like, but trust me, I was not laughing.

By the time I came out, Melanie had returned with an arsenal of cleansers. I took them, grateful, then filled the bucket in the bathtub (clawfooted, circa nineteen twenties) and set to work.

"Really, that's not necessary," Alexander said as I got down on my knees with the scrub brush and bucket of warm soapy water. "We can call *Señora Duarte*."

"No, no," I protested. "We need to get this up before it sets. And children need to know how to clean up after themselves." That, and the simple fact that I didn't want to give *Señora Duarte* the satisfaction of knowing that I'd managed to screw up in front of the kids my first hour as a nanny, never mind that I'd simultaneously managed to feed the boss.

And ghoul or not, I could guess that *Señora Duarte* was a staunch Mexican Catholic, and the idea of explaining to her that Jesus had died to entertain the kids and feed the cat was nothing I wanted to go into.

Instead, I taught Melanie the important skill of removing bloodstains (warm water, not cold, mild soap and a stiff brush) while Malory and their father looked on.

"So that's how you get blood out..." Alexander smiled as I looked up. "It's amazing the number of things they don't teach you when you're Embraced." He paused as I looked askance. "Taken by the Night," he said, rephrasing himself.

You've seen how much vampires like euphemisms, so I'm sure you can figure out what he was talking about. Regardless, I finished showing Melanie how to dispose of evidence—an excellent skill which every child should learn, and that not enough parents, in my

humble opinion, have the sense to teach—and everything got put away, including the dish soap with just enough water added so that the level would be the same if *Señora Duarte* stopped to check—which is something that wouldn't surprise me at all.

"You're very thorough," Alexander said as Melanie snuck off down the hall with the cleaning supplies.

"It's amazing what you can learn at parochial school. Sister Mary Innocent taught me a lot."

I left him to guess whether I'd learned my skills of subterfuge from Sister Mary or because of her, but just so you know, it was a little of both. Sister Mary lived in even more absolute dread of Mother Superior than we girls did, and honestly, Sister Mary knew a lot more about child psychology than Mary Poppins. "In ever job that must be done there is an element of fun" is certainly true, but if you remember childhood, then you know that there's no element more fun than being naughty. And if you can convince kids that cleaning up after yourself and putting your toys away is delightfully wicked, well, then, you're a step ahead of the game. Or at least a step ahead of Mother Catherine Claire.

Or *Señora Duarte*, for that matter.

Alexander glanced around with a bittersweet smile. "These were my wife's things. Before we were married, I mean."

It was one of those uncomfortable statements for which there's no really good reply. "*Señora Duarte* told me." I nodded towards the hope chest.

Alexander leaned over and placed a hand on it, lovingly caressing the wood. "I'm saving it till Melanie gets older. It's something Kate would have wanted her to have." He blinked away a tear, and I thought I saw a drop of blood in it, but then again, what did I really know about vampires?

"Listen," he said, turning to me, "Penny, I know it's not part of the job description I gave you, but—"

"You were wondering if I could keep making blood for you." I grimaced. "Listen, Alexander, I'd love to, but that was an accident, and—"

"Please," he said softly, the word scattering any other protests I might make. "You don't have any idea how much it hurts, how difficult it is..."

I paused. Like I said before, I like helping people. And when somebody asks me to find them something, well...

"I can't make any promises," I said, biting my lower lip. "Magick isn't an exact science. But I'll give it a try. Only the blood of the good and the innocent?"

He nodded, a bloody tear in the corner of his eye, and I didn't ask how his wife had died. Probably nothing to do with it, but, like I said, I like helping people, and, as Sister Mary continually reminded me, the Lord works in mysterious ways.

Even for vampires, heretics, and witches.

An origami crane fluttered past the window, and Alexander stood up. "I had business in the City tonight, but I can cancel it. After all, one appointment's been taken care of already." He smiled. "C'mon, Malory. Let's let your new nanny unpack her things, and we'll go down to the beach and build a sandcastle."

Malory happily hugged his father's leg, umphing Bruno as he did so, and Alexander laughed and picked both of them up.

"Are you staying tonight, daddy?" Melanie asked from the doorway.

"Tonight," Alexander said, and from her expression, I saw how rare and happy an occasion that was for the children. "Get your coat. We're going down to the beach."



There were grateful smiles from all of them as they left the room, and that, in an of itself, was payment enough.

Mister Mistoffelees jumped up atop the windowsill, glancing out at the moon and the ocean below. "A blessing for the house." He twitched his tail twice, then glanced back at me. "Well done, witchling."

"Thanks," I said, then, as he continued to twitch his tail, "Let me get you your pillow. Okay?"



He purred, satisfied that I had remembered my promise. “Yes, Mistress.”



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Kevin Andrew Murphy



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Let me be blunt—There is nothing so inane and silly as black magick.

Yes, yes, I know, you're probably thinking about the nasty, showy stuff like black robes and human sacrifice and summoning demons amid Satanic orgies. That's not what I'm talking about.

I'm talking about the real honest-to-God, Satan and the Hidden Face of the Great Mother Goddess black magick that witches did in the middle ages, and that the modern Wiccans keep trying to dismiss as so much medieval propaganda and claptrap.

I'm not saying that the church didn't do some pretty wicked things itself, or that most of the witches torched in the Burning Times were anything more than harmless midwives who got in the way of the patriarchy (to give it the standard Dianic feminist neo-pagan spin). But I have documentable proof that at least *one witch* in the middle ages was doing all of the nasty things the church said witches did back then, not to mention a few bits of malicious *maleficia* that she came up with herself.

Let me explain. You know how I said I snagged Jodi Blake's familiar, not to mention the contents of her ritual room? Well,

among those contents were a couple of her personal workbooks, as you might expect, and as you also might expect, the Books of Shadows of a Nephandi witch are just chock full of nasty black magick, interspersed with Jodi's gloating over her wickedness and how pleased the Dark Masters are going to be with her exploits.

Yes, I know, you're not supposed to read another woman's diary, but with a Book of Shadows, it's sort of expected. And it's not as if I really give a damn about Jodi's privacy anyway.

But the truly shocking thing about Jodi's Books of Shadows and the spells they contain is not how evil and wicked they are—and trust me, they are—but how silly and dated most of the magick is.

Let me give you some examples. In between her *How to Conduct a Satanic Orgy*, Jodi's notes on *A Methode by which to Kill a Man by Use of a Poppet and Pynnes* (i.e. How to make your standard voodoo doll), and of course the section on *How to Summon Our Good Buddy, the Demon Charnas* (Yes, I'm paraphrasing), there are some completely ridiculous and outdated bits of black magick. Like *How to Give a Child Fyttes* (as if you need magick for that—just tell him he can't watch *Barney*) or *An Art by which to Steal the Cream from Thy Neighbors Churn and to Place it in Thy Own*.

Horrors! Witches shoplifting butter! What depravity will they stoop to next?

Then there's my particular favorite, which, last night—after I'd finished my entry in my own Book of Shadows, but before I went to bed—had me alternately goggling in shock and giggling at the very absurdity of the spell. Not because I'd never heard of it, mind you, but because when I did, I'd thought it was either a dirty joke or a bit of patriarchic paranoia or some combination of the two.

Now you're probably wondering what I'm talking about, what obscene rite of black magick would send me into a fit of giggles at the very thought and into shock at the discovery that a witch had ever actually pulled it off.

Literally.

Pardon me while I giggle, but let me tell the joke the way they put it in the *Malleus Maleficarum*—Sprenger and Kramer's big book

of *How to Burn a Witch and Why*, and the place where I first found reference to the spell. Okay, ready? Here goes:

One day a man woke up and his penis was missing. That's right. It was gone. And since he didn't usually have a detachable penis, he knew it had been stolen by a witch.

Giggle.

Luckily for the man, he found the witch, and threatened to kill her if she didn't give his penis back. But she said she didn't have it with her, so she led him to a tree outside town and told him, "Climb up. Your penis is in the nest at the top."

Not paying attention to the Freudian symbolism—since Freud wasn't going to be born for a few centuries yet—the man climbed the tree, and when he got to the top, he saw the witch had spoken the truth: There was a nest, and in it, there were penises of all shapes and sizes, crawling around and sticking their heads up like baby birds.

And so the man picked out the biggest one and started back down, and the witch says, "No, no, that's not the right one. That's not your penis," and the man says, "What are you talking about, witch? Of course it's my penis," and the witch says, "No, that's the parish priest's!"

Giggle.

I'd always thought that the extra punch line was that what was obviously a dirty joke among the peasantry had been taken as gospel (or whatever) by the good Dominican Fathers Sprenger and Kramer, who even went on to describe how they'd heard tell of other witches who kept their ill-gotten peni in boxes (now there's some Freudian symbolism for you), and how they'd thus surmised that there had to be an entire *circle* of these witches operating throughout the countryside (and possibly trading with their friends—Collect them all!) but now that I was reading Jodi's testimonial of how she'd anticipated Lorena Bobbit by several centuries and gone gaily penis-napping throughout the middle ages, well, all I can say is that I guess everyone needs a hobby.

Giggle.

But the point to the exercise of sneaking out Jodi's books of black magick had not been to read about dirty jokes made real, or to give me a good excuse to set up wards and protective seals around the room, but to see if I could find a safe, reliable method of conjuring blood, aside from messing up when animating my origami. I'd asked Mister Mistoffelees for suggestions, but his reply of "Why don't you just kill something?"—while perfectly logical for a cat—was not what I had in mind, and would cause more trouble than the problem I was trying to solve. His recommendation of several remote murder spells—all variants on Jodi's 'Pynnes and Poppets'—was even less helpful.

At last, he settled down on the top of the desk. "Perhaps you might find inspiration in my old Mistress's books of magick." He then tucked his paws under and went to sleep.

I know a hint when I hear it, since Mister Mistoffelees had used the exact same inflection as Sister Mary Innocent had when she spoke her favorite phrase: "Look it up. You'll remember it longer."

As a result, I'd gone about preparations for unpacking Jodi's books. For the ward, I'd done my usual charm of "Light the candle, draw the curtains, put the lock upon the door..." with the extra frill of using Jodi's Hand of Glory for the candle, an *H o' G* being a candelabra made from the severed hand of a hanged man—preferably a thief, even more preferably a murderer, and most prized of all, a lefty. Not meaning to infer that handedness has any relation to criminal or homicidal tendencies, or to offend any lefties who might have come to be reading this, but belief in 'sinister' magick dates back before the Greeks (well before the advent of Political Correctness), and Jodi Blake (who's a sorceress of the left-hand path if there ever was one) had at very least felt it important enough to procure a left hand, so I could only trust to my instincts and Jodi's classicism which told me that it was also the hand of a thief and murderer, which she had then mummified with saltpeter, smoked with various herbs, and finally pickled in human fat so as to recreate it as a Hand of Glory.

They're pretty notorious in occult circles, so I'd recognized Jodi's kippered southpaw the moment I opened her jewel box—not as yet realizing that the same elegant little ebony case might also have been used to house her Bobbit collection—and while I am *not* planning on recharging the Hand once the tallow gives out (or procuring baby fat candles for any other purpose), I'm enough of an amoral pack rat that I have no qualms about using the mummified member for its intended purpose, that being the most A-1 reading lamp a witch could want for her workroom (and if you were thinking about anything else, shame on you).

Then of course there was the matter of the protective circle, which is something that any witch worth her circle of salt knows to put down, if just to keep out wandering spirits and other astral busybodies—and no, I did not start pouring sodium chloride crystals on the floor, nor did I get down on my knees with a Sharpie pen and set about drawing witch patterns on *Señora* Duarte's immaculately scrubbed Spanish tiles. Stuff like that is a prescription for getting funny looks, if not eviction notices, or at very least the loss of your cleaning deposit. And likewise, even though it's not applicable at the moment, have you ever tried vacuuming salt out of wall-to-wall carpeting? Right.

Troubles like these are why I'm supremely grateful that Great-Aunt Eudora willed me her Turkish carpets. Aside from fond memories of sitting on them and pretending I was in the world of the Arabian Nights (the adventures, not the orgies in the Caliph's gardens), have you ever considered where antique rugs like that might get a reputation for being *flying* carpets (aside from the fact that a rug would be much easier on your butt than some old broomstick)?

No? Well, I really hadn't either, but once I got a little heavier into the arts and dug a bit deeper into my folklore, I noticed that Suleiman, a.k.a. King Solomon, King of the Faithful, Ruler of the Djinn, and demon-summoner nonpareil, was rather fond of riding rugs into battle, at least if you take the 'Tale of the City of Brass' as any historical record. And if you cross-reference that with Dr.

Johannes Faust's *Der Rabenschwarz* ('The Black Raven,' a.k.a. *The Threefold Coercion of Hell*), you'll find an interesting tidbit regarding inscribing red coats with protective circles and demon sigils and taking those out for joyrides (which seems like a perfectly accurate bit of sorcery, for all that most scholars consider the *Rabenschwarz* to be a forgery by some heretical Jesuit).

I'm not saying that I take my great-aunt's rugs out for a spin every Sunday, or even that I've ever attempted the spell. It's simply that the patterns used for Persian rugs and Turkish carpets date back to the time of Solomon, and since those patterns bear a strong resemblance to the ones used in Cabalistic magick and Sufi mysticism—particularly the designs used in the conjuration of (and protection from) spirits—I take it as an educated guess that Solomon copied those very same Patterns and Seals off of his Ring. And Solomon's Ring, if you study the Bible, the Koran, and the appropriate sections of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, is said to have come directly from God, giving Suleiman dominion over the birds and beasts and the spirits of the air (a.k.a. djinn, demons, etc.) which of course explains how the King Solomon of legend did such a boffo job of pummeling all the afrit and shaitans who didn't want to toe the line.

Consequently, all those geometric designs and flowering arabesques, besides looking pretty (and not shocking Islamic sensibilities by depicting a living creature, which might become an object of worship and thereby idolatry), are also something that will make the spirits sit up and take notice. Especially since the Ring of Solomon was said to be inscribed with the Name of God, and after what just one version of The Name had done to my origami that afternoon, I'd say that a dozen variants woven together into a carpet made a Seal which even the big bad boys of the Outer Darkness would think twice before stepping on. Plus there were the ancient herbal formulas used for the dyes and mordants, and same as I could tell that the cover for my Book of Shadows was 'craft-made,' I could tell that Great-Aunt Eudora (bless her tasteful soul) had settled for nothing less than the most classic, traditional and authentic Turkish carpets

and accent rugs, even if she hadn't understood the full metaphysical significance of her choice in decorator items.

Carpets also have the added advantage of causing very few raised eyebrows, since even if the Men in Black charged into my makeshift sanctum, most would just go "Hmm—Turkish carpets—Nice" and not attach any more proof of witchcraft to them than had Great-Aunt Eudora. Assuming, of course, that I already had the Hand of Glory doused and locked away in its little ebony case, and most of my other blatant paraphernalia was also tucked out of sight.

I know, I know, you're probably thinking I'm going off the deep end about guards and wards, and that I'm using the importance of magickal protection as an excuse to go decorating. But let me tell you a little more about books and magick so you can see why this sort of thing is necessary. Anyone ever watch *H.R. Puff-n-Stuff*, if just reruns? Remember Witchy-Poo and her lab? Remember the talking books? The ones that bit, and sometimes didn't want to open? Or maybe you're more familiar with the grimoire from *Evil Dead* and *Army of Darkness*? Or the Books of Shadows from *Warlock* or *Hocus Pocus*?

Well then, if you've seen any of those, you know something of what I'm talking about. And if not, let me explain: A witch's ritual implements pick up some of her personality and her magick, and none of those more so than her Books of Shadows. Like novelists say about their novels, grimoires really *do* take on a mind of their own, and no wizard is ever truly dead until all his books are burned—"This rough magic I abjure!" the immortality of Sappho, and the rest of that riff. In fact, some books have so much personality as to be actually self-aware—*agrippas*, in the vernacular—and while I've got the new footnoted *Llewellyn* edition of the English translation of Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, I'd bet money that somewhere there's a handwritten copy of the original Latin text which has all the intelligence, if not the soul, of the revered old wizard.

Likewise, when you open the workbook of a living witch, she's going to know. It's like running a finger down the back of her neck,

or stepping over someone's grave. You so much as touch a witch's ritual regalia, she's going to feel it.

Unless, of course, you take precautions.

Great-Aunt Eudora's Turkish carpets are one of those, and a Hand of Glory is another. Apart from looking really cool once you light it, since it glows with unearthly blue flames, and even twitches and spreads its fingers a little when you do, there's a charm which any decent magician—or well read Goth girl—knows to say when she touches the match to the fingertips: "Hand of Glory, Hand of Glory! Let those who are awake stay awake! Let those who are asleep stay asleep!"

Apart from this making the Hand a really useful tool for loud cat burglars (since it prevents anyone in the house from waking up), in a magician's laboratory, it not only keeps you awake for all-night cram sessions, but it has the added benefit of keeping the books asleep. And when prying through Jodi's *Ninety-Two Entirely Evil Things To Do* (and it's sequel, *Ninety-Two More Evil Things*, to steal a line from Gorey's *The Disrespectful Summons*), I really didn't want the books waking up, blowing the whistle to Jodi, or just plain arguing with me.

After all, I'd had more than enough trouble with her former cat. And while Mister Mistoffelees isn't actually evil—just amoral, like most cats—after his long association with Jodi, he has a warped enough perspective of what humans consider "amusing" that I didn't want to deal with the opinions of her grimoires, let alone ringing up the witch herself.

The books were still a little fussy as it was, or at least badly organized with no index to speak of (not that I should talk, since you can see the state of my own Book of Shadows), and I was getting a little annoyed. Usually, when I go browsing through books, what I call my Serendipity Overdrive kicks in and leads me to the passage I need. And I didn't know what use I could possibly have for the detachable penis spell, apart from a good evil laugh.

However, Jodi's books were soundly tranked with the Hand of Glory, and so were being nothing more than the twisted (and

occasionally amusing) memoirs of an evil witch, but not in the least helpful. If I prodded them a bit, they might do the standard magick book bit of flipping to the right page, though I really didn't want to run the risk of setting off Jodi's silent alarm, not to mention deal with an awakened *agrippa*, if they were anywhere near that potent (and I have a feeling that they are).

Jodi had also not left an instruction manual with her Hand of Glory, but I'd read enough—and researched enough

since I got it—to know that a Hand is supposed to be able to do interesting tricks like illuminating passages of text in magickal tomes and pointing the way to treasures. As for how you got one to do either, I wasn't quite certain, but I was willing to go for the obvious and try an invocation: "Hand of Glory! Hand of Glory! Reveal to me the passage which I seek!"

The candelabra flared atop the ebony (its box doubling as a stand), then the fingers curled and folded. All except for the index, which pointed a Fu Manchu nail of blue flame to the left side of the book.

I paused, then flipped back a page, but the Hand continued to point so I flipped back another. It still pointed, so I flipped back a third of the heavy leaves of velum, at which point the Hand of Glory got impatient and snapped its fingers like it was doing the *Addam's Family* theme song.

Snap-snap. Go back. Snap-snap. Go back further. Point right, snap. Too far, forward a couple pages. Peace sign, right finger-point. Two more pages. Hand spread, light flaring. Yes, right there.

"Uh, thank you... Thing," I said, and the Hand of Glory beamed, literally, as I turned back to see the passage it had highlighted.

It was the *Butter Stealing* section of all places, a faded note Jodi had penned in the margin and which I'd overlooked completely. But now it was clear as clear, the letters glowing like fluorescent ink under the Hand of Glory's dark radiance: *Yet I must caution my sisters when selling their stolen butter, for if a knyfe with which a man hath been murdered be passed through the cream, then it will well forth with blood,*

most florid and crimson, and all will know thy butter hath been produced by wytchcrafte.

Of course, as Jodi goes on to say, this generally isn't much of a problem, since most people would rather risk eating stolen butter than buttering their toast with a known murder weapon.

Now murder weapons I had no shortage of, since I'd snagged three daggers from Jodi's altar, and all three of them gave me the creeps. And since I'd seen her murder a pizza delivery boy (not to mention the babies which Mister Mistoffelees said she'd sacrificed, or the guy who'd died to make Thing), I think I had a pretty safe bet that her knives had the blood of at least one innocent on them.

Now all that was necessary was the stolen butter. Magickally stolen butter, to be specific.

I glanced up from the book. "Mister Mistoffelees?"

He opened his eyes sleepily. "Yes, Mistress?"

"Have you ever stolen butter?"

I suddenly realized where the phrase 'Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth' came from as Mister Mistoffelees put up his head, opening his eyes all the way, and blinked innocently. "Yes, but I don't enjoy it." He yawned delicately, mouth pink. "I like sucking the milk out of the cows, but I don't like having to vomit it up. It's beneath my dignity." He licked a paw and began washing his right ear. "Sinestro doesn't care much for it then either."

"Sinestro?" I echoed, then looked to the Hand of Glory. "Is that what she called you?"

The Hand folded his fingers down and twisted slightly away, bashfully indicating that Jodi Blake had indeed called him 'Lefty,' albeit in Latin.

"Do you like 'Thing' better?"

The Hand turned back around, fingers straining, corpselight flaring, waving like some necromantic teacher's pet who knew the answer.

"I'll take that as a yes." I grimaced, realizing that the tale of Beautiful Vasilisa bribing Baba Yaga's familiars had been all too

accurate. “Of course, since Morticia Addams has Thing One, you’d have to be Thing Two, but we can still call you Thing for short, okay?”

Thing wagged his fingers happily, and Mister Mistoffelees switched paws to wash his other ear. “Since you’ve roused him and given him a name, Mistress, I should advise you that Thing prefers his milk without the touch of sorcery.”

I paused. It hadn’t really occurred to me, but on the previous occasions when I’d lit the Hand of Glory, I’d always made certain to extinguish the flames with milk, if just because this is the traditional method. But since it seems that dairy products sour on contact with witchcraft, or at least became prone to oozing blood, I could see where the symbolism of milk-white innocence quenching the fires of Hell might get a little messed up if said milk-white innocence were being vomited forth by your black cat.

“If you really wish to steal cream, I’d rather you make a Puke.” Mister Mistoffelees licked his paw a few more times and gave his left ear another rub. “There’s a spell in the first book.”

Thing waved for my attention and pointed to the next page, but I’d already looked at that spell—basically the same idea as my origami crane, except a ‘puke’ is a homunculus made out of handfuls of wool, and it’s only really useful for stealing the milk from the neighbor’s cows. I briefly considered the possibility of updating the rite and substituting steel wool, making something that could siphon gas tanks, but honestly, I had a full tank and was flush for money, and what I really needed was the butter.

“Couldn’t you just sneak into the dairy case of a supermarket and steal a package of *Challenge* or *Tillamook* or something?”

My cat paused, paw upraised. “Sweet cream?”

“Of course,” I said. “I’d let you keep half the sticks.”

He put his paw down. “Yes Mistress. I’d like that very much.”

And so the course of the next day was planned. We were going to go to the City to steal butter.

I know, the morality isn’t exactly lily white, but that’s the nature of gray magick—you use the methods of black magick to accomplish

the ends of white. Shoplifting isn't the nicest thing, but in the grand karmic balance, sneaking a couple sticks of butter so a vampire doesn't have to go out biting people on the neck seemed like a pretty good trade to me. Plus it would let Alexander spend more time with his kids, which is what he really needed.

He also needed a cook, or at least the kids did, because after an inspection of the kitchen, it seemed that *Señora* Duarte either felt that cooking was beneath her, or that she had never gotten over the novelty and convenience of cans. The cabinets were a testimony to the advertising power of Chef Boyardee, and the freezer to the long fingers of Jenny Craig.

I began to wonder what *Señora* Duarte did beyond vacuum, dust, and boss Roland around. It didn't seem like very much, but then again, she'd been "Serving the Gorian family" for much longer than a little *brujita* like me, so what did I know.

That morning, I'd dressed myself like a British parlor maid, which is to say, in a very practical outfit with black skirts, white petticoats, white apron and a lace cap—something I could both wear for a day of dealing with children, and use for an evening at the Clubs—yet another responsibility which I couldn't forget.

"*Señora* Duarte," I said as she entered the kitchen, "I'm going to need an advance from petty cash."

She paused in the doorway. "What for, *Señorita* Drizkowski?"

"Clothes for the children, food for the children and myself."

Her expression became sterner than usual. "I can advance you a bit for food, but the children already have perfectly adequate clothing."

"Nothing they like, and nothing they can really play in."

Her expression didn't change, and I wandered over to the kitchen window, looking up at the curtains. "Have you ever seen *The Sound of Music*, *Señora* Duarte? Or perhaps *Gone With the Wind*?"

She didn't change expression. "I don't take your meaning."

"Such lovely drapes," I said. "Such beautiful fabric. I'm sure I could do wonders with just a few yards."

Her eyebrows raised as she either managed to get one of the literary allusions, or at least realized that I was a crazy *brujita* threatening to cut up her drapes and make clothes out of them. "I suppose a few new clothes aren't out the question," she allowed, "but you'll have to purchase them on your day off."

"Excuse me?"

"The children are not to leave the grounds," she said. "The Master will never hear of it."

I pursed my lips. "The Master most assuredly will. I plan on taking Melanie and Malory into the City today, get them a proper breakfast, and go shopping for the rest of the afternoon. At nightfall, I'd like Roland to bring the Master to meet me, then take the children home. I'll drive the Master home myself once we've finished our business there."

She pursed her lips. "Have you discussed this with the Master?"

"To an extent." I shrugged. "Last night he asked if I could take on some additional duties, and I'll have to see to that today. However, I also need to take care of the children, since last night their father looked after them, and after all, that's what he hired me to do. And of course," I said, before she could protest, "I realize that we can't have the children letting on that their father's a vampire, but Melanie's old enough to know better, and Malory talks to his teddy bear, not to mention my cat, and if anything, he's going to be bragging about his nanny being a witch since that's what's new and novel. And I'll be there to look after them anyway."

"And what of this business of Roland taking the Master to meet you?"

I shrugged again. "I have business in town—magickal business, if you catch my drift—and it involves the vampires. Mr. Gorian might as well come along with me, so I can introduce him to my fellow mages and we can get that out of the way. Plus, with luck, I'll have the answer to the research question he posed me last night, and I'm certain he'll be wanting to hear of it first thing."

I didn't tell *Señora* Duarte what the "research question" was, and from her expression, I could tell that she hated not knowing. She was a control freak, and it didn't take a genius to tell that I had very much gotten on her bad side.

"I will inform the Master," *Señora* Duarte said. "However, if he feels differently than you say, then I'm afraid that your time with us may be very short, *Señorita* Drizkowski."

I smiled. "I'll leave a note for you to give the Master."

She smiled back. "No need to trouble yourself, *Señorita* Drizkowski. I will tell him myself."

"No trouble," I said. "Some of it's rather complicated, so it would be easier for me to just write it down. Plus I'm certain that there are some things the Master would rather keep private."

She frowned, acknowledging me the victor in that little exchange. "Of course. Just leave it on the table in the front room when you are ready."

"Of course." I smiled as sweetly as I could, then skipped upstairs, wrote the aforementioned brief note (thankful that my *Mont Blanc* had gone back to holding normal ink in the interim), then signed it, pausing as the signature came out bright red.

"Mister Mistoffelees?" I asked. "Do you have any advice regarding this?" I held up the bloody pen.

My familiar sat up from his cushion, yawned and blinked, then cocked his head. "You could let me lick the nib."

This was not terribly helpful, but then again, cats are cats, and I already knew the answer: When you do weird stuff, weird stuff happens to you. From my own experience (and confirmation from Mister Mistoffelees), dear Jodi had milk curdle in her presence (making her butter-theft spell even more useless, in my humble opinion) and candles burnt blue around her, not to mention flaring whenever she swore. In addition to whatever other weird special effects she'd gathered after several centuries of being poster child for the forces of darkness.

Magick has echoes, as they call it, and whatever spell you do, it comes back at you, reflected multiple times—"As ye sow, so shall ye

reap,” the Threefold Law, call it what you will—but the moral, short and sweet, is that if you go and make waves, you’d better expect to get wet.

I let Mister Mistoffelees lick the nib of my pen, then sat down, wondering if life had given me lemons or lemonade and whether or not my errand to the City had suddenly become superfluous, and also whether I could actually get enough blood to feed a vampire from multiple signatures.

I sat down and experimented a bit:

Penny Dreadful. Penelope Drizkowski. Penelope Anne Drizkowski. I will not take the name of The Lord in vain. INRI. Jesus. Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, Superstar.

I suddenly knew where they got the term ‘Red Letter Days,’ and why, when you read the Bible, all of Jesus’ words are printed in red. I also experimented with a couple ballpoints, only to find that they were doing the same trick.

Of course, Sister Mary Innocent had drilled into me the importance of penance when you’re truly sorry for something, and believe me, I was and I am. I do not intend to go through life signing everything in blood, including checks, and the only way I could conceivably milk the curse for enough blood to make the lemon into lemonade would be to stand in front of a plate glass window with a squeegee in one hand and can of spray paint in the other. And if you think Heaven has nasty punishments for blasphemers, well, wait till you see what they have reserved for smart-alecks.

I sat down and wrote *I will not take the name of The Lord in vain* a hundred times, followed by a couple of blood red Hail Mary’s for good measure.

Then I tried my signature. *Penny Dreadful*. Normal, regular, black ink, and when I looked again, all of the other copies of my signature had changed to black, as if I’d never signed in anything else.

All of the holy words, however, were still red and bloody, and I don't know whether that was supposed to be a blessing, a curse, or just a warning. Any case, it really didn't matter, because next thing Malory was in my room asking, "What are you doing?"

I quickly hid the evidence and slammed down the front of the roll top desk. "Oh nothing," I lied. "Just practicing my penmanship." I slipped out the note for his father, along with an envelope, then distracted Malory by showing him how to drip sealing wax onto a letter and how to embed a penny in the center—my personal token, and also a foil for *Señora Duarte*, who I suspected was already heating a teakettle so she could steam open the envelope once we left.

Regardless, I got Malory back to his room and got him washed and dressed, and likewise with Melanie. Honestly, the children were wonderfully behaved, but then again, I had the added bonus of being a certified witch, as well as a welcome alternative to *Señora Duarte*.

Though to give her credit, that morning the woman did a very efficient job as housekeeper, having an envelope ready for me with more than sufficient cash, as well having Roland bring my car round from the carriage house.

My Stutz was freshly washed and polished, gleaming silver in the light of noon (remember, the kids and I had been up the majority of the night), and purring a treat as Roland drove up. He came to a stop, then unfolded himself from the driver's seat and readjusted it to fit me.

Malory ran forward, enchanted, and put his hands right on the freshly polished fender. "She's pretty. What's her name?"

I had a flash recollection of Phoebe Figalily's car, Esmerelda, as well as Herbie, the Love Bug. "This is the Stutz," I said, picking up Malory and allowing Roland to quickly polish off the hand prints. I gave him a brief smile of thanks, then said, "Not just a Stutz. *The Stutz*. He's a very proud car."

Malory squeezed Bruno till he umphed. "Bruno likes him."

"And well he should." Mister Mistoffelees leapt from my shoulder to take his usual position as dashboard Jesus. "We both have the same claim to kinship."

“Bearcat!” Malory squealed, solving the riddle before I did, and squeezed Bruno again.

“Shotgun!” Melanie called as Roland opened the passenger door.

“Then Malory gets it on the way back.” I situated Melanie in the front seat and Malory in the back, along with a handful of coloring books and crayons I’d snagged from his room, then got in as Roland shut my door for me.

He bent down on one knee so I didn’t have to crane my neck. “Where do I need to take Mr. Gorian?”

“*The Trocadero*.” I fished around in my lunchbox and came up with one of the flyers for *Death Guild*. “I’ll be there a little before it opens so you can pick up the kids.”

He nodded and smiled. “Will do.”

I checked to make sure that everyone had their seatbelts (excepting Mister Mistoffelees, but then I knew he had enough magick to hold on to his nine lives and then some), then pulled the car forward, proceeding along the carriage drive and out onto Highway 1.

“Where’s the stereo?” Melanie asked.

I smiled. “They didn’t have them when this car was made. If people wanted music, they sang.”

“What did they sing?” Malory asked.

“Oh, different things.” I sped up and passed a Corvette, which slowed if just to gawk at the Stutz. “‘Daisy Belle,’ ‘The Charleston,’ ‘Polly-Wolly-Doodle’—stuff like that.” I gave the horn a little honk, just for fun, then said, “Would you like me to teach you?”

Both Melanie and Malory were more than eager, though like most kids, they had a definite trouble with key. But I was grateful for my repertoire of Turn-of-the-Century through twenties popular songs, since while borderline scandalous for their own day, most are perfectly tame by modern standards, and just the thing to keep kids amused on car trips. And I was going to do myself a favor and not teach them ‘Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall’ unless I got really desperate for something to keep them amused.

In this way, we went on down the coast, enjoying a beautiful spring day with the top down, and then Melanie said, “I know a song.”

I passed a lone cyclist and sped on. “What is it?”

“My— My mommy taught it to me,” Melanie said, her voice catching for a moment, and then she started into ‘All the Pretty Little Horses,’ hesitant at first, but then more steady, with the beautiful tone you hear only in songs a person has learned from the cradle up.

I let her go through it all, then joined in on the final chorus: “Dapples and grays, pintos and bays, all the pretty little horses...”

Melanie was in tears by the end of it and leaning close to me for a hug. I gave it, but honestly, even if you’re a witch, it’s still a trick to steer an early non-power-steering stick-shift automobile one-handed while trying to comfort a crying child with the other, and deal with any road as treacherous as the Pacific Coast Highway.

I gave a glance to Mister Mistoffelees, who took the cue and gave up his position as dashboard icon to jump down into Melanie’s lap. “Mrowww?” he inquired, and Melanie, quite forgetting that he’d been talking just that morning, grabbed him up and cried into his fur.

My familiar gave me a look, and I nodded back, making a mental note to get him an extra bowl of fresh cream and sushi. He was definitely earning his keep, and Melanie Gorian was plainly more susceptible to the charms of a cuddly cat than *Señora* Duarte had been the day previous. Though I did produce a lace hankie so Melanie didn’t blow her nose into my familiar’s fur on top of it (and I don’t even want to think what price it would take to make up for that indignity).

“Better?”

Melanie blew her nose again, then looked up and nodded.

“Want to tell me about it?”

She bit her lip, but Mister Mistoffelees purred, massaging her with his claws, and she nodded again. “Mommy—” she said, then paused. “Mommy died. A— A year ago. But not like daddy. He died

before she did, but he came back.” She didn’t explain that any further, but she didn’t need to. I just smiled for her to continue. “But mommy’s gone,” she said, and another tear rolled down her cheek.

“No she’s not.” Malory sat in the back seat, looking as grave and serious as only a four-year-old can. “She’s not gone. Bruno’s seen her.”

“No he’s not!” Melanie snapped. “He hasn’t seen her. Bruno’s just a teddy bear, Malory. He’s just a stupid teddy bear.”

Malory hugged Bruno so that the bear umphed in disagreement. “Mommy gave me Bruno. She said he’d protect me. And if he says he’s seen her, I believe him.”

Melanie looked to me, obviously expecting me to settle a long argument, but I didn’t have any ready answers, and Mister Mistoffelees did not volunteer to interview Bruno and report whether the teddy bear was self-aware, and if so, whether he had seen Melanie and Malory’s dead mother. “I have a friend I should talk to when we get to the City. He knows much more about this sort of thing than I do.”

Which is the understatement of the year, since Peter talks to ghosts on a regular basis, but if there was anyone who could answer the question of whether Mrs. Gorian (What had Alexander said her name was? Kate?) was still around, and if so, was she making regular appearances to Malory’s teddy bear, it was Spooky Pete, our coven’s resident necromancer.

But I was still curious, and also unwilling to let go of the thread, especially since I’d taken on a responsibility to help this family. “How did your mother die?”

Melanie hugged Mister Mistoffelees till he umphed almost like Malory’s teddy bear. “Don’t know.” She held him to her cheek. “One night, she didn’t come home. Then daddy had *Señora* Duarte and Roland take us to the new house. And that’s it.”

Malory said nothing, and I would have looked up to Heaven if I didn’t need to keep my eyes on the road, especially since we were getting onto the Golden Gate Bridge, in the toll direction. The mysteries were just stacking up, and much as Peter hated the idea of a séance, one seemed like a really good idea at the moment.

Regardless, we crossed through in the commuter lane (they charge double admission to the City if you come by way of the Golden Gate, but not if you car pool), the Stutz got a compliment from the toll booth clerk, and I headed straight down and cut south along 101, getting off at the Palace of Fine Arts.

There are very few places with free parking anywhere in the City, but the Palace is one of them. Of course, we didn't really have time to go to the Exploratorium, but all I needed was a pay phone in plain sight of the car, which the Palace has.

The prayers to Marduk were also paying off, or maybe the ones to Hermes and Hephaestus, but in any case, the phone was in working order, and not only that, but I also got Peter on the third ring. He was his usual surly self, but was still willing to meet us for lunch, *Hang Ah's Tea Room* to be exact.

Hang Ah's is one of those San Francisco institutions that most of the natives know about, and no small number of the tourists, if only because of the leafletters who hand out lunch special advertisements up and down Grant Avenue. It's right in the heart of Chinatown, down an alley off a side street, next to the playground. And they only serve one thing, but they do it very well, and they have more of it than anybody else. What I'm talking about is Dim Sum.

Melanie and Malory looked perplexed and somewhat frightened by the strange array of food on all the little one-to-two-dollar plates, especially the sushi and the shrimp sui ma, but I gave them pork buns, which are generally a safe bet with anyone (save vegetarians, Muslims and Orthodox Jews), and they both seemed to enjoy them, along with the cans of warm Seven-Up from the stacks beside the kitchen door, offset by glasses of ice.

I poured cream over a shrimp sui ma for Mister Mistoffelees—patently ignored by the management—and Peter walked in, pulled out a chair and sat down. He looked disgruntled for a moment, then pulled out the chair next to him and poured a cup of tea, slamming it down in front of the empty place.

"Hello, Peter. Hello, Thaddeus."

Peter glanced at the air over the empty chair beside him, and seemed about to comment, but then glanced to the children and held his mouth shut. "These your boss's kids?" he said at last.

"Yes." I smiled as brightly as I could. "Melanie, Malory, this is my friend Peter. Peter, let me introduce Melanie and Malory Gorian."

"This is Bruno," Malory said, putting him up onto the table and holding him so that the bear looked straight at Peter.

Peter's gray eyes narrowed, looking into the brown glass of the teddy bear's. "Bruno, huh? Okay."

Malory umphed Bruno, then took him down, but I saw from the second glance Peter gave the teddy bear that there was definitely something going on with it.

"Baron's parking the car," Peter said. "He and Sasha came over, so I didn't think you'd mind."

I shrugged, "The more the merrier," and I was glad to an extent since I wanted to hear how Dorothea was doing.

"...wise and wonderful, ooh, our magickal, mystical Penny," crooned a voice, and the next thing Baron was doing a back flip over the railing onto the floor next to us. "Since the day that Penny came to stay with us, exciting things keep happening. Is there any magick in the things she does, or is love, the only magick thing, that Penny brings? Penny, is it love?"

Being suddenly serenaded by an escapee from the All-You-Can-Pierce, Tattoo, and Mohawk parlor is something of an experience, but Melanie and Malory seemed to be taking it in stride, viewing Baron either as a birthday clown or an exotic tropical bird or some strange hybrid of the two.

"Penelope Drizkowski is a silly name, yet so many silly things keep happening," Baron sang, spinning around my chair and coming nearly nose to nose with me. "What is this magick thing about Penny... is it love?"

It's hard to come up with a comeback for something like that, never having been serenaded to the tune of *Nanny and the Professor* (appropriate though it was), but I did my best, removing the bone from Baron's nose and replacing it with a chopstick.

“Ah!” Baron screamed falsetto, falling back on his heels and wagging his long magician’s fingers. “No! Not the other chopstick! I will never betray Dr. Fu Manchu again!”

Melanie and Malory both laughed, and even Peter gave a dark chuckle as Sasha took hold of the chopstick. “No you won’t, Baron,” she said. “You’re going to sit down and we’re going to have a nice lunch, you putz.” Usually that would be an insult, but with Sasha’s soft New York Yiddish accent, it became an endearment.

She pulled him back into a chair, then grabbed a tray of Dim Sum from a passing waitress and set it before him. “Now take your chopstick out of your nose and eat. You’re much too thin.”

In response, Baron clicked his tongue stud against the chopstick, which looked truly bizarre, but Sasha only got herself a chair and sat down between Baron and the empty seat for Thaddeus.

“How’s Dorothea?”

“Resting comfortably.” Sasha found her chopsticks, as well as a spare pork bo. “She’ll be fine. Though she’s someone else who doesn’t eat well enough. We’ll have to take some home for her.” She took hold of the chopstick in Baron’s nose and forced him to open his mouth, “Eat!” then deposited the pork bo with her own chopsticks.

Baron obediently chewed and swallowed, then licked the chopstick still in his nose, which is a sexual come-on in Japan (licking your chopsticks, I mean—I have no idea what the variant of licking the chopstick in your nose might imply), but in response Sasha only did her Jewish grandmother dominatrix routine and forced his mouth open again, feeding him another pork bo.

People who believe that children should be seen and not heard should have weird and interesting guests over more often, because even though Melanie and Malory Gorian had a vampire for a father and a giant for a chauffeur, they were clearly fascinated by this spectacle, and that’s why the circus seldom comes to town—it doesn’t need to. We San Franciscans are weird enough on our own.

But there’s weird, and then there’s uncanny. “What did you want to talk about?” Peter asked in a soft undertone, and I realized that we

had all the privacy we might want, because while people were undoubtedly staring at our table, no one was paying any attention to me or Peter.

"Their mother died about a year ago." I grimaced. "I don't know the circumstances, but Malory says that Bruno has seen her."

Peter sneered, making his own nose ring flip up. "I wouldn't be surprised." He jerked his head in the direction of the teddy bear. "Bruno's probably seen a lot of things."

"So he's magick?"

Peter shrugged and toyed with a chicken bui sao. "Everything's magick. Just a matter of whether it knows it."

I paused, a pot sticker poised halfway to my mouth, and realized what he was saying. *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the idea that toys became real if, and only if, you loved them enough.

I don't know why it came as such a shock. I mean, if I take precautions to keep Jodi's books from waking up, and know the magickal theory behind that, I should have no trouble with the idea that a teddy bear was watching me. I'd already had more than enough signs to that effect.

It's just that the basic idea of Zen-type animism, where everything is sentient to one degree or another, is one of those things you don't usually think about. Talking to cars and teddy bears and books is one thing. Everybody does that at some time in their lives, and I could even deal with it in a limited fashion. But the idea that I could have a conversation with a coffee table or a lamp post was just a little out there, and if I started that, well, I'd probably end up like Merlin in *The Sword and the Stone*, talking to sugar bowls and having the dishes dance for my amusement.

I could see why Peter was always looking at things that didn't seem to be there.

But for the moment, it had very little to do with the price of tea in China. Unlike Malory, I couldn't speak Teddy Bear, and while Mister Mistoffelees may have deigned to play translator, I didn't like the idea of going to Alexander and saying, "The cat says that the teddy bear says that the ghost of your wife says X."

No, it simply wouldn't do, if just for the fact that Mister Mistoffelees had an alien enough perspective that he was not my first choice for a link in a game of telephone. And I didn't even want to think what would happen to a message from the spirit world once you threw a teddy bear into the circuit.

"Peter," I set the pot sticker back down, "could you possibly ask Thaddeus to ask around about Alexander Gorian's wife?"

Peter sneered. "Ask him yourself. Bastard's right here."

I looked to the empty place and the cup of cooling tea, set out in the fashion of a Victorian 'dumb supper,' but before I could say anything, Malory said, "Momma's name was Katie. That's what daddy called her. But you're a bad ghost, and Bruno doesn't like you." Malory hugged his teddy bear protectively and it umphed.

Peter gave a dark laugh. "I'm with Bruno." After a moment, Peter winced, as if he'd just heard some stinging insult, and he looked to me. "Thad likes you though. Say's he'll see what he can do."

"Uh, tell— Thank you, Thaddeus," I said directly to the empty place setting, trying my best to imagine the gentleman in the top hat Peter had described. "I appreciate it."

"Don't mention it," Peter translated, and the rest of the meal continued in a somewhat more mundane fashion, if any meal with Baron at the table can be called mundane. But regardless, it ended and we went shopping.

Peter paired off with Baron and left, while Sasha and I did Chinatown, the children in tow. While Blackrose *had* gone to *So What?* the night before and done the spell, she had also neglected to fetch all the necessary supplies, making it so that Baron had had to fill the pad with some of his precious tattooing ink. Sasha was not going to let *that* happen again, preferring to keep the magick ink in her boyfriend's tattoos where it belonged, so I took her to the shop with the "paint your own sutra" kits. Of course, *Peng Fang's* doesn't call them anything that crass, but it still comes to the same thing—brushes and ink cakes and slips of paper all made to the traditional specifications, even though all we really needed was the ink and the grinding stone.

It bristled both of us to do the “purchased without haggling” requirement that you need for so much of ritual magick, but oh well, I had the cash, and we got what we needed. Sasha took it off to Blackrose, who I hoped would be competent enough to craft the spell without Baron’s aid, and I salved my conscience by dickering for a new stash of *Hello Kitty* stationary and origami papers.

Regardless, the children and I did the rest of Chinatown by ourselves, and we found a kimono for Melanie, green silk with pandas, and then we walked over to the more upscale shops around Union Square.

Do you know how much children’s clothes weigh? After we completed the last station of our pilgrimage at that shrine of shrines, *Neiman-Marcus* (*Needless-Markup* to San Franciscans), I was laden down like one of those matrons you see in 1950’s caricatures, struggling to walk with a stack of boxes, a handful of bags, and two children in tow, literally holding onto my apron strings. In all honesty, I had everything to complete the image save the leopard-skin coat and hat, and I was desperately wishing I’d brought Peter or Baron or even Brent to help me carry everything, when suddenly a man was standing right in front of me.

He was tall, nice enough looking, with pale skin, dark eyebrows, and intense blue eyes. “Let me take the children.”

I paused, thinking I was going to hear “Let me help you with your packages,” but I hadn’t. I blinked. “Excuse me?”

He leaned closer, getting in my face, and his blue eyes blazed like some animal’s. “I said, *Let me take the children.*”

It was one of those hypno things, like the trick Sebastian had tried at the club a couple nights before, but I was wise to those now, and Mister Mistoffelees, who’d been relaxing as my stole, still wasn’t taking any of it. “Hssssh!” His paw swiped right across my range of vision, and the next second four parallel lines of blood appeared on the man’s nose and cheek.

It took a second for the pain to register, I guess, but then the man snarled, his face contorting into a mask of rage, and he rose up, suddenly taller than Roland. But the transformation didn’t stop

there, since he continued to grow, taller and larger, brown fur sprouting everywhere, shirt buttons flying to the four winds, and I stood there in shock, my packages toppling to the ground.

It was a werewolf. Right there, on the sidewalk, outside *Neiman-Marcus*. In the distance I heard a scream and a crunch as someone sideswiped a parked car. A werewolf. And it had its claws raised and was snarling at me.

You know, if I'd been Brent, I would have just pulled out my gun. Baron could have shot flaming dragons and Gibson girls. Blackrose would have probably blown smoke at it or done some trick with her cigarette holder. But in all honesty, my magick isn't anything like that. The most I know how to use is a little serendipity, taking whatever comes to hand, and applying what oddments of mystic esoterica I've managed to pick up.

And while I know all the popular myths about lycanthropes, I was fresh out of wolfsbane at the moment, the only bits of silver I had on hand were my Udjat Eye and the Elector of Saxony's Nutmeg, and the Eye was already doing its job, sort of, since part of how it's supposed to extend its mystic protection to travelers, wanderers, and Goth girls out shopping is to make them aware of immanent perils. Like, for example, the escapee from *The Howling* standing right in front of me—not that I needed an Egyptian amulet to point him out, thank you very much. Besides which the Udjat Eye was probably the exact *wrong* thing to be wearing, given the circumstance. I mean, do the math: lunar symbol + lunar metal + circle of the full moon + man who turns into frothing wolf when confronted with same = ?

Right. Likewise, while antique silver keys are purported to have all sorts of magickal uses—including the ability to open doors to the spirit world and the power to trap ghosts on the other side—so far as I've read, the ability to repulse slaving wolfmen is *not* listed among their virtues. Which made me guess that my flogging one with a silver trinket, no matter how magickal, would at best just guarantee me a quick one-way ticket to the spirit world, no magick involved. Other than the fact that there was a werewolf with large claws standing outside *Neiman-Marcus*, ready to gobble me up, like

any number of pigs, goats, and little blonde girls famed for their crimson equestrian habits, not to mention sick grandmothers.

And as for who was afraid of the big bad wolf, I will admit that I most certainly fit that description. Especially since said wolf was towering over me, at least nine-feet tall, hairy and naked. But, well, if you can do your math, you know that means I was about eye-level with his crotch.

God help me, but I used one of Jodi's spells. It was either that or get mauled by a crazed werewolf.

"Detachable Penis..." I sang, stealing the chorus from the *King Missile* song and stealing something else entirely from the slaving werewolf.

There was another moment of silence, pierced, I think, by another scream, and the filched phallus thrashed in my hand like a live eel. The werewolf looked at me, then at what I held, then I threw the writhing thing away in revulsion. "Fetch!"

The werewolf had the sudden choice between mauling me and retrieving his manhood, which had landed in the far lane of Stockton Street like some obscene tribute to Lorena Bobbit. Easy decision—he lunged for it—but perhaps Mister Mistoffelees had misunderstood me when I yelled, "Fetch!" since my cat jumped off my shoulders and darted between the werewolf's legs. A car slammed on the brakes, skidding with a scream of burning rubber, and the werewolf screamed as well, since the tires were headed straight for his missing organ.

But Mister Mistoffelees was faster than either, snatching up the severed member in his mouth like a fish from a fish stand, then jumped atop a newspaper machine and bounded off down the street with all the gaiety of a vintage carousel cat, the screaming werewolf running after him.

I grabbed the children and ran the opposite direction, dodging traffic and accidents and praying to any of several gods, including the Big J, for help and forgiveness, not necessarily in that order. No pun intended, but it gave me the willies to know that I was even capable of pulling off that sort of spell, and while Miss Price had said,

“A witch is always a lady, unless circumstances dictate otherwise”—and circumstances most certainly *had* dictated otherwise—I didn’t even want to think of what other bits of *maleficia* I might attempt if I got desperate enough.

The werewolf, however, had not elected to follow us, and by the time I got back to the parking lot, the strangest thing was the looks we were getting, as people no doubt wondered what the problem was with the hysterical girl in the parlor maid outfit carrying the two screaming kids.

However, the supernatural returned the moment we got to the car. “Hello, Mistress.” Mister Mistoffelees sat in the passenger seat, his new prize beside him, wriggling and trying to crawl away. He waited until it had nearly escaped over the edge of the seat, then reached out his paw and batted it back. “I’ve had a very enjoyable afternoon.”

I was not at all inclined to agree, especially with the severed member there, reminding me of the crazed werewolf and destroying any wholesomeness or G-rating which I may have intended to impart to the children that day.

I grabbed the thing and jammed it in my lunch pail. “No time to play, Mister Mistoffelees. Get in, kids.” I got them situated, and was almost in tears because of the time I knew it would take to crank up the car. “Stutzie, please, just start for once...”

The engine turned over before I could even go round the front, and I paused, gaping. Then I decided to be thankful for small miracles and assorted weirdness and just got in, putting him into gear. “Thanks, Stutzie.”

I paid the attendant and pulled out of the parking lot onto Jackson, wondering what the explanation might be. My continuous singing of ‘Chitty-Chitty, Bang-Bang’ when I fixed up the Stutz? My growing belief in animism? Maybe a wire Roland had joggled when he looked under the hood, somehow giving me an automatic starter?

“What was it you did to the monster?” Melanie asked, then giggled, knowing full well exactly what I’d done.

I pulled forward, making an illegal left turn, and cut up California. “Something you should never talk about, and something a lady would never do except in desperation.” I tried to give it a *this matter is at an end* tone, but the effect was completely ruined by the thumping inside my lunchbox. Melanie giggled, and I began to question my sanity, wondering exactly where I’d gone wrong and segued from *Mary Poppins* to an X-rated version of *The Turn of the Screw*.

The screw turned again, loudly, and I took the lunchbox and shoved it under my seat. “Mister Mistoffelees, will the werewolf be able to trace us?” I had half a mind to pitch the thing back into traffic, or perhaps, more kindly, just leave it on some homeless person’s sidewalk sale blanket, so the original owner could find it next to a broken toaster oven, like in the song.

Mister Mistoffelees stretched out on the dashboard and peered down at the floor of the car. “Your magician’s satchel is composed of iron, and warded with seals of power. Only the most potent divination would be able to spy past that.”

I hadn’t really considered the full extent of the magick behind the band stickers on my lunchbox, but when you looked at it from the metaphysical perspective, I suppose it would work. Especially with the Head of Baphomet from *The Electric Hellfire Club* which I’d placed on the back.

“What about our new clothes?” Malory asked.

I had several things I wanted to say about those clothes and what could be done with them, none of them appropriate in front of children, so I only put some forced brightness in my voice and said, “Oh well, we’ll just have to go shopping again. Your father can afford it.”

“That’s what the nanny on teevee would say,” Melanie pointed out.

“Well, then, she’s absolutely right.” I paused. “Do either of you know your father’s phone number?”

Both responded that they did not, which is a bit of child safety that they should have been drilled in, but I guess I couldn’t really

fault them. I hadn't picked it up either, and it was a safe bet that Alexander Gorian's number would be unlisted. Not that he'd be able to answer right now even if I did, and I certainly didn't want to deal with *Señora Duarte*.

I drove west across the city, considering my options. I couldn't exactly go to the police. Even if they didn't have spies for the Men in Black and God knows who else in their ranks, what was I supposed to tell them? "Well yes, officer, I was babysitting these two children, since their father's a vampire and couldn't take them shopping during the day, when this werewolf comes up and tries to kidnap them. Distinguishing features? Well, first off, he doesn't have a penis, because you see, it's right here in my lunch pail. Could you run a DNA test?"

No, definitely not. There are some things that are just too weird. Even for the San Francisco police.

However, a bodyguard was perfectly in order, preferably one with a gun with silver bullets. I stopped at a gas station, nearly driving the Stutz into the phone booth, hunted for a couple dimes, and called Brent.

You know, the Men in Black can appear out of nowhere, and Brent is no exception. He was there within thirty seconds of my call, and I briefed him on all of it. "Good thing you called me, Penny." He glanced around, his pale brown eyes taking in everything. "There are forces in the Technocracy who've been following the werewolves for years. They'd give a lot for what you've got in your purse."

"Well, yes, but then so would the apothecaries in Chinatown." After all, if they pay top dollar for dried tiger penises so they can make soup for impotent Asian men, how much do you think they would pay for a fresh bona fide werewolf penis? "That's not the point. Can you help us?"

"Of course, Penny. I live only to serve." He spoke the last in the ashen tone which I knew was the result of Blackrose's spell, but oh well. I really did need Brent's help. "First order of business, we continue on about your regular day as if nothing had happened. If we've picked up a tail, we don't want to lead them back to your home

base, and if the werewolves are smart, they'll have staked out the major exits to the City." He glanced to the Stutz. "And your car is rather distinctive."

I looked around. "Well, we were going to go shopping in Union Square, but that's sort of out now."

He nodded. "Stonestown will be fine."

And so, God help me, we went shopping, this time at San Francisco's one big indoor mall. Brent did an absolutely perfect job of playing secret service agent, checking each shop and even carrying a few packages, and the afternoon was almost painfully normal. The thumping had ceased within my lunchbox, and when I opened it briefly to retrieve the cash, the cold glare of the mall track lighting transmuted the stolen werewolf penis into nothing more than a large flesh-tone rubber dildo—embarrassing to be caught with, sure enough, but nothing even the Men in Black would give a second glance.

And so the day proceeded. The envelope of cash dwindled painfully, and I had to use my bargain-hunting skills in earnest while we hit the *Castro Safeway*, which is the big pickup spot if you've read *Tales of the City*, and general weirdness central if you know anything about San Francisco. A British parlor maid, a painfully nondescript Mod, and a couple of kids wearing new clothes from the mall were all completely commonplace, and I could have even brandished the giant dildo at the checkout clerk and no one would blink an eye.

As for black cats running down the aisles with packages of butter in their mouths, I don't think Mister Mistoffelees even had to pull his invisibility trick to keep anyone from caring. It's just that sort of place.

And so it went, like clockwork since Brent joined our crew. Of course, getting the trains to run on time is one of the specialties of the Men in Black, and last night was no exception; Brent fidgeted with his watch and checked and rechecked his daytimer, and after a creditable impersonation of the White Rabbit from *Alice* (only a hare different from his portrayal of Rabbit from *Pooh*), he gauged our

arrival at the *Trocadero* to within thirty seconds of the appearance of the Gorian limo.

Marduk had also been kind, and there was parking to spare for both vehicles, though it was early enough that this was nothing terribly unusual. Roland got out and opened the door for Alexander, and the moment he stepped out, Brent and I hustled the kids over as well as the packages and jammed them all in the back.

"Daddy!" Melanie cried. "It was really exciting. Penny—"

"There was this big wolf!" Malory said as I stuffed him inside and shut the door.

"Roland," I said, "get them both home. *Now*."

Roland was so used to being bossed around by *Señora Duarte*, I guess, that he didn't even question what I said, especially since Alexander didn't tell him anything different.

"Keep the windows rolled up, and be careful of tails," Brent added, and Roland nodded. The limo pulled away and sped off down the street.

Alexander and I looked at each other, then, as one, said, "We need to talk." We exchanged looks, then I said, "Jinx."

Alexander paused. "Alright, drinks on me. Let's go find a quiet corner."

There were actually several quiet corners, since *Death Guild* had not really opened, it not yet being nine, but Brent talked our way in and made arrangements, while Alexander and I snuck past the plastic barricade chain and up into the upstairs gallery. *Death Guild* doesn't get quite so large a crowd as some of the *Troc's* other nights, so only the downstairs is used on Mondays. This gave us an extra degree of privacy, and we made our way through the darkness until we found a table screened away from the deejay booth by camouflage netting.

Alexander turned to face me. "What do you mean by taking my children to the City?" His eyes practically glowed with anger and fear.

I paused, setting down my lunchbox and arranging my skirts. "You mean you knew that there were werewolves out to kidnap

them?" I looked at his expression, and saw that he did. "What do you mean by not telling me about that first thing?"

Alexander jerked back as if he'd been slapped, suddenly put on the defensive, which I suppose is unusual for a vampire. His eyes blazed for a moment, then he broke eye contact and looked down, sighing, as the light went out. "At least they're safe. They are safe, aren't they?" He glanced up, hopeful and pleading.

"If Roland can drive a car, they should be just fine." At that moment, I really wished I smoked, or that Alexander had gotten that drink he'd offered me, since there are moments when you want something to do with your hands and an excuse to keep from having to talk. "Listen—truce. We both screwed up. I didn't get your permission to take the kids for an outing, you didn't tell me that there were werewolves waiting in the wings if I did. I'm kind of new at this nanny business. But if you hired a witch because you thought one would be a match for a werewolf, well, you were right—but it would have been nice to know what was coming; I'm not the best choice for a bodyguard. If you wanted one of those, you should have hired Brent."

Alexander looked haggard. "Alright, truce." He ran his hands down over his face, smearing his bronzing powder. "I should have told you. It's just that I've gotten used to not telling people. You see, they're my in-laws."

"The werewolves?"

He nodded. "Kate's relatives. Lycanthropy runs in her family, same way that, well, my bloodline has its own peculiarities." He bit his lip. "To say that our families don't get along is putting it mildly."

"Romeo and Juliet?"

He shrugged. "Hatfields and McCoys is more like it. We eloped, but then my relations found me, and, well, rather forcibly made me toe the family line. And then Kate's relatives came in, and Kate—Kate died..."

Bloody tears started to run down his cheeks. I got out my handkerchief and wiped his tears away as best I could, for all that the handkerchief still had Melanie's dried snot in it. "Hush. Don't

worry, it's all right. Your kids are safe." I patted him on the back, trying to make reassuring noises while a number of thoughts and emotions rattled through my brain, foremost being a desperate wish that I knew more about both werewolves and vampires, since I seemed to have plunked myself right down in the middle of a supernatural custody battle. And if the latest interesting addition to the contents of my lunch pail actually belonged to Melanie or Malory's uncle or some other relation, well then, at least I was glad that I hadn't thrown it back into traffic. Even if it was well over the legal limit.

I wondered whether I should tell Alexander exactly what spell I had done to defend the children, then remembered that Melanie and Malory had both seen it live and up close, and it wasn't the sort of spectacle you wanted someone to hear about secondhand. "Do you have your wife's family's phone number? I have something that belongs to one of them."

Alexander looked up. "What?"

I took my arm back and rested both hands protectively atop my lunch pail, grinning nervously. "Well, when I suddenly had to deal with a giant werewolf, I didn't know what else to do. So I kind of threw a Lorena Bobbit spell."

"You what?"

"Well don't look that shocked," I said, looking around to see if anyone else was listening, but they didn't appear to be anyone in the darkness, and Mister Mistoffelees remained quiescent as my stole. "It's a very ancient magick. Vampires steal blood, witches can steal hearts or youth or..."

"Or?"

"Well, he *was* over nine feet tall. It was the only thing in reach."

Alexander goggled, no doubt shocked that anything could shock him after all that he'd seen since he became a vampire. But practicality is the mark of a parent, or at least of someone who knows when they're in over their head. "Well, so long as the kids are safe..." The table shifted as he crossed his legs, and he looked like he was going to be ill.

"If I find the owner, I should be able to reattach it," I said, hoping to assuage his fears. "Do you have the phone number?"

He shook himself a bit. "Kate's last name was Kearny. One of her relatives should be in the phone book. You'll have to call around."

"Alright." We talked a bit more, and I managed to put him at ease, or at least reassured him that he'd made an okay choice for a nanny. Or at least gotten one who would be ruthless and innovative if she had to protect his children. I also gathered, with the bad blood between the vampires and the werewolves, that he didn't want his fellow vamps to know that his children were of the lycanthropic line. Otherwise things could get even more complicated.

I was very thirsty, my mouth as dry as it gets when you have to explain something complicated and embarrassing—like telling your boss that his kids nearly got kidnapped, except that you stopped it by Bobbitizing one of his in-laws—and I guessed that Alexander might be feeling the same way. And he couldn't just wait for the bar to open. "Listen, Alexander. I know there's that 'no drinks' requirement for your sort here, but since I'm kind of in charge of tonight anyway, I can bend the rules. And I think I may have a spell that will let me fill up a cup."

"May?"

I shrugged. "It's untested. But what they hey—I promised I'd try. The butter's going to melt if we don't use it soon regardless."

After what I'd told him earlier, Alexander Gorian didn't even blink at this non sequitur, only watched as I opened my lunch pail and went through the contents. He did start a bit at the sight of the outsize rubber dildo, which I carefully set aside in the top, but I then removed the box of butter and the three daggers I'd swiped from Jodi's ritual room.

Technically, they're *athames*, which is the pretentious formal name those in the craft use for ritual knives, but it still comes down to the same thing: They're sharp pointy things you cut other things with, and whether it's a protective circle or a person's throat, it depends on the rite and the individual practitioner. I had them all

sheathed and wrapped in silk, not wanting to contaminate the rest of my stuff, but I took them out and weighed each of them—and not just for heft—finally selecting the smallest, a tiny silver blade which gave me the nastiest feeling and looked like the very thing for sacrificing babies.

Not having a cup handy, I just tore off the end of the package and tipped out the sticks, then propped the empty box against my lunch pail, mouth bent open. “Well, here goes.” I held up one of the sticks of butter, the paper warm and faintly greasy from the lack of refrigeration, and stabbed it through with the knife.

There were no sparks, no screams, and the point of the silver dagger came out the bottom. A bit greasy, but otherwise perfectly mundane. Then a moment later, a dark drop beaded up on the tip and fell into the open box.

It was creepy, and slowly, ever so slowly, another drop formed at the tip of the blade, proof of the innocent blood it had spilt and the taint of sorcery upon the seemingly pure cream.

However, it was also going a little bit slow for my taste, and never being the most patient of women, I jerked the knife up and down, priming the pump as it were and causing a few more drops of innocent blood to spatter the bottom of the box. Then I took the handle and twisted it, and there was a slight cry, like the memory of a dying infant, but I steeled myself and held onto the cube as blood welled forth like juice from an orange, and Mister Mistoffelees opened his eyes, illuminating everything with a weird green glow.

Once I finished torturing the butter cube, I’d gained about a half a cup of blood, so I took the next stick, sacrificing it as well, ignoring the whimpering cries and reminding myself that the proxy murder of stolen butterfat was far better in the grand scheme of things than Alexander having to go out and feed directly from the good and the innocent.

I finished filling the box, then handed it to him. “Will this do?”

He took it hesitantly, the grotesquery and bizarreness of the rite obviously disturbing him, but then his vampiric nature asserted

itself and his nostrils flared, scenting. He brought the box to his lips, downing it in one gulp, a few drops running down his cheeks.

Then he set it down and wiped off the blood moustache with the back of his hand, and I had the inane thought, *Got milk?* “Thanks,” he said. “That was good.”

“Was that enough?”

He nodded. “Just fine. I’m full.”

“I’m very glad that is so,” said Mister Mistoffelees. “The other two sticks were promised to me.” He uncoiled himself from my shoulders and stretched down onto the table, waiting until I unwrapped the two remaining sticks and left them sitting out on their paper. He gave a wistful look to the bloody butter box, and wordlessly, I took it and pulled the zipper tab, opening it up so he could lick out the inside without messing up his fur. “Thank you, Mistress,” he said, then switched his tail, closed his eyes to glowing green slits, and began to daintily lick at the sweet cream butter.

“Penny, if you would have a moment?” Brent emerged from the shadows at the top of the stairs, and I jumped, then quickly put away the knives and all and shut my lunch pail. “The others are arriving, and the club will open shortly.”

I stood up halfway, then paused and smiled an apology to Alexander. “I’m sorry. Duty calls. Time for me to put on my professional witch’s hat.” I touched a hand to the Udjat Eye at my throat, then picked up my lunch pail and followed Brent downstairs, leaving Alexander with Mister Mistoffelees.

Blackrose had arrived, trying to steal the scene as usual, but Baron and Sasha were still both miffed about the ink and weren’t letting her get away with it. I put my imprimatur on her spell, Baron did the switcheroo on the inkpad and the hand stamp, and then the guests began arriving and I set myself up at the end of the bar to hold court, to the strains of harpsichord and Tori Amos’s ‘Blood Roses.’

Do you have any idea how many vampires there are in San Francisco? Well, I asked for red roses, and let me tell you, I got them. By the time the evening was over, I was laden down like a prima ballerina at the end of opening night. Of course, some had brought

me full dozens—and there were the two weirdloops who both had the “original” thought of bringing me white roses dunked in blood—but it was still a lot, and I decided that San Francisco must be as much a tourist destination for the undead set as it is for the living.

Excepting the “painting the white roses red” shtick, the evening proceeded fairly much without incident. There were vampires, yes, and mages, and drunken Goths, but everyone seemed to enjoy themselves, and Elysium, whatever that is precisely, seemed to be good for business. The dance floor was packed, and I even managed to make some peace with Blackrose by giving her my seat and the heap of roses and letting her have the dead come and kiss her hand while I went and spun a few to the sounds of *Bauhaus* and Lorena McKennit (Lucretia and the Melting Girl play a rather interesting mix), tangling it up with Alexander and a host of admirers who’d followed me from Sebastian’s club.

And so it went. We stayed till the end, then Alexander and I went out, arms piled with roses, and Brent checked my car. The Stutz was free of bugs and bombs, and likewise with invisible Nosferatu, though the *Trocadero* seemed to have gained some gargoyles which were not usually part of the South of Market industrial façade. Regardless, we drove out of SoMa, Alexander in the back on the cell phone, canceling his various business engagement, Brent riding shotgun in the original sense of the phrase, or at least riding silencer pistol.



I’d have said that Brent’s fears of a werewolf stakeout were unfounded, except for one unusual incident as we slowed to cross the Golden Gate Bridge in the free direction. As we passed the toll booth, Mister Mistoffelees hissed, then suddenly each of the Stutz’s mirrors shattered, one by one.

Out spread the web and floated wide/The mirror crack’d from side to side/“Alas, the curse has come on me!” cried the Lady of Challot, Tennyson’s quote sprang immediately into my head, but the Stutz only sped on, with a slight growl from under the hood. Brent cocked his gun, looking around, but nothing else happened, and soon we passed under the rainbow of the Waldo Tunnel and on north.

After a bit, the light from Mister Mistoffelees' eyes dimmed, and he observed, "It is the mark of greatest loyalty to sacrifice one's proudest possessions in defense of one's Mistress. I suggest you replace the mirrors at your earliest convenience."

"Heck, I'll throw in a pair of fuzzy dice and a rosary." I patted the dashboard and the Stutz's engine purred, speeding up even though I hadn't changed any pressure on the gas pedal. "You've earned it, my fine four-fendered friend."

Alexander didn't comment, and neither did Brent, as the Stutz purred and we sped home.



Penny Dreadful™

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Part Four

In which Penny passes through dreams and shadows; through the Looking Glass, and what Penny finds there; the care and feeding of pets; the game of tea party, the mystic secrets of Oreomancy, and the way the cookie crumbles; holding Toto for ransom; and a conversation with Brent.

Kevin Andrew Murphy



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Tuesday Afternoon, the 30th of April
Just before Walpurgisnacht, the Witch's Sabbath

Before you take a job with a vampire, one thing you should contemplate is how much you can deal with the graveyard shift. I'm a night person by nature—it's one of the prerequisites for being a Goth, not to mention a mage—but even I tend to draw the line after the Witching Hour. Which, to be technical, cuts off at three o' clock, since that's when the church starts morning services and ends the three hour respite us witches get from the constant drone of prayers and the accompanying psychic white noise (and here I bet you only thought witches saved their important rites for midnight just because it looked cool).

After getting home sometime after even the bad little witches had packed it in, getting *Señora* Duarte to find a room for Brent, waking up the kids just long enough to kiss them good night, and having a bit of incidental chatter with Alexander while we tried to find enough vases for my umpteen roses—then locking myself in my room so I could finish the previous entry in my Book of Shadows before it could fade from my memory (though don't ask me *how* I'm going to forget any of it)—I fell into an exhausted slumber, and didn't expect to be woken up for anything short of Judgment Day.

And so, when I suddenly woke up for no readily apparent reason, I was more than a little annoyed. Then I looked around and saw that the drapes, which I'd carefully drawn before going to bed, now hung

open, the orange and purple stained glass around the edges of the window delicately tinted by the gray light of predawn.

I sat up, swinging my feet out from under the quilt, and hunted around for my bedroom slippers with my toes, since the Gorian Estate is cold like most oceanside houses, and the tiles in my room especially so. And, as it must be one of the corollaries of Murphy's Law, no matter where you leave an accent rug so it will be there when you step out of bed, when you wake up in the middle of the night, it will not be where you thought it was.

I eventually located both my slippers and the rug, then a moment later found a box of matches and the silver candleholder on my bedside table. I didn't remember putting them there, but I was sleepy enough that it didn't really matter, and then I struck the match. And oh my...

Have you ever read Andersen's 'The Little Match Girl'? Remember the special effects when she lit one of the matches? Or maybe you know the scene in *A Little Princess* where Sarah wakes up to find her attic prison transformed into an Indian fantasy? Well, it was sort of like that, except my room had *not* been a prison, and my nightgown had already been one of the nice long old-fashioned numbers that doubles as a dressing gown (You can find them in the tasteful end of the Christmas edition of the *Victoria's Secret* catalogue), so there really wasn't any room for improvement in some things.

But now, somehow, a canopy of mosquito netting and lace and lavender ribbons had sprung up over my bed, the furniture was rearranged and in some spots even replaced with grander pieces, and the far wall had been knocked out altogether except for two mahogany pillars and a carved lintel, leading into an adjoining parlor with Queen Anne loveseats in green velvet, low clawfooted tables filled with ornaments and curios, crystal vases overflowing with the roses from the previous night, and gas brackets on each wall shielded by Tiffany shades just like they had at *The Alexandrian Club* except blown in pink and hyacinth purple. In short, every beautiful or noteworthy thing I'd seen in the past few days was there, along with a few others I'd only imagined, like a hand-carved doll's cradle

for Mister Mistoffelees, or a medieval lectern for my Book of Shadows with a matching high church candlestand for Thing.

I stepped forward in the jeweled Oriental slippers which had somehow replaced my battered sheepskin Ugg booties and held the candle high. "I must be dreaming."

"You must be, but please, don't pinch yourself. It took a good deal of trouble to arrange this phantasia, and I'd rather it not be for naught." I saw the side of a wingback chair and the top of a top hat, and then the owner rose from the depths and doffed it, turning and holding it before him in a low bow. "Thaddeus Anthony Winters, at your service, Miss Drizkowski."

"A pleasure, sir," I said, falling back onto my Jane Austen training and dropping a one-handed curtsy in my nightdress, candleholder poised in the other. "I believe I already know you, though we've never been formally introduced."

"Never formally, no." His blue eyes twinkled behind little Teddy Roosevelt spectacles and he replaced his hat with an elegant tap of the crown.

I took in the rest of the man, or should I say, ghost, even though he looked just as solid as everything else (and much less fantastic than most of what I was seeing). He was middling tall, or at least half a head taller than me, with a neatly trimmed beard with gray accents, dapper charcoal suit with waistcoat and gold chain, a silk cravat held in place with a Masonic lodge pin, pearl gray kid gloves, and an ivory-handled cane with a dragon-shaped head, a black pearl clenched in the teeth. Not exactly as I'd pictured him, but a Turn-of-the-Century gentleman nonetheless, and obviously one of breeding and intelligence. "I regret having to hoodwink you in this manner, but you *did* request my aid, and you are not nearly so possessed of the Sight as young Peter, or, for that matter, your inimitable tutor and confidant."

I looked to Mister Mistoffelees, but Thaddeus raised the cane and shook his head. "Tut-tut, do not trouble him. Such as he might very well complicate matters, or at least would not necessarily

expedite them. Allow your familiar to terrorize phantom mice and spectral rats, and let us talk in private.”

I stepped forward into the parlor and came around to the front of the sofa. “What of?”

“Is your memory so short, Miss Drizkowski? But I must beg your pardon. It is a bit early yet for you to be experiencing a dream of any true significance. The dreams of the weary are usually frippery and Christmas tinsel, and here I intrude, resurrecting solemn concerns of your day-to-day existence. I apologize. But you had a question regarding the disposition of the soul of one Katherine Gorian, and honor-bound as I am to aid young Peter, I feel it my duty and my pleasure to aid his associates. Especially young ladies so charming as yourself.” He inclined his head and touched the brim of his hat, too much of a gentleman to wink. “And I have news regarding your inquiry.”

“News?”

“Reports, information, speculation and exaggeration. All the faults that hearsay is heir to. But if we might walk and talk, I might enlighten you further than you already are, and perhaps you might make the acquaintance of the late Mrs. Gorian.”

There was a dark tinge to the air around him, an odd quality to his shadow, and I hesitated. “How do I know you are who you say you are?”

“You don’t,” he said simply. “You only have my assurances that I am who I say I am, and the plain reasoning that a fiend would appear in a semblance more glorious and inspiring of trust, while an angel would never deign to sink so low. I am Thaddeus Anthony Winters, nothing more, nothing less, Agent to the Loyalists, Herald to the Hierarchy, and metaphysical Guide to your friend and compeer, Peter Cameron. Duly bonded and appointed by the Fates, with whom you have had dealings yourself, for I can see their Mark upon you, my dear Miss Drizkowski. And if no less a personage than grave Destiny or the Weird Sisters, call Her what you will and number Her how you like, has seen fit to entrust me with so solemn

a responsibility, then I hardly see how you can begrudge me your company for the space of anything so trifling as a dream.”

Well, he certainly didn’t sound like Freddy Kruger. “What would you have me do?”

“Merely walk with me for a space, traveling the paths of shadow and dream. You bear a candle to light your way, and a silver key to open any door which might bar your path, and by these tokens alone you are more fit to travel the twilight road than all save the few.” He took off his ribboned spectacles and polished them with a gray silk handkerchief, then gestured with them to the world around us. “Follow where I lead, or lead so that I might follow. It matters very little which. All roads lead to Rome, as they say, for in the course of dreams such as this, choice has very little to do with the outcome, as it does in any matter touching upon the Sisters Three.” He placed the spectacles back on his nose, adjusting the loupe, then refolded his cobweb silk handkerchief and placed it back in his breast pocket, smug, his argument complete.

“Very well,” I said at last, placing one protective hand around the Elector’s trinket, which had somehow unfolded itself into key-shape in my sleep, and raising the candle with the other. “Let us walk for a while, and talk as we do.”

“Excellent,” said Thaddeus, offering his arm, though I declined with a smile and a nod, holding tight to the Silver Key. He grimaced wryly. “I see you distrust me, as well you might. Young Malory was correct, at least in spirit: I was neither a good man in life, nor a blessed soul in death, merely one of the shades damned to walk this earth and look upon their own mistakes and folly. Rather like Jacob Marley, I’ve spun my chains and fetters from the deeds and misdeeds of my life, and weighted them with my own pettiness and spite.” He paused and contemplated his gloves, as if looking for stains or dirt. “But while neither good nor holy, I’ve always fancied myself at least to be a man of honor, and regardless of my place or my state in the order of things, I’ve prided myself to believe that I have always behaved as expected of a gentleman.” Apparently satisfied that his

hands were clean enough, he opened the door on the far wall of the parlor with a courtly bow. "After you, my dear young lady."

Caution only goes so far, and then curiosity takes over. I lifted the candle and stepped through the dark doorway, smiling in thanks.

The light dimmed, then brightened slightly, illuminating a hallway gray with cobwebs and soot, old rotten planks, and furniture riddled with decay and blackened by fire. "Where are we?"

"The memories of the house that stood here before." Thaddeus stepped past me, holding forth his cane, and the dragon's head flickered with a glowworm's fire. "Do not fancy that so choice a location was not coveted in the past. On the contrary, the domicile of your experience is but the latest in a long line of dwelling places, and doubtless will not be the last to occupy this place in the cosmos."

I stepped forward, and Thaddeus lifted a curtain of cobwebs aside with his cane. "Thank you." I passed under, holding my candle forth, and the rotten boards creaked under my feet, almost giving way, but not quite.

Thaddeus again made the offer of his arm, and this time I did not refuse, releasing the transfigured Nutmeg to swing free on the end of its chain. The wool of his sleeve felt solid beneath my fingers, and warmer than the cold metal of the Key, and we walked onward, Peter's spirit guide parting the curtains of cobwebs and decay, until at last we came to a room where the floor had fallen through. There was nothing before us save a yawning gulf fringed round by ragged boards, and at the bottom I heard the crash of ocean waves and a scream like wind or tortured souls. A sea cave. There was a sea cave below the house, and I stood on the brink.

"I can pass no further with you, Miss Drizkowski." Thaddeus gently rested his fingers atop my own and gave a reassuring pat. "My sins would carry me downward into the Tempest, and I could no longer function as a guide, for you or Peter or any other. But you may pass where I would fail. Your soul is more of the Light than mine, as is that of Katherine Gorian, who, if rumor is to be given any credence, dwells with the spirits of the higher aether and the blessed dead. Or at least so my inquiries have indicated."

He put down his arm, disengaging my fingers, then held forth his cane with the other hand and pointed across the gulf. "Your Path and your Answer lies that way. I will not tell you not to fear the Abyss, for that route lies open only to fools, and I do not count you among their company, but rather, do not let your fear get the best of you. Merely have faith in your own worth and your own Destiny as you tread the razor's edge to the higher aetherial plane. If there is any truth to the words of the priests, or Justice in the universe, the Light will show you the way."

The glimmer of the cane's ivory head, and the light of my own candle, illuminated the path before me, a mere spider web spun across the gulf, a tightrope finer than the thread of Damocles' proverbial sword and no less risky.

I hesitated, the wind from the gulf licking my bare ankles in a clammy caress, and I shivered, chilled by more than just the sheer cold. But you can't be a mage without having some inkling about archetypical tests and metaphysical challenges and how to deal with them, at least in the abstract. I grasped the Silver Key tight in my left hand, the metal cold and reassuring at the end of the chain, then put my right foot forward, knowing at least that much from Greek folk magick, and tested the strength of the fiber. The fantasy of the jeweled Indian slippers disintegrated at its touch, leaving only the reality of my battered, coffee-stained sheepskin booties astride a filament spun from nothing more than moonbeams and ether. Or at least my Ugg boots seemed as real as anything could be in this place, but the line felt firm beneath the sole and it held. Slowly, carefully, I put my weight forward, trusting in whatever faith I held in myself and the talismanic properties of Key and Chain, holding the candle in front of me like an aerialist's parasol.

"Do not hesitate, Miss Drizkowski," said the voice of Thaddeus behind me. "Do not falter. Only proceed forward, and whatever you do, do not look back."

I put my other foot forward, hitching up the hem of my night-dress by clutching the front, and stepped down on the ray of light stretched out before me.

It held, but then the wind spun up from the gulf below me, bringing with it the howl and the crash of the ocean. And I heard voices, voices around me. *Look back, they said. Look back. Go no further; turn back while you still can. Only your Doom awaits you.* A hundred voices, whispers and shrieks, each around me, lying and taunting, like the spirits of the black rocks around Princess Periezadeh in the Arabian Nights ‘Tale of the Three Sisters.’ But unlike the Princess, I unfortunately hadn’t had the foresight to stop my ears with cotton, and I heard a cacophony of temptations around me, each trying to lure me from the path.

The candleflame guttered, a trickle of wax running down the side, and then, amid the babble and shriek, I heard the voice of my mother: *Penelope? Penelope, where are you?*

That snapped me to attention. But I’d seen *The Wizard of Oz*, and even if I hadn’t already been wise to the standard tricks and temptations of the Forces of Darkness, I wasn’t as much of an ingénue as Dorothy to begin with. My mother wouldn’t know a dream of the Abyss from a coleslaw slicer and would think that the rites of Orpheus and Eurydice were a wedding taking place at the Greek Orthodox church down the block.

I paused, and the wind shrieked in triumph, blowing up my nightgown like Marilyn Monroe’s dress in *The Seven-Year Itch*. Or, more accurately, like the skirts of the Chorus of the Damned from *Orpheus in the Underworld*, which has the dubious honor in the history of musical theatre as being the production which introduced the world to the Cancan, and, it appears, a bit of actual metaphysics, since the Dancers in the Abyss not only wanted me to join them, but apparently expected me to hitch up my skirts as I did so. Yet call me prudish, but I didn’t care to have my nightdress pulled over my head, let alone go high-kicking my way into the pit of Tartarus—which was problematic, since I *also* didn’t want to let loose of the Key, which was hanging from the very obvious metaphor for my Silver Cord. So I did what anyone does when they don’t have enough hands and stuck the Key in my mouth.

There are many bits of symbolism that go with keys, and locking your lips is one of the more obvious, though when I awoke, I'd have to remember to clean the Elector of Saxony's little bauble more thoroughly, since I could taste silver polish in the cracks. And while even tarnish has a mildly pleasant taste, let me tell you that silver polish is bitter and really gross.

But now, having a hand free, I was able to catch the skirt of my nightdress, twist it up, and wedge it under one arm so I could get to the point of the exercise and peel the winding shroud of wax from the taper in my hand. This I then balled up and stuffed it in my ears. After all, if it worked for Princess Perie-zadeh, I didn't see why it shouldn't work for me—it was my dream to begin with—and however you look at it, I really didn't care to be deafened by the voices of the *Temptations*, or the Sirens, or whatever you properly call to the Greek chorus of whispering spirits who were attempting to get me to join the *Folies Bergères* of the afterlife. Plus it wasn't as if I had Orpheus's lyre or vocal talent to make the spirits shut the fuck up, like he did in the original myth if not the theatrical production, so I might as well use what I had on hand, same as I always do.

The howl died to a murmur, and it could have been my imagination, but I think I heard the darkness whisper, *Merde!* I held my candle forth and retrieved my skirt from under my arm, holding it up in a much more ladylike posture—and refrained from high-kicking—as I continued along the spider's web stretched across the gulf, for all that I still had the Silver Key stuck in my mouth. And then the visions began where the verbal temptations had left off.

You've seen the opening credits of the *Friday the Thirteenth* teevee series, where they open the Vault and the Pandora's Box of deadly knickknacks flies out? Or maybe the part in *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy's caught in the twister and everything's flying by, including witches on bicycles and her aunt in a rocking chair? Well, that was the sort of thing that was going on, a phantasmagoria as they call it in the metaphysics books, but I'd already dealt with the Whisperers in Darkness, and I'd be damned (probably quite liter-

ally) if I was going to be distracted by the annual budget of ILM. I kept my eyes fixed on the candle and the spider web, stepping carefully one foot in front of the other, a tightrope walker's gait, until at last the path widened into a broad band of light, and I stood between two gates.

The one on the right was made of horn, brown and black, edged and ridged, goat and antelope and hartebeest and all the rest of those African herd animals that they've got at *Marine World* and that show up on the menus of fancy restaurants, locked and twined and laced around into a long ovoid, the frame for a dark mirror. My candle reflected dimly in the depths, just in front of a dark shadow, and beyond that, a little further in, was another flame and a brighter apparition, but pale and insubstantial, a reflection of a reflection, and then another and another, dark and intense then ethereally bright, alternating and curving back into infinity, advancing in a procession as I stepped forward. The phenomenon you see when you stand between two mirrors set at angles. A parade of figures in white nightdresses with keys stuck in their mouths.

I took the Elector's play-pretty out and glanced back the other way. The gate on the left was made of ivory, elephant tusks crossed and then crossed again to form a double ellipse, like the royal seal of Benin, decorated and fringed with long, spiraled narwhal tusks and walrus teeth, spider-delicate venus comb shells depending from the points like window charms alongside paper nautilus lit from within like Chinese lanterns. At the top, suspended from the crossed tusks, was the skull of a unicorn, periwinkle-fluted faerie horn pointed down like the head of Falada in 'The Goose Girl,' guardian for a bright mirror that looked to be composed of equal parts radium and quicksilver, shining and brilliant and glittering such that the reflected light of my candle almost blinded me.

I looked away, turning back to the dark gateway, and locked eyes with the hollow sockets of the goat skull in the shadows at the top of the obsidian mirror. Nothing happened, no glow lit in the depths with a Satanic light, the jaws didn't bleat forth dark prophecy, but

I knew it was watching me. I looked down, then stepped forward and gazed more closely at the reflection in the depths of the black glass.

It was me, but not as I liked to see myself. Strung out and haggard, dark circles under my eyes, my hair disheveled with sleep and stuck up on one side the way it can only get when you sleep and sweat onto hairspray and styling gel and it resets itself into some beautician's nightmare. My lace cap looked tattered and tatty, and my nightgown was worse, showing *Victoria's Secret's* secret origin as just another name for *Frederick's of Hollywood*, the bodice displaying my insufficient bust to its disadvantage in a failed attempt at coy elegance, while the Elector of Saxony's Key, though once the pinnacle of the silversmith's art, now looked to be nothing more than a worn and battered antique gewgaw leaking drool onto the front of my nightdress. Below that, the hem beneath the frayed lavender ribbons showed every coffee stain and pale brown blood spot, and I won't even go into the state of my Ugg booties, aside from saying that they definitely showed their use, and my toenails need trimming.

Standing alongside the unflattering image, one step further into the mirror, was a ghostly apparition, me, but pale and insubstantial as smoke under black lights, looking slightly away. Another step in, angled towards me, was another of the somewhat-less-than-appealing doppelgangers, then one of the insubstantial wraiths and so on, alternating like I said, in an endless corridor of mirrors.

My candle flickered in its tarnished holder, and I turned away from the unpleasant images, looking to the bright mirror and shielding my eyes against the radiance.

It took a moment for them to adjust, but then I was beholding a vision of beauty, elegance even, in the ivory frame. Me, Penelope Anne Drizkowski, done up like the model for the *Victoria's Secret* Christmas catalog, oh-so-Gothic and retro candle in my hand, hair perfectly coiffed, makeup done, every eyelash in place with a fresh coat of mascara, and on my chest, adding accent to my many charms, a fantastically beautiful Silver Key, every tracery and twist of filigree shining, bright as a new penny. A pinup version of the Ghost of

Christmas Past, my feet once again sheathed in the beautiful jeweled slippers that Thaddeus's dream had gifted me.

I took a half step closer, then paused as I caught sight of the image just beyond the Christmas angel. The radiant quicksilver reflected the image from the black mirror, not as some insubstantial figment as had the dark obsidian within the horn frame, but as a medusa, and I'm not just talking about the state of my hair. Me, Penny, but evil, twisted with my own envy and pride and all the rest of the Deadly Sins I'm so fond of indulging. She wasn't looking at me, thank the gods, but beyond her, holding her candle aloft, was another of the divine visions, and then another of the harpies reflected from the dark mirror and so on, good and evil, beautiful and hideous, twinned throughout eternity.

I looked back and forth, from the bright mirror in its ivory frame, showing me as good and beautiful, while it displayed the dark mirror's reflection as my base and corrupted shadow, to the dark mirror, which showed me to my worst advantage, plain and tired, with the bright mirror's reflection nothing more than an ethereal figment.

I glanced from the skull of the unicorn to the skull of the goat and realized where I was. The Gates of Horn and Ivory, the fabled portals of true dreams and false visions which Virgil described in *The Aeneid*, and which were probably the last record of the lost Elusion Mysteries. I hadn't recognized them at first, not just because of the mirror tricks, but because the last time I'd seen them had been in a panel in the *Sandman* comic, and before that a scene in one of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies. And the artist and the set designer had both depicted them rather differently than the vivid reality of my dream, if that's not a contradiction in terms. I have to say that the ones in front of me were creepier than either Gaiman's or Wes Craven's, even put together, but then again, that's probably because mine were up close and personal, instead of a safe distance away on a comic page or movie screen.

I held up my candle, looking at the vision of loveliness in the radium mirror, and her twisted sister behind her. The beautiful

reflection even frowned prettily, but I recognized her for what she was. The Gate of Ivory was the Left-Hand Gate, the Gate of false visions and false prophecies, the mirror that showed you what you wanted to see, not what truly was.

Flattering as the image might be—and frightening as its reflection of the right-hand mirror was—neither was the truth. More than that, I knew that portal wouldn't lead me where I needed to go.

Just so you know, but the Ivory Gate was the portal that Aeneas and the Sibyl left the Underworld by, according to Virgil, and, if history, or at least mythology, held true, would lead me back to my waking life and the world that I knew. The greatest lie and the grandest illusion, according to some philosophies.

I looked back to the black portal with its goat skull and unflattering reflection. I know, the Ivory Gate had shown that mirror as holding my evil twin, but while it would be flattering to believe that, I knew it wasn't the case. The obsidian mirror showed me as I am and as I know myself to be, the girl I see in the bathroom each morning, without any illusions or artifice. Penelope Anne Drizkowski, pretty enough, I suppose, once she gets her hair and makeup done and puts on a padded bra, but with little crows' feet around her eyes and lines around her mouth that come from too many smirks and spiteful laughs (mostly at Blackrose, but just because someone deserves them doesn't make them any nicer or more charitable) and a nightgown, which, while it may have once been beautiful and new, had never quite fit her to begin with, and now just looked comfortable and slept in, at best. The reflection was me, and while not a pretty picture, especially in comparison to the beautiful vision in the Gate of Ivory, it was at least honest. Something, I should mention, that goats are known for, despite their other failings.

The Gate of Horn is also the Right-Hand Gate, and while Virgil didn't write much about it (or give too many other hints about the Elusion Mysteries), he did at least say that it was the Gate through which blessed souls (and true dreams) pass en route to their next existence.

That seemed good enough to me. Katherine Gorian was said to dwell among the blessed dead, if Thaddeus's sources were to be trusted, and while I hadn't yet encountered the Elysian Fields or even Sunday School Heaven, if either of them lay anywhere, it was beyond the Right-Hand Gate.

Gate was operative word. Virgil had referred to them as the Gates of Horn and Ivory, not the Mirrors, and unless I'd just discovered some undocumented feature of the Otherworld, I was willing to bet I could make like Alice and step through.

I reached out my hand with the candle, touching it to its reflection in the obsidian, almost like I was toasting my brutally honest double in the Gate of Horn. It merged with its image without even a ripple, then passed through.

I stepped through before I could chicken out or even waffle, not wanting to annoy the gods by doing the Hokey-Pokey with the Gates of the Underworld. And then I was standing back in my own bedroom, the one I'd gone to sleep in, not the one I'd awakened to. (Adreamt to? What is the proper verb for waking up in a lucid dream?)

Or at least that's what I thought for a moment. The hope chest was there, and the chifforobe, and the desk with the ladderback chair, but the bed was different, one of those white princess things with the canopy and pink pillows, and in place of my unconscious body, there was a rag doll of the type they don't make anymore for politically correct reasons (i.e. blackface) sitting propped up against the headboard. The walls were papered with pastel orange poppies and baby blue butterflies, and the window looked out onto a sunny suburban backyard complete with crabgrass and portable sprinkler.

I glanced back and saw that I'd stepped out of a full length dressing mirror, which reflected only myself, the usual way, and then I turned and saw a woman dressed in white, standing there and looking at me. She didn't have angel wings or anything like that, but the same way that Thaddeus had a dark tinge to the shadows around him, well, she had a brightness about her, and more than just the type you get with a sunny room and a white dress. This woman had

a glow like you usually see around saints or the Virgin Mary or Krishna in religious paintings. The type of radiance that's supposed to signify blessedness and enlightenment and all that, except she didn't have the beatifically stoned expression that most of the saints and Krishna icons have, or, for that matter, that I'd seen on the idealized version of myself in the Gate of Ivory.

Instead, she looked a bit sad, a little annoyed, and vaguely put out, though smiled at me, and since I've never seen a depiction of Our Lady of Ambivalence, I could only assume that she was a real person, and not some iconographer's fantasy.

And I felt really stupid standing there in my nightgown, holding a candle in the middle of a sunny day. "Katherine Gorian?"

"Katie," she corrected softly, voice sweet as a butterfly kiss, then grimaced. "At least, I was..." She looked around her room—since that's what I realized it was, her room, the way it had been—then looked back to me. "You must be Penny." She gave a smile, bittersweet. "I'm glad you came. I've been... wanting to talk with you."

Her voice was low and lush, the type that's made to sing lullabies, and I knew why Alexander had fallen in love with her, or at least what had first attracted him. Katherine Gorian had the type of voice angels are said to have, the type you never get tired of hearing, and in it I heard the echoes from Melanie's song from the day before. And suddenly I knew the full scope of the children's loss, and Alexander's anguish.

I should probably also describe Kate Gorian in just plain physical terms, even though my meeting with her was purely metaphysical. She was tall, or at least taller than Alexander or me, with bright red hair and freckles, green eyes, and slightly horsey teeth. Fashionably in-shape (especially for a mother of two), but no raving beauty if you catch my drift. And having met her, I knew that I had no chance to compete with her for Alexander's affections, even if I'd wanted to. Katherine Gorian was an angel, in the figurative sense, if not the literal as well, and I had a nasty wash of the sort of guilt/envy you get when you meet someone who everyone thinks the world of, and

then you find out that they're really just as nice as everyone said they were.

"I've been wanting to talk with you too." I paused, feeling ashamed of myself for even thinking of competing with a dead woman. "I've— Well, your husband is better at keeping secrets than explaining things."

She laughed, a sound as musical as bells. "That's Alex for you. Always hiding things. Not, of course, that I told him everything I should have about my own family." She shrugged. "There's always regrets."

I didn't ask what sort, it being kind of obvious with a dead woman, but I steeled myself and asked what I really wanted to know. "How did you die?"

She gave her bittersweet smile again. "Saving the life of the man I loved. At least, what's left of it." She sat down on the hope chest and patted the spot next to her until I came over and joined her. She sighed. "I suppose that's what I have to thank for *this*. This blessed state, I mean. A martyr's death is always good for the soul, though They don't let me look in quite as often as I'd like."

Some statements leave more questions than they give answers, and that was one of them. "Saving his life?"

She nodded. "Alex was pretty badly mauled—my cousin Brandon has a horrid temper, especially when he lets out his animal side—and I gave Alex a bit of my blood so he could heal. Brandon, of course, thought he was killing me, so he tried to kill Alex, and then I got up and I got in the way. And I died. That simple." There was a tear on her cheek which told me that it wasn't anywhere near that simple, but sometimes you should let people tell their stories in their own sweet time, and this was one of those instances. "The last I heard was Brandon's keening, so all I've gathered is that Alex was the practical man I married and left me so he could save our children. At least, I've seen them with him since then."

"Except did they need saving?"

She looked at me, tears shining in her eyes. "From Brandon? Not exactly, no. He has a horrid temper, like all the wolf kind, but I still

love him.” She sighed. “There’s more evil done in the world through self-righteousness and ignorance than by all the demons in Hell.”

I wasn’t going to contest that statement, since she obviously knew more whereof she spoke than I did, though after my encounter with Jodi, I have to say that the demons can get pretty nasty too, or at least their local fan clubs sure give it the old college try. “Is there anything I can do?”

She shrugged and gave her bittersweet smile. “End a feud that goes back further than Babylon?” She sighed. “It would be nice, but not very likely. Heaven has wonderful solutions, but tends to fall short on the practicalities.” Kate turned to me and lifted her hand, resting her fingertips on my shoulder. “Just do what you’re doing, I suppose. I’m glad to see a good soul here to help. Alexander and the children need you, more than you think. I look in as often as I can, but I can’t do much more than that, and they need a living soul there to help.” She sighed and took her fingers away, wringing her hands. “And if you see Brandon, tell him... tell him I forgive him. And that if he respects the wishes of the dead, that he’ll leave my Alexander alone, and let him keep what shred of life he has remaining. Our children need their father, whatever he might be, and if Brandon takes that away from them, well, that’s something I will never forgive. At least not in his lifetime.”

I didn’t mention that I’d already met Brandon—or at least a werewolf who I suspected was Brandon—or what I had done to him, but all I can say is that either the angels are not omniscient, or else that Kate Gorian was well mannered enough not to touch on unpleasant subjects. Or maybe that ignorance is bliss, and that while Heaven probably knew full well what sort of witchcraft I’d been practicing, it wasn’t about to show *that* sort of thing to one of its blessed souls, whether because it would shock her or make her applaud I don’t think I’ll ever be sure.

The light began to brighten around us then, as if in reaction to this impious thought, and Kate Gorian reached out and touched the back of my hand. “You’ll have to go now. Mortals are only allowed to stay so long.” The light intensified around her, and through her, suffusing the room. “Don’t worry. I’ll be watching. But you must go.”

The light expanded in a blinding glow, the glass of the mirror the only refuge from the glory, and I rushed for it, squeezing my eyes shut against the brilliance.

"Tell Alexander that I love him..." Kate Gorian's angelic voice trailed into the distance as I stumbled through, fleeing the brilliance, and the next thing I knew I plowed straight on through the Ivory Gate, not passing Go, not collecting \$200.

The light didn't stop, only kept coming through, turning to green, and I felt something soft and leathery patting my cheek as the breath was squeezed out of me and then suddenly I awoke to find Mister Mistoffelees sitting atop my chest, eyes glowing.

"Wake up, Mistress." He patted me with his paw again. "There is something you should attend to."

I did wake up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes and sitting up, Mister Mistoffelees cradled in my arms instead of squishing my chest and the worn-out *Victoria's Secret* nightie. The only light in the room came from his eyes, and the little bit that crept in under the edge of the drapes, which were still drawn as I'd left them the night before.

There was also a banging and clanking from the floor of my room, and it took me a moment to register that it was coming from my lunch pail. *Bang! Clank!* It hitched itself an inch across the floor and butted against the desk.

"Could you please attend to that, Mistress? I'd like to get my sleep."

"Of course, Mister Mistoffelees." I set him down in a wadded up heap of quilt, then searched for my Ugg booties and turned on the bedside table lamp, which had taken the place of the candle and matches from my dream.

The lunch pail clanked and butted the desk again. "Alright already. I'm coming." I padded over in my slippers and knelt down, picking up the banging lunch pail.

I sighed, knowing that this was my fault for trusting to mundane reality to keep things quiescent. We were no longer under the harsh track lighting of Stonestown Mall, and now that we weren't, things

like vampires and talking cats were perfectly reasonable. And likewise with stolen penises.

The lunchbox vibrated under my hands, but I tried to hold it still while I located a hairpin and picked the lock of the smaller of my two steamer trunks, the one where I stash my magickal paraphernalia. Security tip for those in the business, but not having a key means that said key can't be stolen, and as those of you who practice the extralegal arts may know, once you get acquainted with a particular lock, a hairpin is just as quick as a key, and a lot easier to locate.

Word to the wise, however—picking a lock is not always that simple. Adverse conditions can cause trouble, adversity including such things as—just to give an example, mind you—being half asleep and hung over while your head is still swimming with ecstatic visions and dreams of great metaphysical significance, and your lunchbox, which you're holding with your offhand, is jerking with rhythmic lust.

I don't know how long it took, but at last the catch sprang open and I lifted the lid, pinning the lunchbox between my knees and the front of chest while it bounced like some obscene metallic Bumble Ball.

And you wonder why the New Age books advise against dark sorcery?

I think you get the picture. I sorted around through my metaphysical magpie's nest, setting aside packs of Tarot cards and onyx chalices shaped like skulls (and I still don't know why Grimm sets such store by the things—the cups may be magick, but they're tacky, and I've already turned up three of them without even trying), until at last I came to the ebony case for the Hand of Glory. Which, according to Jodi's first book of evil tricks (which was safely locked away in the neighboring compartment) was exactly the sort of thing for storing pickpocketed peni.

"Hey Thing," I said, opening the box, "I've got a new boyfriend for you."

I could only assume that Jodi had once said something similar, because the moment I did, the mummified hand flipped out of the

box, turning handsprings in delight, then finally sat up and begged, fingers quivering in expectation.

The sight was somewhere between lurid and ludicrous, but I only opened my lunch pail and grabbed out the wriggling werewolf weenie and dropped it into the steamer trunk before it could twitch out of my hand. Thing pounced atop it and proceeded to make it feel welcome.

I watched, this definitely one of those sights that the censorship boards say appeal to the “prurient interest,” though all I can say is that the Nephandi have some rather innovative alternatives to the usual hamsters and gerbils that people keep as pets. Also that, even if I was holding Brandon Kearny’s (or whoever’s) manhood for ransom, I was at least treating it well. If not sending it to a Nephandi health spa, since Thing displayed amazing dexterity, especially for something sinister by almost every definition of the term.

I remembered, though, that the *Malleus Maleficarum* had also mentioned that the witches of the “Collect them all!” school had fed their prized possessions, and since it obviously wasn’t attached to anything, I probably should too, unless I wanted it to shrivel up and die. And with the revelations of only a few minutes before, that was simply *not* an option. Even if I were in the mood to play femi-nazi, which, let me assure my male readers, is not really part of my nature.

At least not unless seriously provoked.

“Mister Mistoffelees?” I looked back to the bed. “What did Jodi feed her stolen penises?”

He kept his eyes shut tight, but said sleepily, “Usually grain soaked in blood.”

“Okay,” I said, as brightly as I could, doing my best to simply deal with the concept. Thing, meanwhile, had captured the werewolf’s severed member and was proceeding to stuff it into the ebony box. Diagonally. I helped by replacing the lid and shoving it into place. I then carefully closed and latched the steamer trunk, pausing to stick a spare *Electric Hellfire Club* decal amid the vintage *Bombay* and

Cairo patches (you should renew your wards whenever you have a chance), then shut my lunchbox, got up and went downstairs.

Señora Duarte was thankfully out of the kitchen, especially with the state of my hair and nightdress (not to mention my sanity), and even more thankfully had put away all the groceries we'd bought the day before. Or maybe *Roland* had, since some of them were on very high shelves, but I hunted around to see what I could find. There was blood in the refrigerator, three bags of it in fact, but even though I'd given *Alexander* his fix the night before, I had a feeling that he wouldn't appreciate me getting into his stash. Sure bet it was there for emergencies, and this wasn't one of those (though the *Bobbitized* werewolf was no doubt of a different opinion).

The only actual grain to be found was *Orville Redenbacher Microwave Popcorn*, though the *Chef Boyardee Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle Pasta* in tomato sauce seemed close enough to "grain and blood" to me, or at least a vegan substitute. To be on the safe side, I fixed both, including an extra bag of popcorn for myself, then took it all upstairs.

Grimm would probably have had a heart-attack at what I did next, but he's too stuffy sometimes, and I really didn't care. The tacky skull-shaped chalices (which *Grimm* had called the "Tears of *Kali*," even though they seem to be about a dime a dozen, at least at the junk shops and garage sales I frequent) were just the right size, and so I poured some popcorn into one, spooned the lightly warmed mutant turtle pasta into another, then took the third into the bathroom and filled it in the bathtub, since the silver skeletal hand-shaped stem wouldn't fit all way under the vanity tap.

You can see why I thought they were tacky. I'd briefly considered using them as potpourri dishes, since stuff like that can look pretty Goth if you hide it in a corner and add enough dried rose petals and faux cobwebs, but then again, that's more *Blackrose's* style than mine. *Nephandi* pet-food bowls, however, seemed just their speed, and I got them arranged in the bottom of my magick trunk with *Jodi's* old ritual robe (which I never planned on using anyway) tucked down around them just in case something spilled. I then

situated the ebony case between them and knocked on the top. "Hey Thing! Tell your new friend that breakfast is served!"

The box opened, Thing waving like a mummified version of his Addam's family namesake, and then the penis stuck its head up next to him like the Crocodile from *Punch and Judy*. I quickly slammed the chest and locked it. In all honesty, I didn't really care to watch if, or how, a penis ate, though I suspected it would look something like the stop-motion penisauruses from *Flesh Gordon*. Which some Nephandi probably had guarding her house, or at least I wouldn't put it past Jodi Blake, who'd probably get a real kick out of something like that. If she hadn't gotten bored with it already.

I grabbed a handful of microwave popcorn and stuffed it in my mouth, then paused, wondering if I shouldn't wash my hands first. Then I shrugged. I'd already washed them in the kitchen, and it's not as if I really touched anything awful since then, other than a spoon and robe and trio of necromantic chalices.

On second thought, I went and practiced my Lady MacBeth imitation, then came out and began to eat popcorn in earnest to cover up the crunching sounds coming from the depths of my magick trunk.

See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. Don't ask, don't tell. Send the pictures to the *Weekly World News*.

I giggled maniacally, realizing where Madame Mimm and the rest of the old witches had learned those well-practiced mad cackles, and Mister Mistoffelees twitched an ear, then looked up, eyes green glowing slits.

He yawned. "Did you fetch *me* any breakfast, Mistress?"

I giggled. "I thought you wanted to sleep."

He stared at me coldly, and I set down my handful of popcorn, and in the uncomfortable silence and green glow, I heard the continued crunching from the steamer trunk. Word of warning to my fellow witches, but don't neglect your familiar. And *never* feed strange penises before you feed *him*.

I stood up, dropping the popcorn back into the bowl and dusting the last of it from my fingers. "Let's see if Melanie and Malory are

up,” I said in my best Mary Poppins voice. “We can have a dolls’ tea party and watch cartoons.”

“With raw eel?” Mister Mistoffelees asked.

“No eel, I’m afraid,” I said, apologizing as quickly as I could, “though we should be able to have salmon salad and cream cheese.”

“Quail eggs?”

I shrugged and held up my hands. “Alas, just regular chicken.” Then I laced my fingers together and smiled as winsomely as I could, striking an attitude like Mary Pickford. “But soft-boiled? For three minutes and three seconds? With a pinch of salt sprinkled on top?”

Mister Mistoffelees blinked and his eyes dimmed to their usual radiance. “Yes Mistress. I’d like that very much.”

I continued to smile, hoping I hadn’t annoyed him too badly, and endeavored to unlock my fingers from the silent movie pose. “Do you mind if I shower first?”

He cocked his head, then yawned and stretched out one leg, flexing his claws. “I suppose not. So long as you’re quick about it, and we don’t miss *Sailor Moon*.”

“Not much chance of that. Thanks.” I scratched him quickly behind the ears, making him purr, then went into the bathroom, hung the Nutmeg over the corner of the medicine cabinet, stripped off my nightie and stumbled into the shower, pulling the curtain all the way around the tub.

Just so you know, but my cat is a bit of a television addict—a habit which I’ll freely admit to encouraging, if only because I’d rather amuse my familiar by buying him copies of *The Aristocats* and *The Three Lives of Thomasina* than by doing any of the sundry bits of wickedness which Jodi Blake had felt were fitting entertainments for a witch’s feline companion.

“Tea Party” is one of the replacements which I’ve found Mister Mistoffelees enjoys, consisting of the regular things you’d expect at a little girl’s tea party, with the addition of various frills, such as sushi and soft-boiled eggs and salmon salad sandwiches. And of course *Sailor Moon* videos.

One thing you can probably gather, but like most cats, Mister Mistoffelees likes watching other cats on teevee. I'm not certain whether it's the feline equivalent of the *Playboy Channel*, or just that everyone likes watching their own kind, cats included, but my familiar has a peculiar fascination with *Sailor Moon*. Or really with the Sailor Scouts' talking cats, Luna in particular, and the same with the magick Luna ball.

I, for my part, had a bit of a thing for Tuxedo Mask, Sailor Moon's knight in formal wear, and if ever I needed a man in a top hat and Mardi Gras mask to come in and rescue me, it was now. At least, that's how I was feeling at the moment, though on second thought, having an overdressed amnesiac run in flinging exploding roses was probably the last thing my sanity needed. Even if it would be a lot less weird than most of what had already happened.

And so, after a brief shower, I gathered my clothes, my Nutmeg, my familiar, and what few shreds of sanity I had left and locked my room behind me, pausing only momentarily to toss the rest of the microwave popcorn into the conjurer's trunk. "*Bon appétit!*"

Hee-hee. Ha-ha. And you wonder why wizards have a reputation for being crazy?

Regardless, I tried to put it behind me, went downstairs, and set about making salmon salad and fussy little tea sandwiches, crackers with cheap caviar (lumpfish, not beluga) atop cream cheese (one of the stipulations in my pact with Mister Mistoffelees), a plate with assorted cookies, everything from elegant and expensive little apricot jam tarts (which I like) to extra stacks of plain old Americana Oreos (the centers of which my familiar is particularly fond), a half-dozen three-minute and three-second eggs, and of course a large pot of tea. Irish Breakfast to be exact.

"Is there anything I can do?" Brent materialized out of the shadows, even though there weren't any in the kitchen, if you know what I mean, and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Yeah," I said, setting down the caviar spoon, "don't sneak up on me like that..."

“Sorry...” Brent shrugged, his mouse-brown hair sticking out from under the black beret, which was probably meant to camouflage him as a beatnik, though with his Udjat Eye and the yellow ribbon done into a cockade on the brim, it made him look more like a Goth commando. Which is actually what he is, though I don’t think that was the intended effect.

I used my finger to scoop up the fish eggs stuck to the side-panel of the refrigerator, then offered them to Mister Mistoffelees. “If you want, get the tea tray and take everything to whatever room has the television.” My familiar happily licked the caviar off my finger with his raspy tongue, and then I washed my hands, dried them, and turned around, ready to ask Brent if he knew whether Melanie and Malory had gotten up yet.

He’d vanished, along with the tea tray, not even a tap of heel on the tiled floor to indicate he’d just been there. “I’m watching my back, I’m awaiting my visitation, from the Men in Black...” I sang, half under my breath, then just retrieved my familiar and my teacup and wandered out through the archway into the foyer.

It would be nice and impressive to say that my uncanny knack for finding things led me to the family room, but the simple fact of the matter is that hacienda architecture, no matter how large, has a tendency to echo, and when you add in tiled floors, well, it was pretty easy once I stepped into the main hall to figure which arch led to the room with the television.

The awful, insipid theme music of *Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood* also helped lead me to the conclusion that the kids were up—unless Brent had gained some truly warped tastes in television programming after Baron and Blackrose had done their little number on him—but as I came down the steps, I was relieved to see Melanie kicking back in bunny slippers and Malory in charge of the remote. Brent stood behind them, tea tray poised like some ninja butler, the kids not having noticed him yet.

I, of course, am nowhere near so stealthy, and the younger Gorians turned as I came down the steps, pausing with one hand on the railing as I attempted to make the best entrance I could under

the circumstances. Clothing-wise, I'd put on my early seventies Phoebe Figalily meets Samantha Stephens outfit, though I'd forgone the blonde wig I'd need to complete either look, which, of course, made me look more like crazy cousin Serena, or at least that's what I thought.

"Are they doing another sequel to *The Brady Bunch*?" Melanie asked, rudely shattering what little ego and sanity I had left.

I giggled, in hindsight rather like Elizabeth Montgomery's portrayal of Samantha's wild cousin. "Of course. Do you want to hear me sing 'Sunshine Day'?"

Melanie shivered in horror, proof, I suppose, that witches could still strike terror into small children, while Malory only looked at us both sternly. "Shh... It's getting to the good part."

Attention was abruptly turned to the television, and I saw how truly little had changed since I was a child. Fred Rogers was older and grayer, but otherwise still just as smarmy and insipid, and the kids were doing the same thing I used to do: putting up with it until the old queen got out the magic trolley and the good stuff came on, the good stuff of course being the puppet show.

Mister Mistoffelees jumped from my shoulder to the arm of the couch, curling his tail around himself and purring. I should probably mention it, but my familiar also has a thing for Miss Catherine, Mr. Roger's Steiff cat puppet, though thankfully my cat otherwise holds the rest of the show in the same low esteem I do.

Brent played Jeeves, setting out the tea on the coffee table, as silent and invisible as a Kabuki puppeteer, and I helped prop Bruno up in a toddler chair which had no doubt been Malory's only a short while ago. Bruno, of course, also warranted a place setting, but I made sure the teddy bear was only served shortbread and water crackers. As those of you who ever played tea party probably remember, you have a bitch of a time getting anything stickier out of plush, and I didn't even want to think about what would need to be done to remove cream cheese and caviar from teddy bear fur, especially with as bad as the black dye in the fish eggs could stain.

Mister Mistoffelees came down from the arm of the couch once I had the last of his setting just so, with a small plate of caviar and crackers, a dish of cream, and the promised three-minute and three-second egg in a proper egg cup, which is a fussy and terribly useful bit of china which every upper-class family should have. The Gorians are nothing if not old money, and while I'd had to hunt through the back of the china cupboard and wash the dust off, once I did, the base had fit perfectly into the indentation in the saucer, and I must say, but it is very nice to have a complete breakfast service, instead of making do with shot glasses (which will do in a pinch, though look nowhere near as elegant). "Small end?" I asked, picking up the monogrammed silver egg-knife.

"Yes please," Mister Mistoffelees said politely, and I tapped a couple times to crack the shell, then sawed off the top of Humpty-Dumpty's head. I set it aside, then took a pinch of salt from the old-fashioned salt cellar and held it up. My familiar nodded, and I sprinkled it over the egg, sliding it and the saucer over to him.

Mister Mistoffelees leaned down and daintily began to lick at Humpty-Dumpty's exposed cerebellum, as if the fine porcelain were a Tibetan monkey table, with the major difference, of course, being that the egg was not screaming, and we did not have PETA and National Geographic elbowing each other to take photos. My familiar, however, seemed willing to overlook this deficiency (and had, in fact, once confided that the screaming monkeys his old Mistress had provided frankly annoyed him), and Malory looked at him, then at me. "Mine too. Please." He pushed his egg forward.

I smiled, glad at how quickly he'd remembered the magick word. "Of course." I tapped at the eggshell, then proceeded to decapitate Humpty's cousin. "You know what they say about eating eggs, don't you?" Malory gave me a look of wide-eyed innocence, Melanie one of frank curiosity, and Brent and Mister Mistoffelees both refrained from comment, so I continued, "'We must break the shell to bits for fear/The witches make a boat, my dear/For over the sea, away from home/Far by night, the witches roam.'"

Melanie looked frankly perplexed. “What’s that got to do with eggs?”

I pushed Malory’s back to him, then reached for hers, and she didn’t protest. “Well,” I said, committing my third ovicide, “according to some stories I’ve read, there’s a spell which lets a witch turn an eggshell into a boat, which will take her anywhere in the world. But the eggshell has to be from an egg someone else has eaten—usually a child—and that they didn’t smash the shell of afterwards.” I shrugged and added a pinch of salt. “I know. It’s an odd spell. But that’s the way a lot of the old magicks are.”

Melanie took her egg and dipped in the spoon. “How do you do the spell?”

“Well,” I said, “you take the eggshell, set it down on the shore, turn round three times widdershins, which is the fancy way of saying ‘counterclockwise,’ then say the magick word. And then it turns into a pretty white boat.”

Melanie took a bite of egg. “So what’s the word?”

I shrugged. “That’s the problem—I don’t know.” I started in on my own egg, Brent fending for himself. “I’ve run across the spell several times, but none of the books had the secret word that makes the charm work.”

“I know what it is,” Malory said gravely. “Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo.”

“That’s *Cinderella*. The Disney version.” I took a bite of egg, then added a bit more salt. “And that’s for pumpkins, anyway.”

Malory nodded. “We had a pumpkin for Halloween. It didn’t work.” He looked up at me with his dark, intense eyes. “Except I’m not a witch.”

I paused, considering. Just because old Uncle Walt had used it in a syrupy movie didn’t mean that the fairy godmother’s charm was inaccurate. After all, *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* has the Star of Astaroth—who’s either a demon, or a corruption of Ishtar/Astarte, depending on who you talk to—so it’s perfectly possible that *someone* did their homework, and the Men in Black had decided it

was easier to leave the word there in plain sight than to draw attention to it by making a fuss.

Brent did not comment, and Mister Mistoffelees wasn't finished with his egg, so I couldn't ask him either just yet. Then Malory finished his egg and pushed the unbroken shell in front of me. "Here. You can have it."

I paused, then reached out and took it. "*Paraka*," I said. "That's the gypsy way of saying 'Thank you.' Every witch should say it when someone gives her a gift."

"Are you going to turn it into a boat?" Melanie asked.

I looked at the eggshell, remembering the fiasco with the origami crane, not to mention the kidnapped John Thomas still banging around in the trunk upstairs. "Not just yet," I said as diplomatically as I could. Honestly, I was not in a mood to attempt any spectacular spells at the moment—even if I did know the right word—and I glanced around for possible distractions. "Maybe Bruno would like another cookie."

I picked up a small plate of shortbread and offered it to Bruno, or at least Malory, who looked at his teddy bear, then carefully took a finger of it. "Just one," Malory said. "Bruno doesn't eat much." He pressed the teddy bear's stomach till it made an "Umph!" sound. "Bruno says '*Paraka*' too."

Sensing that they weren't going to get a magick show, or maybe just wanting to get into the game too, Melanie set down her spoon. "Let me get Bettina." She vaulted over the back of the couch, and before I could even say a word in response, was up and out of the room. Brent looked at her, impressed, I think, at the promise she showed if she ever chose to become a DEA agent or SWAT team member, and less than a minute later, she was back, clutching a black-faced southern doll in a patched gingham dress. A doll, I should point out, exactly like the one I'd seen on Kate's bed in my dream only that morning.

Mr. Rogers nattered on vapidly, and Malory hit the mute button while Melanie propped Bettina up in the chair beside Bruno.

“Did she... belong to your mother?” I inquired, hesitant to ask but already sure of the answer.

Melanie nodded, then looked a bit guilty. “I—I got her out of the chest in your room. I hope you don’t mind.”

I paused, my heart skipping a quick beat as I thought of my conjurer’s trunk and Jodi’s various and assorted bits of nastiness, then the gears clicked and I realized Melanie had to be talking about her mother’s hope chest. “Is that where you learned to pick locks?”

Melanie nodded, then bit her lip, not making eye contact. “There were... crunching sounds... coming from your trunk.”

“That’s right,” I said brightly, doing my best cousin Serena impression. “You know why you should never open a witch’s conjure box, don’t you?” I grinned maniacally, as if hoping she’d say no so I could tell her in gory detail what had happened to all the other little girls and boys who had poked their noses into the wrong places.

Melanie nodded vigorously, eyes wide, no doubt imagining far more grisly sights than a disembodied penis and a bowl of popcorn (though certainly nothing quite so surreal), and I leered in disappointment, glad that here was at least one potential disaster averted.

Then Malory looked at me, brow furrowed in a grave pout which only four-year-olds can pull off successfully. “Why shouldn’t you look in a witch’s conjure box?”

I poured myself a cup of tea, sighing as I realized I had let myself in for it, and a pat ‘because nanny says not to’ would be worse than nothing. “Well,” I said, slowly squeezing a wedge of lemon into my tea so as to buy a second more time, “are you familiar with the story of Pandora?”

“I am,” Melanie said brightly. “It was on *Xena* last week.”

I paused, having missed that episode, and shuddering to think what Sam Raimi had done to the legend. I was more partial to *Hercules* myself, and the last episode I’d seen of that, he’d recast Aphrodite as a windsurfing Valley Girl, and I didn’t even want to consider the possible reinterpretations of the origin of all the world’s evils. “Oh,” I said simply, trying to come up with a different tack on the subject and looked around for inspiration.

My eyes came to rest on the video cart (figuratively, not literally), specifically on the spine of *Fantasia* which was part of an extensive Disney collection. “You know ‘The Sorcerer’s Apprentice’?”

“With Mickey and the brooms?” Malory asked.

“Yes,” I said and handed him a jam tart, “with Mickey and the brooms. The point of the story is, if you open up something you really don’t know everything about, you can have some unexpected results—and most of them are a lot worse than a bunch of dancing broomsticks flooding the house.” (Or, for example, fountain pens squirting blood.)

I looked to Melanie. “Think about the closet where *Señora Duarte* keeps her cleaning supplies. It isn’t that the stuff in there is so much bad as the fact that you can poison yourself without too much trouble if you use it the wrong way.”

Malory looked grave, still not having touched his jam tart. “Are you going to teach us the right way?”

I sighed. “I suppose so. You already know that magick exists, so I might as well give you something simple and safe.”

“Like the eggshell spell?” Melanie asked.

“No,” I said quickly, “not like the eggshell spell. I know, it would be fun if you could get it to work, but if you sent yourselves to Tahiti, I’d have one heck of a time explaining it to your father. I’d be out of a job, and you’d have to go back to dealing with *Señora Duarte*.” From the children’s expressions, I could see that this was an actual threat, so I just smiled and pulled Malory’s egg cup closer to me. “Trust me, once I figure it out, you’ll be the first I show. But before you try anything quite so... spectacular... you should learn something simpler, safer, and easier to hide. Like maybe divination.”

Brent took a sip of tea and crooked an eyebrow, not commenting, though I know he’s fully cognizant that divination includes everything from rooting through the entrails of human sacrifices to summoning demons for Q and A sessions. Though trust me, I was not planning on teaching the kids the intricacies of either (though I’m certain that Mister Mistoffelees has observed more than enough

of both to give a number of helpful hints if anyone ever wanted to try).

I glanced around, looking for something wholesome and child-friendly, and almost ready to suggest tea leaf reading—which would be just fine if not for the boiling water—when my eyes lit on the cookie plate. “For example,” I said, reaching out and selecting one, “there’s the ancient art of Oreomancy.”

“Oreomancy?” Melanie echoed, her expression clearly questioning whether I’d just made it up.

In point of fact, I had, but you can’t be a magician without being able to justify anything at the drop of a hat. “Of course, Oreomancy, from the Latin *mancien*, ‘to know,’ and the American *Oreo*...”

“Black and white cookie,” Brent supplied.

“Yes, black and white cookie,” I agreed quickly. “Black on the outside, symbolic of the outer darkness; white on the inside, signifying the inner light. The universe in miniature.” I held it up like a magician’s coin, turning it so they could see both sides. “I know, you’re probably thinking, I’m just making this up, but divination by cakes and various baked goods has been done since ancient times. The Greeks did it, the ancient Celts chose lots by whoever got the burnt shortbread, and...” A soufflé foretold the fall of the Roman Empire?

For all I knew, that might be perfectly accurate. Omens, after all, are where you see them, but I needed to cut to the chase before I had the kids demanding the eggshell spell (whether or not ‘Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo’ really was the charm to get it to work). “Well, straight practicality here. You’ve seen the commercials—‘Unlock the magic inside an Oreo cookie.’ And if you’re a real witch, it works.”

I held up the cookie, fingers poised to twist it open and ‘attuning myself to the resonance’ as we say in Tarot card lingo. “Now, anyone have a question?”

Melanie and Malory exchanged glances, then Melanie looked at Bruno, who sat next to Bettina with an expression almost as solemn as Malory’s. “Yes,” Melanie said, “can Bruno see our mother?”

I nodded. “Very good. Now, let’s see what the Oreo says, shall we?”

The kids both nodded the affirmative.

I inclined my head, acknowledging this in true fortuneteller fashion before I proceeded. "If the cream is on the right, the answer is yes. If it's on the left, then no. If it splits, well..." Solemnly, I twisted the halves of the cookie widdershins, the direction traditionally used for unlocking and unbinding. Including, I suppose, whatever intrinsic magick there might be in an Oreo.

The halves came apart neatly, all the cream on the chocolate wafer in my right hand, not one speck of it remaining on the left.

"Well," I said solemnly, almost shaken by how neatly it had worked, "the omen is quite clear. Then answer is yes."

I lay the cookie down on the plate before me, and Mister Mistoffelees looked at it and sniffed in disdain. "I told you that already." He gave Melanie a reproachful look, obviously offended that she would seek omens in cookies instead of just taking him at his word.

I stroked his fur, smoothing down the hackles. "Well yes, Mister Mistoffelees. Of course. But this is a lesson, and we needed something we were certain of first, before we asked a question we *didn't* already know the answer to."

"Maybe we should ask if Bettina can see momma," Malory said, glancing at the doll, then at Melanie, a definite challenge.

With the eyes of both her brother and my familiar on her, she wasn't about to back down. "Okay," she said. "That's a good question."

"Alright..." I picked up another Oreo, wanting to ask several questions myself—for example, a few about the nature of the spells on the cover of my Book of Shadows, and the motives of the mysterious Madame Verthank—but unfortunately, most of them weren't simple yes/no questions, and then there was the added wrinkle that I really didn't want to pique kids' curiosity about anything else.

"Here goes." I held the Oreo poised. "Can Bettina see Katherine Gorian?"

I twisted the halves of the cookie, or really attempted to, but the frosting didn't want to give. Then the next second, the wafers cracked, the whole thing twisting, and it crumbled, raining bits onto my plate.

That, no pun intended, was the way the cookie crumbled, and you don't need to be a soothsayer to recognize a bad omen, or at least a warning that you've asked a question which you shouldn't have.

"What does that mean?" Malory asked, innocent.

"It means," I said, dusting the crumbs off my fingers and standing up, "that I've troubled the oracle enough, and I have other matters to attend to."

I glanced to Bettina, the doll's embroidered brown eyes holding the same sweet yet determined look which I'd seen on the face of Katherine Gorian in my dream, and I didn't need to read the pattern of the cookie crumbs to know it's meaning: Bettina didn't *see* Katherine Gorian, but the children's mother saw *through* her—the occasional "looking in" she'd mentioned—and that greater truth was more than the frivolous art of Oreomancy could handle.

And I was certain of it. Like I said about Jodi's books, a person's prized possessions pick up their resonance, a little sliver of their souls, and the magick of poppets and effigies is so well documented I don't even need to go into it. Bettina may have been made to look like a little black southern girl, but once upon a time, she had been the sole friend of a little red-haired Irish girl, more important than life itself, and that importance had stuck. She was real, like the Velveteen Rabbit, or Bruno, or even Mister Mistoffelees. And with the death of the woman who had once made her real, she had become even more important, one of Katherine Gorian's strongest links back to her children.

Bettina and the Oreo also clinched it—My dream had been a true vision. We witches have a sense for these things, if just because Fate sometimes loses all touch for subtlety and beats us over the head with coincidences so we don't miss the point. I took just a moment to pop *Sailor Moon* in the VCR, cutting short Mr. Roger's vacuous "What did we learn today, children?" speech, and once the video

began showing hollow threats from the FBI, I turned to Brent. "Secure cell phone?"

"Always." At once he produced a slimline black cellular telephone which looked like something from James Bond meets *Sharper Image*, and I took it, slipping out through the French doors onto the balcony and watching the antenna telescope up as I popped the mouthpiece. Honestly, the Men in Black have the neatest gadgets, and if it weren't for the fact that they're trying to turn the world into a Kafka novel, they'd be pretty cool.

Regardless, it took just a moment to dial information, and another to call the one Brandon Kearny listed in the San Francisco area. I leaned on the railing as the ocean wind whipped my skirt around my knees, chilling me slightly and probably making me look like a heroine from a Hitchcock film, not that there was anyone there to appreciate it save myself.

On the fifth ring, the answering machine picked up, classical guitar playing in the background: *Hi. This is Brandon. I'm not in right now, but if you leave your name and number, I'll try my damndest to get back to you. If not, then it's your loss. Cheers!*

There was a flourish of fancy fingerpicking, and I waited until the tone sounded, about ten seconds after the music cut off, which meant a cheap answering machine. I ran my tongue across my lips, trying to come up with a Hitchcock heroine voice, but failed utterly when I actually spoke: "Hi? Um, I'm trying to reach Brandon Kearny. I'm not sure if I've got the right number, but I think we bumped into each other yesterday outside *Neiman-Marcus*, and I've got something that belongs to you? My name's Penny, and—"

There was the crackle of a phone being picked up. "You *witch*. You fucking *witch*..."

Now, honestly, I have no problem with people calling me a witch, since that's what I call myself, but I do object to the tone Mr. Kearny was using, as if my title were more properly spelled with a B.

And as I should probably remind my male readers, if you call a woman either—in that tone—then you better expect to deal with

what you've called up. "A witch? Well, yes, I suppose so. I don't know about the fucking part, but you're the dickless werewolf, aren't you?"

There came a howl, loud enough that I had to hold the phone away from my ear, then a crash as if the receiver had just been dropped from about nine feet in the air, which is what you would expect if a giant werewolf suddenly had to deal with the recoil from a phone cord not designed to be stretched to the ceiling.

I waited for him to retrieve the phone, and after a scrabble of claws on plastic, there was a much-less-human voice growling, "*Kill you. Kill you fucking bitch...*"

The spirit of cousin Serena was obviously with me, since I just tittered gaily, which is probably not the appropriate response in such situations, but then again, some people deserve it. "Really?" I said. "You'd kill me? But then, after all, what can I expect? You killed your own cousin. Probably wouldn't be too hard for you to murder another woman."

There was another snarl, then a smash and clatter and a ring. Then the next second, the phone was dead, and I was listening to the three rising tones and the "*If you would like to make a call...*"

I hung up. Then, after waiting three seconds, hit redial. No answering machine picked up, but after about two dozen rings, I heard the phone being lifted, and a haggard, but human, male voice. "Hello?"

"Hi," I said. "Can we try this again?"

There was a long silence, punctuated only by the Pacific wind continuing to whistle through my nylons, then a sigh. "What do you want?"

I paused, realizing that with one panicked off-the-cuff spell, I'd defeated a werewolf, if not maimed him for life. Yet somehow it didn't feel like a triumph, and I told myself to remember Kate's kind words about her cousin. Despite the fact that he'd killed her, and that she wasn't the sort to say anything unkind about anyone. "Listen," I said, "I think this is all a terrible misunderstanding. I didn't really mean to, um, uh, well..." I fumbled for words, trying to find a polite and delicate way to say 'rip your dick off,' but in the end

just skirted the issue. "...but, um, you tried to kidnap the kids, and, well, what can you expect? I mean..." I trailed off, wanting to say that it seemed poetic justice that a man who'd tried to kidnap children would end up with his willie being held for ransom, but that would *not* have been politic.

"Would you..." I said, then covered the receiver at the same time as stifling a giggle, it suddenly occurring to me to ask if he'd like to *talk* to his willie, and whether I should put it on the phone (and whether it would actually talk back, which was a truly frightening thought). After my brief attack, I repeated myself, "Would you... like to talk this over in person? I spoke with Kate, and she explained that the situation is a little more complicated than it seemed at first."

"You..." There was a long pause, whether from anger, shock, or disbelief, I really can't say, then he asked, "You troubled her spirit?"

"Well, no, not exactly," I said, hedging frantically while attempting to define precisely what I *had* done in the first place. "It's more a case of her spirit being troubled to begin with. I mean, you kill her, attempt to murder her husband, kidnap her kids—Would you rest peacefully if that happened to you?" I paused, remembering the rest of my dream. "Listen, Brandon—it is Brandon, isn't it?—Kate gave me a message for you. She says she forgives you for killing her, but she also says that if you lay one claw on Alexander, she'll never forgive you. At least not in your lifetime."

There was another long pause. "You don't understand. He's not Alex anymore. He's a fiend, a bloodsucking corpse who steals from the living, a creature of the Wyrms..."

"And you're a dickless werewolf. Your point, sir?" I waited, hearing snarling, then silence. "Listen, Brandon. Let's try to be civilized about this and not call the kettle black. I think it's all just a matter of perspective. I mean, you're probably thinking I'm some sort of evil, Bobbitizing sorceress, when all I am is a regular girl who knows a few tricks and got the bejesus scared out of her yesterday. You're probably something other than a slaving, bloodthirsty bogeyman when you come down to it—you've got a normal enough answering machine

message and I guess you play the guitar—but when we met, you really didn’t leave your best impression. Fair enough?”

“I guess so...” Pause. “Do you... still have it?”

I could probably say something really catty about men and their priorities, but honestly, if it were me in the same position, I’d probably be asking the same questions. “Yeah, I still have it. It’s just fine, being taken care of Geneva convention and then some.” I looked out at the ocean, and the waves breaking on the beach below. “I could reattach it without much trouble.”

This, of course, was more than half bluster and wishful thinking. I hadn’t the faintest idea how to reattach Brandon Kearny’s willie, but then again, until yesterday, I hadn’t thought it possible to actually steal one, aside from the mundane method. And I still didn’t know how I’d pulled it off aside from a touch of panic and some *King Missile* lyrics.

Then again, Mr. Kearny didn’t need to know that. “I’m guessing that you *do* want it back?”

“Hell yeah!” There was a note of almost religious fervor and desperation in his voice, and I realized what it was like to have someone quite literally by the balls. Or close enough. “What... do you want?”

I looked out at the ocean, butterflies in my stomach as I suddenly grasped the fact I could ask this man for just about anything, and probably get it. But, as I’ve said, I really don’t like being a bitch, and even if I did, my best excuse for being one was over and done with almost two weeks ago, so I wasn’t going to be any nastier than I had to.

“Okay, Brandon?” I said, listening to make sure he was still there (though I think only an act of Pacific Bell could have gotten him off the phone). “This is what I want. And you’re going to do it if you ever want to see your... your... your little dog Toto again. Ready?”

“Yes.”

“Good. We’re going to get together, just the two of us, and talk things over. I’m sick of the mysteries flying all over the place, and I want to get everything out in the open and hear things from your side of the story. And you’re going to come alone, without telling any of your werewolf

buddies. Your little stunt at the tollbooth last night broke every mirror on my car, and I shouldn't have to tell you, but I'll have a bitch of a time getting replacements. Not to mention all of the kids clothes I left behind when we broke and ran outside *Neiman-Marcus*." Not, of course, that that was anything that should be concerning Brandon Kearny, but it was still pissing me off, so I might as well get it off my chest while I had a chance. "I am not—repeat not—going to bring Toto with me. So if you decide to tell your buddies, or they follow you anyway, then the deal's off, and you're going to be Brandon the Dickless Werewolf for the rest of your life. And if you lose your temper and manage to take me out, it'll be worse than that. I'll..." I paused, trying to think of a suitably fiendish ultimatum. Have his willie sold for soup in Chinatown? Let my cat play with it? Will it to Jodi Blake?

Then it occurred to me: "I'll have someone give it to the children. Along with a staple gun. And a piercing magazine. You get the idea?"

There was a low moan of terror from the phone, and I was shocked by how evil I could get when pressed for time. "Where—Where do you want to meet?" Brandon Kearny whimpered like an abused puppy, and the sound made me feel terrible.

Maybe it was a need for wholesomeness after the twisted bent of the conversation, or maybe evil works up an appetite, but the words were out of my mouth before I even thought about them: "Ghirardelli Square. The ice cream parlor. You know, the one with the chocolate-making machines?"

There was a groan, and I had a feeling I'd be the only one eating ice cream. "What time?"

I drummed my nails on the rusted metal of the railing, listening to the faint ring. "Oh, about seven should work out fine. Remember, come alone."

I clicked off the receiver then, wondering exactly what I was doing. I was going to an ice cream parlor to meet a killer werewolf, right in the middle of tourist central. Then again, I'd gone to beard the vampires in their own den a few days before, and things had worked out fairly well with that.

A crane flew by then, pale powder blue, and I paused. Not only were cranes not native to this part of the California coast, at least so far as I knew, but they also didn't come in that color.

Even if *Hello Kitty* origami paper did.

I watched it for a moment, both in wonderment and a little bit of horror. I'd done that. I was responsible. Even though reality had taken its own twist on it, deciding, no doubt, that odd-colored Japanese cranes blown badly off-course were a lot less of an affront to normalcy than origami sculptures animated by Catholic heresy and the wisdom of Rabbi Loew.

Or maybe I was tripping and it was just a trick of the light, and I was looking at a perfectly ordinary cormorant or egret. Whatever. It didn't really matter, or at least I hoped not. I popped the cell phone mouthpiece back in place, letting the antenna telescope back in, and came in out of the cold and back into the living room.

Sailor Moon was busy whammying anime bad-girls with her magick wand, and Mister Mistoffelees was treating himself to an extra helping of caviar, straight from the jar. Brent appeared to be taking mental notes on the martial arts, or at least seemed poised for action in case Queen Beryl's minions popped out of the screen, but then looked to me and raised an eyebrow.

"Mission accomplished." I handed him the cell phone. "Thanks."

His eyebrow continued to be crooked, so I just leaned down and felt the side of the teapot, which was still warm, though less than half full. "Let me go make some more tea." I poured the last of it into Melanie and Malory's cups, then finished off with the teddy bear's.

"Get Bettina her own cup," Malory said. "Bruno doesn't like sharing."

"Of course," I said, with a look to Brent, and silent as a ninja, he followed me down the hall to the kitchen.

I quickly briefed him on my dream and the gist of the conversation with Brandon.

"Do you think it advisable?" Brent asked. "Werewolves can be dangerous."

"I gathered that." I shrugged and took a sip of cold tea while we waited for the kettle to boil, which was taking a bit longer than usual since *Señora* Duarte's kitchen is unfortunately 'modern,' with electric instead of gas. Not that I think she uses much aside from the microwave. "I suppose I could back out, and just mail it to him like Vincent Van Gogh's ear, but I'd hate to trust something like that to the United States Postal Service."

He nodded, not mentioning the options of FedEx and UPS, but some things are better left unspoken.

"We're going to have to deal with Brandon sooner or later anyway. After all, he is family, and the kids' closest living relative, at least in the traditional sense." I set about washing and warming the teapot, a pleasant and understated bit of Spode porcelain, plain cream white with a soft crackle glaze, the type of thing that was obviously fine china without screaming it to the entire world. "It's either that, or get known as the witch who steals weenies, and that's Jodi's shtick, not mine."

Brent only shrugged. "You think you can negotiate a peace?"

I towed out the inside of the teapot. "I'll settle for an armed truce. Alexander hasn't told the kids any of the particulars of their mother's death, and the only reason I can think is that he doesn't want them to be permanently scarred if Brandon and his pack ever do get their paws on them."



"He's a very practical man."

I shrugged and filled the infuser with a rose-violet blend. "That's what Kate said. I think Brandon should be thankful the kid's have a father as nice as Alexander."

"You want me as backup?"

I turned off the gas and poured the steaming water over the infuser. "Of course." A delicate scent of violets and rose wafted up, for Modesty and Love. "I only said for him to come alone. I never said I couldn't call in my friends, and I fully intend to."

Brent nodded, and with a bemused feeling of closure, I placed the lid atop the teapot with a *chink* of fine porcelain.



Penny Dreadful™

A Mage: The Ascension® Novel in Eight Parts and an Epilogue

Part Five

Regarding the Witches' Sabbat & nature of tempests and traffic jams; the ice-cream social, faerie etiquette, and chocolate-dipped bananas; The Garden of Costly Delights, "My, Grandma, what a big ____ you have!" the laughter of mermaids, daisy chains and maiden's crowns; My Change-Purse, Totoro and a second sundae; a matter of negotiations, nipples, and a new toad for Mister Mistoffelees; and fuzzy dice for the Bearcat.

Kevin Andrew Murphy



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Just around midnight
Tuesday, the 30th of April &
Wednesday, the 1st of May
The Height of Walpurgisnacht &
the Beginning of May Day, the Start of Beltane

There are some missions doomed from the outing, and this past evening's was most assuredly one of them. I'd been unable to get hold of anyone save Neville, and all the leader of our merry band did was wish me well and tell me he had every confidence in my abilities. Not that I'd really expect him to show up anyway, but still...

Of course, trying to find a witch with a opening in her social calendar come April Thirtieth is something of an exercise in frustration to begin with. Those in the know are already nodding in agreement, while for those who aren't, let me illuminate you—The last day of April is the Feast of Saint Walpurga, who was this German nun who was holy enough that the Church decided she was just the woman to reform the witches. Or at least this was the general consensus, since they put her feast on the Thirtieth of April, which just happens to coincide with the Witches' Sabbat, made famous by Goethe as an excuse for every magical practitioner in the world to hop on her broomstick or other flying appurtenance and hie to the Brocken in Germany, there to hold the world's largest orgy and beer bash.

Of course, the witches and wizards I know hold their beer bashes and orgies slightly closer to home, and have never flown broomsticks, at least so far as I've witnessed, though I'm certain that old-fashioned types like Jodi Blake still keep with the tradition as set forth by Goethe, getting drunk, dancing naked on mountaintops, and kissing the Devil's butt (not necessarily in that order). But the trouble still holds true—Walpurgis Night is one of the old days of power when the stars align and the currents of magick flow that much more freely, it being the beginning of Beltane, which, when nicied-up by the Goddess worshipers, is described as “the festival celebrating life, fertility, and the male generative power.” This explaining the broomsticks, maypoles, Soviet military parades and other obvious Freudian symbols associated with the holiday.

With *that* about to kick off at the moment of nightfall, I was lucky to have even one mage as backup. Even a double-agent for the Men in Black.

Then, of course, there was the matter of traffic. The commute is still horrendous at that hour, even going into San Francisco and even on regular Tuesday nights, but as I maneuvered the Stutz through the MacArthur Maze, the hairs on the back of my neck prickled, telling me that the delay was not just unnatural, but supernatural. Several prayers to Hermes and St. Christopher went unanswered, as did Brent's calls to CalTrans, and even a “Wonder-Twins powers, activate!” tapping my orange-beribboned Udjat Eye to Brent's yellow did nothing more spectacular than let us get around a semi-rig.

Then again, the Udjat Eye is the sigil of protection for wanderers and travelers, not Federal Express or Domino's Pizza, and even Thrice-Great Hermes makes no promise of “Overnight” or “Half an hour or it's free.” We were safe, we were protected, and even if we weren't traveling anywhere near the posted speed limit, we were in the only lane that was moving, which was something to be grateful for. Short of giving us a police escort, the saints and gods had done what they could—or perhaps that they were allowed to, if you believe the popular joke that the MacArthur Maze is a malign and

malevolent entity in an of itself and demands a sacrifice of time from all who seek to pass through its coils.

Of course, we weren't the only ones caught in the uncanny gridlock, so the malevolent energies weren't necessarily focused on us. Walpurgis Night is known for random weirdness and supernatural disturbances in general, and word to my fellow practitioners, but large elemental forces—whether they be tempests or traffic jams—tend to cause a lot of collateral damage, no matter who or what summoned them. The best tactic is generally to grin and bear it and ride them out. Even if it is at five miles per hour.

Regardless of the cause, we didn't get to Ghirardelli Square until at least 7:45—very near sunset—and that was with violating several speed laws and 'No Left Turn' signs, in the end cranking a hard (but legal) right into the parking garage.

For those of you who don't know the City, Ghirardelli Square was formerly the Ghirardelli Chocolate Factory, where they also made spaghetti and mustard (and now *there's* a yummy combination). Not that 'Toto' in my lunchbox would have refused, with as much as Brandon Kearny's severed member was eating.

That's probably something else I should mention. Have you ever considered what happens when you overfeed a penis? No? Well, neither did I, but to get some peace and quiet while I finished my last entry in my Book of Shadows, it had seemed like a perfectly reasonable idea to toss several cans of *Spaghetti-O's* and a can opener to Thing so he could keep his new friend amused.

Mea Culpa. I will not go into graphic detail, but I will say I had to empty the rest of the contents of my lunchbox and bend Brandon's willie double to fit it in. After dosing it with a full pot of *Sleepytime* tea, since, well, it was rather frisky. And while I had told the rightful owner that I intended to leave it home, that was before I discovered that one-eyed trouser snakes could become pythons after one-too-many cans of precooked pasta.

Or maybe it was some unexpected side-effect of using the Tears of Kali as pet-food dishes on Walpurgis Night, since it was exactly the sort of thing you'd expect from a dark earth-mother goddess and

the *primo* night of the year for fertility rituals. Brandon's willie, while impressive to begin with, was now a *lingam* worthy of Shiva, if not Priapus and several other randy fertility gods. Or at least I'll say that I certainly wouldn't want to date him.

We parked in the basement of the Mustard Building, I made sure to 'Club' the Stutz, promising to get him a pair of fuzzy dice at one of the toy stores upstairs, if just to pay for the parking validation, and then we went up, expecting to deal with nothing more than an agitated werewolf who was probably wondering if I'd flaked.

The lateness was honestly not much of a problem so far as I was concerned, but Brent, in proper Secret Service fashion, would have much rather cased the area first. We split off, him taking the stairs, while Mister Mistoffelees and I went by way of the elevator.

There was a badly scratched and gang-insigniad mirror inside, and I paused a moment to adjust my wig, making sure the honeyed tresses had the right flip at the end and that they didn't get in the way of my cat. I'd decided that if I was going to do the Phoebe Figalily/Samantha Stephens look, I might as well do it to the hilt. Also, my feminine intuition had told me that today might be a good day to go it as a blonde, if just because some men seem to think that women with that hair color are innately sweeter and more innocent. And while I didn't know if Mr. Kearny fell into that camp, I was willing to take any extra ammo I could get.

And then the doors opened and we stepped out and it was Ghirardelli Square, exactly like you'd remember it if you've ever been there—brick courtyards, ever-so-pricey and upscale shops with all manner of expensive but beautiful ornaments, like paper-weight and spun glass figurines, and the bronze mermaid fountain shining in the half-light of sunset, complete with toads squirting water and mermaid mommies ready to force-feed said toads to their horrified merbabies. (Look carefully next time if you don't believe me.)

Brent was nowhere to be seen, but that was to be expected. He'd probably already ensconced himself in the clock tower or the *Sharper Image* showroom (which, needless to say, would be perfect

camouflage for a MIB), while I was just left to wander past the mermaid fountain and over to the little marble counter outside the ice cream parlor.

I set down my lunchbox and its frightening contents, then took an order slip and menu from their slots, along with one of the little miniature golf pencils they keep for the express purpose of being stolen. I was about to check off *The Rock*, which is vanilla and rocky road with a hard shell of chocolate over it and one of my personal favorites, when I felt a slight twitch from the pencil, like the tug of a dowsing pendulum or the ghostly pull of a ouija board planchette. And while I seldom need dowsing pendulums, and I leave the ouija boards to Blackrose, I know the tug of instinct when I feel it, and I knew better than to pull back.

I scanned the pencil down the list of items and my fingers twitched again, putting a fine check in the box for ‘Vanilla Milkshake.’

Now, personally, I have no real problems with vanilla milkshakes, and even order them on occasion without the fingers of Fate guiding mine, but if you’re mystified as to why the forces of the universe were bothering to guide my choice of deserts, then you weren’t alone.

I just gave a mental shrug, trusting that as with Walpole and ‘The Three Princes of Serendip,’ all would be explained later. “Mister Mistoffelees?”

My familiar came halfway down off my shoulder and put his paw on the slip, indicating the plain vanilla sundae.

That, at least, was usual, a fair approximation of the ‘dish of cream’ I’m supposed to give him as per compact, though my familiar likes a bit of variation when he can choose it himself. I marked his sundae off as well, replacing the menu, and took the slip to the clerk, reaching for my *Totoro* change purse, which I’d clipped to the handle of the lunchbox, getting ready to pay the exorbitant price.

“No charge, Penny,” she said. “Our treat.”

I paused, looking to the clerk, who was dressed as crisp and white-bread as a Disneyland employee except for a silver Bajoran-style ear cuff arrangement with an itsy-bitsy spider suspended from a fine chain, and contacts with hourglasses in the center, like Raistlin

from the old *Dragonlance* series, except the irises were silver instead of gold. And she had a face I recognized. "Norna?"

She smiled, the silver spider swinging on its metallic thread, and then the hourglasses receded into infinity and winked out, leaving perfectly normal black pupils in pale blue eyes. In a face reminiscent of Norna's, though not quite the girl I remembered.

She shook her head. "Number seventy-four," she murmured dazedly, then handed me the stub with a convenience clerk's smile and any hint of recognition was gone. "Enjoy."

I glanced to her name badge, which said *Ariadne* instead of *Norna*, then back to my slip. Yet when I looked up, it was the same girl with the same earring, but her badge read *Bernice*.

"Uh, thanks," I said and wandered into the ice cream parlor, stroking Mister Mistoffelees' tail with one hand and trying to make things jive. Just so you know, but Norna used to be one of us Hollowers, back before we really had our act together, or at least before I got clued in to the whole magick business. This isn't to say that I didn't believe in magick, it's just that there's a big difference between picking up pennies for good luck and suddenly figuring out how to make your origami get up and boogie.

Norna was part of that, or really I should say that what started as a perfectly innocent, even frivolous, séance to figure out whether she was dead or not led to a great many shocking revelations, not the least of which being the existence of Jodi Blake, my cat, and mad Dr. Himiitsu, who Peter later turned into a pig. This, of course, was simple turnabout, since the good doctor had somehow and in some way I'm not privy to, and really don't want to know about anyway, kidnapped Norna and turned her into a giant silver spider, which then broke loose and spun its web in the upper astral reaches of the old St. Francis Church, where we Hollowers used to hold the *Waydown*.

Confused yet? Good, because then you're in the same boat as me. The upshot is that Norna is still around, somewhere, and apparently pulling strings, including possessing ice cream clerks with unfortunate taste in jewelry so as to say hi and give me complimentary

milkshakes as a ‘Happy Walpurgis Night!’ And while I can smell signs and portents a mile off, there are some of them that are so bizarre that all they do is clue you in that something important is going down, but not precisely what.

That much, however, I already knew, at least for myself, and the cosmic significance would probably reveal itself before much longer.

And how.

I stood there in the middle of the Ghirardelli Square ice cream parlor as the cosmic junctures shifted, Beltane beginning with the green flash of sunset, and I stroked Mister Mistoffelees’ tail with the hand with the crumpled receipt, my lunchbox heavy in the other, and tried to see if I could spot Brandon Kearny. Unfortunately, the parts of him I was most familiar with were his naughty-bits, or at least the major one—as in really major—and *that* was still tranked and wedged into my lunch pail as if in some continuation of a great cosmic joke. “So Penny, *what have you brought for ‘Show and Tell’ today?*” “Well, Sister Mary...”

Suffice it to say, I’d only seen the rest of Mr. Kearny for half a second before he morphed into a giant werewolf, and he was currently not in that form. Trust me, but while I may joke about how blasé San Franciscans are, a nine-foot-plus dickless wolfman would cause comment, if just “Pity...”

And of course I was dressed as a blonde from an early seventies sitcom, so I couldn’t expect him to spot me off the bat, especially since I had Mister Mistoffelees on my shoulder, and his usual *Pay no attention to the cat in the ice cream parlor* field normally extends to *Don’t bother with the woman holding the cat either* unless I make a scene or draw attention to myself in some other way, and I really didn’t want to do that just yet.

I looked around, trying to see if I could spot some man just sitting there, looking alone and desperate, and then I paused and did a double-take.

Brandon Kearny was there, or at least it looked like the man I remembered before he did a riff on *The Howling*, but he was hardly

alone. For there, sitting opposite him, with a bright red raspberry parfait in front of her, was me.

Well, it wasn't exactly me. First off, I'm the only me I know of, aside from the doppelgangers in the mirrors that morning, and second, I was dressed, as I said, in vintage seventies clothes with a blonde wig and nylons and the last-gasp of the fussy little white gloves women used to wear before bra-burning came into vogue.

Sitting opposite Brandon Kearny was me, except me with my usual black bangs, dolled up almost as pretty as the vision from the ivory-framed mirror—hair coiffed and spit-curled, white powder, red lipstick, with long red nails and this gorgeous Victorian black-and-white lace wedding gown which had been my find of finds three years ago, and I didn't think two of them were still in existence, let alone two of me. And she, or I mean I, was sitting there, laughing, a cruel little twist to her lips, as if she'd just heard something delightfully horrid, like a new dead baby joke.

I took a step back, shocked to say the least. In folklore, it's said to be very unlucky to meet your double, if not a presentiment of your own death. And while that didn't feel like the case here, *something* weird was most certainly going down, if not in several other directions as well.

I continued backing up, getting behind one of the pillars where there's the drinking fountain and these little tiny paper cups for you to fill up with water so you can wash the ice cream out of your mouth, and peeked out at my doppelganger, who was laughing and flirting with Mr. Kearny, or at least her body language was saying that she'd like to screw him seven ways from Sunday, or perhaps that she already had and would like to do it again.

Mr. Kearny was also not acting like a werewolf who'd just had his penis appropriated by a witch. From his body language and his gestures, he looked not only whole and complete, but queerer than an eight dollar bill. And since most of the gay men I know, if they were victims of a dick-napping, would be at least as upset as the man I spoke with over the phone, if not more so, I smelled something

more than a little rotten in the State of Denmark, not to mention the Ghirardelli Square ice cream parlor.

“Mister Mistoffelees,” I whispered, “what do you see at that table over there?”

My familiar blinked and purred, cocking his head, then rubbed himself against my ear, and I heard, in a low undertone, “My old Mistress. And a big juicy rabbit.”

The revelation that Jodi Blake had finally come out to play was a shock, honestly enough, but I’d been dreading and expecting it ever since I torched her mansion and bested her on a technicality in a wizard’s duel. But the other part was just plain weird. “A rabbit?”

Mister Mistoffelees sniffed the air, then rubbed against me. “Of course. A big juicy rabbit. Wolves smell very different.”

I had to back up further, as a couple with a little girl came and got glasses of water to go with their ice cream, and I glanced around the parlor, wondering what in the names of several deities I was going to do. Just so you know the layout of the place, but the main floor has the soda fountain along one wall, with the other leading out into the patio area. In the back are the chocolate mixers and grinders left from the old factory, running in a continuous demonstration with little historical plaques set up at intervals, while the water fountain is behind one of the pillars in the middle. Jodi, impersonating me, along with the “big rabbit” who looked for all the world like Brandon Kearny, was sitting at a small marble-topped table, towards the back, near the cocoa bean crushers.

I cast about frantically for anything that might be of use, but while I had my Udjat Eye, and that had definite magickal applications, I was wearing it as an ankle bracelet at the moment, and all the mystic business I know about the third eye says that you’re supposed to wear mystic jewels and amulets and similar metaphysical contact lenses in the middle of your forehead, or the hollow of your throat, or the palm of your hand, or maybe in your navel—anywhere that corresponds to one of the Hindu chakras, pretty much—but I don’t think ankles count. Ankles are for wings, and maybe lotus blossoms, but not for mystic third eyes. And while I

could possibly have untied it and put it on as a headband, that would require an interesting bit of maneuvering in the middle of the ice cream parlor, not to mention look pretty stupid even if I did pull it off, especially with the wig.

Then I recalled an old bit of folk magic, which says that dogs are clairvoyant, and if you want to see ghosts, all you need to do is look between a dog's ears. I'd never put it to the test, and didn't know whether the substitution of a cat would work any better or worse, but with an animal as magickal as Mister Mistoffelees, I thought it was a pretty safe bet. Witches are supposed to be able to see through the eyes of their familiars anyway, and while I'd never attempted that either, it wasn't as if I had much of anything else at hand.

I took Mister Mistoffelees into my arms, scratching him once under the chin, and glanced between his ears. And then I saw, quite clearly except for the cat hair, an old hag with a milky eye and a minidress that would have looked awful on a woman one eighth her age, talking with the apparent second cousin of the March Hare, dressed in a lavender vest and silver hoop earring ensemble that looked like it was patterned after the outfit of the infamous gay Ken doll.

This, of course, was shocking enough, but then a man ran into the ice cream parlor, panting, and stood there in the middle of the floor, looking around frantically. Then he went slack-jawed, gawking at Jodi Blake and the apparent Lord of Bunnybury. And I realized that the real Brandon Kearny had been just as delayed as I'd been myself.

He was also being far more obvious than I'd been, both being taller and panting in exhaustion, but you can't be a witch without knowing how to improvise, and that means more than just magick.

I grabbed one of the iced tea spoons out of the rack and flung it towards Jodi's table, causing her and the Lord High Hare to look at the skittering bit of silverware, and moreover giving me a moment to reach out and grab Brandon Kearny by the back of his shirt and drag him into the relative safety of the pillar.

He did another double-take at me, since I'd rather rudely just called his attention to myself, and Mister Mistoffelees' collateral invisibility could only handle so much, but I put my hand over his mouth and pointed to the table where Jodi and the Rabbit Lord had gone back to chatting over sundaes. I pointed to Jodi and hissed, "That is not me, and I'm betting even money the other one isn't you either."

Brandon Kearny looked, taking my hand away, then he sniffed the air and his lips curled back from his gums. "Padraic..."

I snuck a peek at Brandon's doppelganger, who looked just like him, down to the rumpled Pendleton shirt, now that I didn't have Mister Mistoffelees next to my eyes. "Is he Harvey's second cousin or what?"

"He's my second cousin," Brandon said. "He's a pooka."

I blinked, digesting this information, having both my suspicions confirmed and my worldview expanded, since, in addition to vampires, werewolves, witches and ghosts, I'd now been given hard proof that faeries existed too. But I was hardly going to clap my hands at this revelation, since—for those of you not up on your Irish folklore or black-and-white film classics—*pookas* happen to be shapeshifting rabbit spirits who can turn invisible, play all sorts of annoying tricks, and have the morals of Bugs Bunny, at best. And you only have to read a couple of the stories about Brer Rabbit vs. Brer Wolf to figure out that the fur was going to fly. Besides which I also realized that the Kearny clan was even more screwed up than the Gorians. The Gorians were only vampires with werewolves for inlaws. The Kearnys were apparently werewolves with ties to faeries, then related by marriage to a vampire clan. Who had a witch for a nanny, who'd consulted the spirits of the dead only that morning.

I sighed. "The other one's Jodi Blake, the *Kama Sutra's* answer to Baba Yaga."

Brandon looked around, as if realizing how obvious he'd been, and the possible danger, but I just held tight to his arm. "Relax. And

stick close to me. I've got a black cat bone and the cat to go with it. No one should pay attention to us unless we really make a scene."

Mister Mistoffelees sat on my shoulder and purred, looking up at Brandon Kearny and fanning his whiskers, very smug and self-satisfied. And while Mr. Kearny had good cause to hate me, I could tell from his looks that he hated his cousin Padraic far more, or at least there was an older anger and rivalry than anything I'd been able to accomplish, even with my nasty little spell.

I also whispered a silent thanks to the Fates, or at least to Norna, who had somehow brought us to this pass. Our mutual enemies had both been inspired to the same scheme, and Fate had arranged it so that they were dealing with each other rather than screwing over both of us. And as I watched Brandon Kearny watching his rabbitry cousin, I saw him grit his teeth and grow an inch, clearly furious at whatever he was hearing.

I leaned my head against Mister Mistoffelees, hoping I could get the 'witch looks through her familiar's eyes' trick to work for his ears as well, and lo and behold, or really hearken, but it worked, and I could hear what Bunnyrabbit was saying that so incensed Mr. Wolf: "Oh no. You can keep it. I think I'll go to Sweden next week and finish the operation."

Jodi, who I was seeing in a weird double-exposure effect as the old hag in the minidress and the ersatz me, was clearly flummoxed. "Keep it? But it's hardly any good by itself!" She leaned forward, showing more cleavage than I possessed with even the fanciest push-up bra (at the same time as a bust as stretched out as a basketball player's socks), then took a bite of her parfait. And the way she licked the spoon alone was suggestive enough to warrant several pages in *The Perfumed Garden*. "It's brought me such pleasure already, but to not know thrill of it being wielded by its rightful owner..." Lick, suck, take a very suggestive scoop of ice cream.

"But that's not me..." the rabbit impostor protested, twitching his half-invisible ear with the large hoop earring. "Honestly, I must thank you for freeing me from that... that... that horrid *thing*. Now that I'm not a slave to its passions, I can be who I truly am." He

leaned close and personal then. “And there’s something I really must ask you—Where *did* you get that dress?”

Jodi looked completely baffled, and not just because she didn’t know where I’d gotten the black-and-white lace bridal gown (which, incidentally, had been hidden in a stuck bureau drawer in the St. Vincent De Paul Thrift Shop on Haight). But I didn’t get to hear her response, since right then the forearm under my hand suddenly increased several inches in diameter, almost lifting me into the air as Brandon Kearny puffed up into a steroided giant, while the lunchbox in my other hand almost doubled in weight.

I dug in my nails, both to keep my balance and get his attention. “We’re in public...” I hissed up at him. “Let me deal with this.”

He calmed down, or at least shrunk about an inch, and I was able to get my heels back on the ground and set the lunchbox on the counter beside the water fountain. “Watch both of them, if you could,” I said to Mister Mistoffelees, taking him off of my shoulder and setting him atop my lunch pail, where he happily perched like a temple guardian, looking up at Brandon and hopefully keeping people from paying too much attention to the hairy giant.

Call it instinct or inspiration, but whichever, I went over to the soda fountain, unbuttoning one of my gloves and turning it inside-out as I did. Then I handed my claim check to the soda jerk. “Number seventy-four?”

“Sure.” He took it and handed me a tray with a slightly melted vanilla milkshake and sundae, which I smiled thanks for and took.

Then I walked directly over towards Jodi and the Lord of Bunnydom’s table, pausing right beside him and opening my fingers slightly so as to let my glove slip free. “Oh, excuse me, could you...”

“Of course,” he said, leaning over, then paused, a look of horror spreading across his face.

“Is there a problem?” I asked innocently, and he looked up, his expression one of mixed horror and hatred and awe, with a little bit of grudging admiration thrown in.

As I’ve mentioned before, I have an extensive collection of fairytales and books of folklore, and one thing fairytales do is teach

you about faeries. And while I've never had a chance to put that knowledge to practical application before, I'd just been presented a golden opportunity.

There are lots of charms to banish faeries and faerie magick, but one of the simplest is just turning an article of clothing inside out—typically a glove—and tossing it down at the faerie's feet.

Another thing you have to remember about faeries is that they're really anal retentive about politeness and etiquette, so much so that they make Japanese businessmen look like trailer trash in comparison, and don't ask me why, but for a faerie, committing a social *faux pas* is worse than death. At least if the fairytales are to be given any credence at all.

And so when a pretty young lady drops her glove in front of a gentleman, and asks politely for him to get it for her—and it happens to be turned inside-out—well then...

Can you say Catch-22?

He couldn't even pretend not to have heard me, or saved face any other way, since he'd already offered. And caught in the grip of a horrid fascination, he reached down and touched the glove.

There was a pop, like a soap bubble bursting, and a scent like lilacs and primroses, symbols both of Youth Eternal. And the next second, the March Hare's gay cousin was coming up, his ears long as a television aerial and bent at the tips like the *Quick* bunny's. He then gave me a rabbit-toothed smile worthy of Peter Gabriel as he held out my turned glove. "Your glove, young lady?"

His smile told me exactly where he wanted me to put my glove, and how far, but I only took it from him and smiled back. "Why thank you. That's very kind of you." One thing you should also remember from fairytales is to always remember your manners around faeries, and never forget to give thanks for any favor, no matter how small. Otherwise, you're fair game and you fall into their power.

"Don't mention it," he said, smiling back at me and looking at the rest of patrons of the back section of the Ghirardelli Square ice cream parlor, who were dropping their spoons at the sight of a six-

foot-tall anthropomorphic rabbit, with the bunny ears and big feet and everything.

Jodi Blake was looking at him too, just as shocked if not more so, as she no doubt realized that she'd spent the last hour of her Walpurgis Night wasting her little masquerade on another impostor.

Then she looked to me, with my face, fixating for a moment on the Nutmeg which I was wearing in lieu of a mustard seed crystal, then widened her gaze out to take in the rest of my outfit, and I saw growing realization dawn across my double's face as she mentally stripped away the blonde wig and the seventies costume. "You..."

"Hello, Jodi," I said, then upended my ice cream tray.

The milkshake fell, the glass shattering on the marble tabletop and the shock sending the contents flying across Jodi Blake. And that's when the second bit of fun started.

Time out for a quick bit of metaphysics. Remember how I said that one of the few ways to put out the Hand of Glory was by using milk? Well, the same holds true for most black magick spells, especially things like illusions and glamours. Milk, cream, white sugar, eggs, vanilla beans and all the rest of the ingredients typically symbolizing purity and goodness can short out dark enchantments. And when you mix them all in a blender, well then...

Jodi was splattered with milkshake, the whipped cream hitting her right in the face, and the next thing her false seeming of me and my lace gown melted like the cake in MacArthur Park. Leaving Jodi as an old hag got up in a minidress that would have been daring for a cheerleader, partially covered with whipped cream and vanilla.

"Oops," I said. "How clumsy of me."

The Rabbit Lord looked at me, then at Jodi, then at me, then pointed his finger at Jodi and burst into peals of laughter, suddenly getting the joke.

"You... you... how dare you..." Jodi seethed, standing up, her left eye beginning to glow red through the whipped cream, rather like a neon cherry. "You will suffer for this indignity..."

I backed away, distancing myself from the infuriated witch and the giggling pooka and stepping back into the crowd of ice cream parlor patrons gaping at the two obviously supernatural creatures in their midst.

Jodi slammed her fist onto the marble tabletop and glared at the anthropomorphic rabbit, one eye blazing. "Silence, fool! Can't you realize it? She's made mockeries of us both!"

The rabbit looked up, pausing. "Yeah, lady. But she did it with *style!*" He looked over at me and raised a furry finger, marking one off in the air. "Points, darling! Points!"

I tried to smile in acknowledgment of this compliment at the same time as looking at the parlor customers around me and conveying to them that I hadn't the faintest idea what the strange rabbit creature was talking about, with I believe varying degrees of success, which was the moment when the Men in Black burst through the doors.

Yes, the MIBs. Trust me, but I wouldn't set out to antagonize Nephandi witches and pookas unless I knew backup was waiting, and as it was, it looked like the entire floor staff of the *Sharper Image* showroom had suddenly invaded the Ghirardelli Chocolate Factory. Mirror shades and name badges and all sorts of fancy looking electronics gizmos, and the next thing I knew, Brent was stepping past me. "Thank you for your assistance, ma'am. We'll take over from here." He pulled out his gun in a proper Remington Steele pose and got a bead on Jodi.

I stepped back behind him, and the look Jodi shot me was pure evil and death, Nephandi witches, unlike pookas, not known for their senses of humor, or being able to appreciate when they've walked right into the middle of a Technocracy sting.

Unfortunately, as I've said, witches are by nature innovative, and Jodi Blake has had more than four hundred years to practice. She glanced around the room, looking at the various patrons, then leveled one long red Lee Press-On Nail at Brandon Kearny. "You. Beast. You know what she's done to you. How she's humiliated you

worse than me or this one here. Are you willing to just stand there, or will you slake your revenge with the taste of her blood?"

Brandon Kearny, though well over seven feet tall at present, still looked relatively in control of his faculties, or at least had the presence of mind to pretend that he hadn't the faintest idea what the old bitch with the glowing red eye was talking about.

Jodi laughed spitefully. "So. I see. The rabbit's portrayal was accurate. You're really nothing more than a dickless queer, a craven pansy who—"

Jodi could obviously read men like books, or at least knew enough of the basic instruction manual that she could push the right buttons to make one lose it. With a scream of rage, Brandon Kearny rose up, his clothes somehow stretching with him this time as he became the giant werewolf, the ice cream parlor suddenly having three overtly supernatural creatures in it. And like one of Sendak's Wild Things, he roared his terrible roar and waved his terrible claws, and then, unlike one of the monsters from the children's book, very suddenly bent double, clutching his crotch, eyes bulging in agony.

I was beginning to put two and two together when I was abruptly informed of the sum and total by a wailing "Mrowwwwwww!" from Mister Mistoffelees as my cat arced across the ice cream parlor, landing in a potted palm, and bits of metal rained to the floor as I came to a full realization of what had happened.

You probably have too, but if not, let me spell it out. *Given: Tall man + gigantic penis. Next step: Giant + really gigantic penis. If so, then monster werewolf = ?*

Yes, the storage capacity of my lunch pail had been exceeded and then some, this explaining Mister Mistoffelees' precipitous launch into the palm tree, the bits of metallic shrapnel, Brandon Kearny's agony, and of course the outlandish obscenity which had landed atop a nearby table.

I suppose you've also heard the phrase 'Madness Reigned,' and while I'd never quite seen anything which I've felt fully qualified, the tableau in the ice cream parlor at that moment definitely receives my nomination. I felt as if I was posing for one of the lesser

known works of Hieronymus Bosch, or perhaps had stepped onto the set of a modernist production of the Witches' Sabbat from *Faust*, and Jodi looked at the priapic python rising from the table, then at me, and I got the first look of respect I've ever received from the woman. "Oh, *bravo...*"

The old lady, on whose table the monstrous member was poised, looked at it in shock, then glanced to one of the MIBs, or really one of the WIBs, since this was a woman in black blazer, mirror shades and radio headset, proof, I suppose, that even the NWO had to bow to pressure of the NOW.

"We're filming an episode of the *X-Files*," the Woman in Black explained. "Weren't you informed?"

The old woman looked at the animate penis sitting atop her senior sundae, then at the ancient witch, then at the Gay Freedom Day Bunny and the crippled werewolf, and she looked back to the Woman in Black. "Young lady," she said coldly, "do you take me for a fool?"

Peter Castro Street recovered from his attack of the giggles and bounced to his feet, then into the air with a jackrabbit leap, coming down, ten points, on the table with Toto. "Whoa cuz! I had no idea you were this hung!" So saying, the rabbit grabbed the mammoth member in both arms and did a back flip to land on the brass rail atop the glass screen which shielded the chocolate-making display from the rest of the room. Then he held the wiggling willie out over the conching machine, which is this apparatus with large granite rollers and pools of molten chocolate. "Anyone for chocolate-dipped bananas?"

Brandon screamed for the second time that evening, charging through the crowd, and then screamed louder as Padraic the Pooka dropped the wayward weenie into the molten chocolate and granite crushers of the conching machine.

Chaos had been achieved and then some, and there was no way the Men in Black were going to be able to explain this one away as an *X-Files* episode. And so, with the instincts of a long-term operative, Brent raised his pistol in the air and fired.

The gunshot echoed through the ice cream parlor at the same moment Brandon crashed through the glass partition and into the chocolate display, and one bouncing hare later, the bullet lodged in the electrical wiring, shorting out the overhead lights with a shower of sparks and overloading the circuit breaker, plunging the room into darkness as the conching machine ground to a halt.

I dove for the floor, hissing, “Mister Mistoffelees!” A moment later, I felt him land on my shoulders, and I suddenly saw, not just sensed, the chaos going on around me, from a cat’s-eye view. In other words, while I’m not able to see in the dark, my familiar is perfectly capable of the feat, and I got to see the Men in Black fumbling around in the blackness as the werewolf wrestled with the conching machine to free his outsize organ and the pooka caromed around the room, hurling sundaes and adding to the confusion in general.

And then I got to my feet and was face to face with the hag.

Both of Jodi’s eyes blazed now, even the milky one, and I could tell that even though she no longer possessed Mister Mistoffelees, she didn’t need his services to see me as clear as day.

“I will remember this slight, witchling,” she hissed, her breath as rancid as week-old *kim chee*, “but another time...”

With that, she dissolved into darkness, and I do mean dissolved. One moment she was there, and the next, nothing but motes of inky blackness, so dark even Mister Mistoffelees couldn’t see through them, rising in a evil cloud, then swirling up one of the ventilation ducts, pure fulgent smoke so black even a witch’s cat’s eyes couldn’t catch a reflection. And even though I’d never seen anything like it in real life, it didn’t take much for me to figure out that I was witnessing the celebrated ‘up the chimney’ trick attributed to witches flying to the Sabbat, and only later appropriated by Santa Claus.

I paused only a second, not certain whether I should thank Jodi for her reprieve or live in dread of it, and whether I should be flattered or terrified by the fact that she’d taken time out of her schedule for me on Walpurgis Night, one of a witch’s busiest nights of the year, even for one who didn’t specialize in sex magick. That

she had taken time out, and that she considered her revenge on me worth being late to kiss the Devil's butt, either spoke of the high importance she held me and/or her revenge, or the low priority she gave Satanic ass-kissing.

Then I just pushed the whole thought out of my mind, since I had other, more pressing, matters to attend to. Pressing quite literally.

I pushed through the little swing door into the chocolate room and ran over to the conching machine, which was being savaged by a crazed werewolf, not, honestly, that I really could blame him. But as I've said, I know machinery, and with Mister Mistoffelees lending me his night vision, I was able to locate the release lever for the conching bar. Allowing Brandon Kearny to free his manhood from the chocolate machine, which had threatened to do something to it akin to what the Oompa-Loompas had predicted for the entirety of Augustus Gloop.

Then he was molten-chocolate wrestling his own member, which is probably one of the more frightening experiences that might ever befall a man, while the Men in Black were getting out their night scopes. "Hold still!" I hissed. "Let me put it back on!"

With the promise of that, he held still, and the next thing I unzipped his pants and shoved the base end back in place, chocolate slippery beneath my fingers. Then that was it. It snapped right into position like an accessory for a magnetic action figure, no muss, no bother—aside from the aforementioned chocolate. Then I saw one of the Men in Black readying what was either a chain gun or the *Sharper Image* tennis ball cannon, and I didn't really think the latter was likely. "Duck!"

Brandon Kearny did, lunging for one of the remaining panels of the glass partition. But instead of shattering, he dove through, like it was a vertical pool of water. And like I was Queen Jadis in *The Magician's Nephew*, I held on, following him through the magick barrier, though unlike Jadis I had hold of something completely different from Polly's hair or Digory's earlobe, the very idea of which

would have scandalized C.S. Lewis, if not sent him into moral apoplexy.

I rolled and tumbled across grass, my wig flying one direction, Mister Mistoffelees the other, hissing, and I lost my grip on Brandon's chocolate-covered willie as well. And then I sat up and got a look around myself.

No, it was not the Wood Between the Worlds. It was a courtyard of a beautiful glass hall, with unearthly flowers and spiders everywhere, and if I had to liken it to anything, it was a lot like the enchanted palace at the end of *Dominic*, if you've ever read the book, or the land of the Vegeboo's from *Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz*. Flowers glowed with an inner light, softly illuminating the area, and overhead the night sky shone with ten thousand stars and a gibbous moon so white and pure that it more rightfully belonged in a Kay Nielsen illustration.

It was Faerieland, plain and simple, and while the only other time I've ever visited was on the fateful night of my last showdown with Jodi Blake—when I'd made a hasty exit stage left by running round *The Waydown* widdershins, screaming Merlin's charm from 'Childe Rowland'—it was pretty obviously the same place. Though unlike the spider web cathedral which had lain behind the old St. Francis, instead I sat in a Maxfield Parish garden of earthly delights, spun, I think, from the dreams and fancies which are the metaphysical truth behind Ghirardelli Square. Though I also noticed that most of the flowers had thorns and the luminescent bees sharp stings; reflections, I think, of the fact that while looking is free, if you want to take anything away, you'd best be prepared to pay the price.

A short distance down the hill, the werewolf sat up, then he looked down at himself, then looked at me and raised his claws and snarled.

I leveled a finger at him, much as Jodi had done a few minutes before, though I didn't have the Crimson Press-On Nails of Doom. "Don't even think it, buddy. Don't even think it. Unless you want it to fall off, and you'll never get it put back on again." While nowhere near Jodi's level of expertise, I do know how to press a few

buttons myself. "Now calm down and go back to normal and let's talk."

The werewolf snarled, but then got control of himself, squeezing his paws together and shrinking back down into Brandon Kearny, at least the usual human version of himself. And he was looking back down into his lap and his unzipped pants.

"This isn't my dick," he said, looking up, stricken. "It's way too big..."

I sighed. Fate had somehow conspired to put a new punch line on Sprenger and Kramer's old joke, and I really didn't know what to say. "It was too big to begin with. Would you prefer that it shrunk?"

Brandon looked down in his lap, reaching out and touching himself, then looked back up. "Well, no, but... Look at it! What did you do to me?"

I could have told him about the ten cans of *Chef Boyardee*, the popcorn, the Nephandi pet-food dishes and the upcoming maypole dances, but sometimes the truth isn't the best option. Especially when you'd prefer the blame to go somewhere else. "Don't ask me," I said. "I don't know. That looks like one of Jodi's spells, not mine." Which, in fact, was the literal truth.

"The old woman?" he asked. "The one who stank of the Wurm? She did this to me?"

"Well, it's certainly her style. And don't look at me. I was planning to give it back, and it was its usual size when I put it in my lunchbox." Yesterday, that is, but I wasn't about to tell him that. "She murders babies for fun, so I wouldn't put it past her."

Brandon Kearny stood up, looking down at himself, and I refrained from jokes about 'My Grandma, what a big...' no matter how apropos, leaving the rude comments and catcalls and cries of shock and wonder to the mermaids in the marble basin just down the hill.

Their skin was bronzed as California bathing beauties, their scales green as verdigris, and even without their gurgling voices, it was easy to peg them as water nixies and guess that they corresponded to the Ghirardelli Square mermaid fountain. And while I

couldn't understand the words they were saying, there was no mistaking the tone, or the finger pointing, or the whispered comments and giggles. Girl talk is girl talk, regardless of species, and the same body language and attitudes are used by women the world over when they're checking a guy out, especially one as... remarkable... as Mr. Kearny.

Brandon only responded by blushing furiously and turning his back to them, eliciting more even giggles and girlish chatter, but the supernatural's new answer to Jeff Stryker only muttered, "Nymphs..." and shuddered. Then he shoved himself down into his pants and endeavored to zip up his fly, as if hoping that might keep him safe from the water sprites, or maybe just my Lorena Bobbit spell.

Then, doing his very best to ignore the bevy of mermaids, Brandon Kearny looked down at me and my familiar. Mister Mistoffelees had just come and taken up residence in my lap, whether to force me to stand my ground or just to get his paws off of the dew-soaked grass I'm not at leisure to say, and I was there, looking up at a known werewolf who loomed over me, half-covered with chocolate and with his fly threatening to come unzipped any second.

He leaned close and sniffed the air, and I was glad, as I've said before, that I finished with my monthlies a week and a half ago. "You don't stink of the Wyrms, but I don't recognize your spirit either. What manner of creature is it, and which of the Triat does it serve?"

Mister Mistoffelees looked up at him, then, after seeing whatever it was he wanted to see, turned away, licking his paw and beginning to wash his right ear. "You will find, Mistress," he purred, patently ignoring the glowering lycanthrope, "that werewolves can be exceptionally rude, as is the case with most dogs. They also," He switched paws and ears, "suffer from an unfortunate number of preconceived notions and false perceptions as to the nature of the universe."

Brandon Kearny, upon hearing himself being spoken of in the abstract, and not even in the third person, growled, but at least looked directly at my familiar.

Mister Mistoffelees finished his washing, and then, and only then, returned the werewolf's gaze. "At present," he said slowly, "I serve only Mistress Penelope, and my own amusement. Not, might I add, that it should be any concern of yours." He looked back to me and blinked. "You will also find, Mistress, that werewolves possess an exaggerated sense of self-importance, believing themselves to be the Chosen protectors of the Earth Mother. Which is peculiar, since you would think that the Earth Mother would announce such a fact to the universe at large, were it true, or even worthy of attention."

Mister Mistoffelees, as I've shown before, possesses an uncanny ability to touch on raw nerves, and that moment was no exception. Brandon Kearny snarled, but I leveled my finger at his crotch, making a 'Down boy!' gesture. He flinched, and his growl trailed off into actual words: "We hear Gaia cry out, we go to Her aid..."

"Which is commendable," Mister Mistoffelees remarked, "but unless I am mistaken, I believe that makes you more 'self-appointed' than 'Chosen.'"

I patted Mister Mistoffelees, scratching him behind the ears so he would purr and not make any more catty remarks, no matter how accurate or enlightening they might be. Familiars, as I've said, sometimes cause as many problems as they solve. "Listen," I said, hoping to reach at least some sort of peace, "let's not go there right now, okay? But whatever the case, I think you're pretty clear on the fact that neither I nor my cat are bent on world destruction, so let's just get that out of the way too. That alright?" I didn't wait for any more response than a grudging sneer before I added, "So what's your problem?"

Brandon Kearny scowled, but appeared convinced—at least fairly convinced—that neither I nor Mister Mistoffelees were villains from the *Captain Planet* series, and that we didn't have any designs on Gaia, other than perhaps to ask whether or not She really was voice-acted by Whoopi Goldberg. "Why are you working for one of the leeches?"

Since I don't know any lawyers or tax collectors, I could only assume he was talking about Alexander. "Because he's a nice guy,

and he needed my help.” I looked at Brandon in what I hoped was challenge. “Crazy werewolves murdered his wife, then tried to kidnap his children. Next question?”

Brandon looked ready to hulk-out again, but restrained everything but his zipper. “You don’t understand. It wasn’t like that. He was feeding from her, killing her...”

“So you finished the job. Oh yes, that makes perfect sense.” I rolled my eyes in exasperation. “What happened? Did Gaia tell you that you couldn’t have any vampires in your ‘Friends and Family’ calling circle, or did you come up with the idea on your own?”

“It was an accident!” He glared at me, veins standing out on his forehead from his effort to stay under control, while tears began to run from his eyes and his zipper came undone the rest of the way.

Unfortunately, I’d just risked death because of his bad temper, so my patience was at an all time low, and my bravery, or at least foolhardiness, was becoming correspondingly high. And even if it wasn’t my time of the month, I can still be a cold bitch when I’m angry, or when I hear someone pitying themselves and believing their own line of bullshit. “Which means it wasn’t Alexander’s fault, no matter how much you want it to be. If you’d left him alone, Kate would still be alive, and you wouldn’t have to wallow in guilt.” I petted my familiar, and Mister Mistoffelees purred in catty agreement. “What it sounds like to me is that you want to put your own personal demons to rest, and the only way you’re going to do that is to finish the job you botched in the first place. Once Alexander’s really dead, not just partially, you can weep a little, beat your breast, say you’re sorry, then get on with your life.” I glared up at him, trying very hard not to look him in the crotch. “Leaving Alex alone is just too much trouble. It means you’ll have to admit you were wrong in the first place, and that you’ll have someone who’ll always be around to remind you of your guilt.”

The cage of logic was tight and inescapable, or at very least I’d backed him into a corner. But as Peter’s experience with the rat had proven, when you corner a dangerous animal, expect it to go on the

attack. “Listen to me—” he began, blue eyes blazing, voice soft as silk and twice as seductive.

“No,” I said, cutting him short, “you listen to *me*. You try that silver-tongue on me one more time, mister, and your willie won’t be the only thing that falls off on the floor. And I’ll let my cat play with both of them.”

I’d meant it more than half as bluster, but then my familiar said, “I’d like that very much, Mistress, thank you,” and I realized that my threat was not so hollow as I’d thought at first. After all, if you could steal one body part, then you could just as reasonably steal another. “Please continue as you were, lycanthrope...” Mister Mistoffelees purred. “It’s been over a hundred years since I’ve had a tongue, and the quick and agile ones are the most sport.” My cat snicked his claws out, ready to get any incautious tongues that might be appearing in front of him.

Brandon Kearny clapped both hands over his mouth, then, when my cat turned his green-eyed gaze elsewhere, used one to endeavor to cover his crotch, looking like a combination of the monkey figures for *Speak No Evil* and *Fuck No Evil* they sell in Chinatown (though admittedly the latter is usually meant as a joke).

Whatever. When a witch has a sudden epiphany, she doesn’t stop to pat herself on the back, she uses it. And if I could play ‘Cat got your tongue,’ then this also explained why ‘Got your nose!’ strikes such primal terror into small children. Not to mention providing authentication to the creepy old fairytale ‘The Witches Who Stole Eyes.’

I pointed two fingers, Moe-style, at Brandon’s. “The same goes double for your peepers if you try the Sad Puppy-Dog Look or the Smoldering Glance or whatever it is you call that other trick you just tried.”

Brandon Kearny did not have enough hands to do *See No Evil*, *Speak No Evil*, and *Fuck No Evil* all at once, and so he finally gave up, collapsing into a heap and wrapping himself in his arms, like one of those Balinese contortionist-monk croquet balls you find in the

fashionable import shops. Excepting, of course, that Mr. Kearny was life-size, Caucasian, and dressed in a Pendleton shirt and Levis. "But Alexander's dead..." he whimpered from under his arms, then finally dared a look at me. "It's unnatural..." He made the Sad Puppy-Dog Eyes, though without any supernatural force behind them this time, so I let it slide.

I petted my cat, lips pursed, about as prim as a British spinster, which is to say, your classic prissy white witch. "And I suppose werewolves who step through plate glass into Faerieland are the most normal thing in the world?"

He sat hunched in the grass, looking across at me and biting his lip, then, after realizing that I wasn't poised to follow the lyrics of 'All of Me' as if it were an instruction manual ('Take my lips' and so forth), he unfolded himself a bit, then took a moment to redo his zipper and blushed furiously. "It's not the same thing," he said softly while the mermaids giggled in amusement. "We're part of the balance, part of the natural order. Leeches break the cycle, stealing their life from the living."

"At least Alexander hasn't killed anyone in a fit of pique." I watched Brandon flinch at that little snipe, but then shrugged. "But from what you're saying, your major objection is that Alex has to go around biting people on the neck to survive?"

"Well, yes..."

I smiled in triumph. "Well then, I've taken care of that little problem. I'm a witch, and I figured out how to turn butter into blood. Alex doesn't need to worry about going out biting people on the neck anymore."

Brandon looked at me, slightly credulous.

I shrugged, glancing to his lap, then met his eyes once he'd followed where mine led and back up. "You know I can do some pretty serious juju if I put my mind to it..."

He blushed and looked away, covering his crotch with his hands, then glanced back nervously. "Butter?"

"Into blood. Innocent virgin blood, to be specific." I grimaced. "Yeah, I know, it's a pretty wonky spell. But that's what I specialize

in, and what can I say? It works, and that's the proof in the pudding." Or the blood in the butter, but same net result. "With me on the case, the worst evil Alex does is pay a witch to shoplift a few dairy products. Which is a little eccentric, I'll admit, but hardly cause for him to lose custody of his children, let alone justify a death warrant."

From his expression, I could tell that I'd just done a pretty serious head-trip on Mr. Kearny, and all he had to do to check my bona fides was pat the front of his pants. "But... but he's *dead*..."

I realized I'd have to do a little more creative lawyering if I wanted to get him to see it my way. "You're Irish, right?"

He looked unsure of what I was getting at, but nodded anyway. "Second generation, but..."

"Fine," I said, cutting him off. "That's just fine. But you believe that the wishes of the dead should be respected, right? And that the bodies of the dead should never be desecrated, and their spirits should never be troubled?"

"Well, yeah," he said. "Of course..."

I gestured, presenting my open palm and the logical conclusion. "Well then, it seems fairly obvious. Alexander is dead. He wishes his kids to live with him. And since ripping his head off with your claws would be desecrating his corpse, you shouldn't do that. Or do anything else to him, since it's pretty obvious that that's troubling his spirit. Right?"

"No!" he shouted, growing about an inch.

"No?" I echoed. "It's alright to ignore the wishes of the dead and desecrate their corpses? Oh goody! Let's go rototill a graveyard and build condominiums."

His face turned furry around the edges, and he dug one hand into the grass with the effort to control himself and not give me an excuse to disassemble him for parts. "No..." he grated out, "not that either. You're twisting it all around..."

"Am I? Or are you just spouting dogma?" I petted my cat, then took a passion flower from a nearby vine, carefully removing the thorn, an action which I suppose roughly corresponded to shoplift-

ing. "Did you decide Alex was pure evil on your lonesome, or did Gaia tell you? Does She really sound like Whoopi Goldberg?"

There are some comments that just catch people out of left field, and that last one was one of them. Or at least so to judge from Brandon Kearny's expression, and I could only assume that he'd never subjected himself to *Captain Planet and the Planeteers* or the *Action Bill Adventure Hour*. "No," he said at last. "Gaia has never spoken to me..."

"So you learned it in Sunday School?"

Brandon growled, but nodded. "I was taught it, but it's also something I know in my heart. The Garou have fought the leeches for centuries. They are ancient and evil, and even though some fight it, the Wyrms are in their blood. Eventually they become part of the darkness in which they hide."

"Oh, I see," I said, continuing to plait my thorny daisy-chain of shoplifted flowers. "You've learned your catechism well. But tell me, if we're going to believe all the stories, how many little girls have you eaten lately? Or do you only eat slow old grandmothers?"

He snarled, and his nose became much more like the Big Bad Wolf's than a human's. "How— You— That is our ancient shame! But the Impergium is at an end! We no longer hunt our human brothers, not for centuries..."

"What about your cousin?" I asked. "Was that just a mistake? Or did you just go back to the Julian Calendar for a few days?" I twined a phosphorescent columbine with a nasturtium, realizing a moment later that I'd subconsciously united 'Folly' with 'Patriotism,' a sentiment applicable to both the real world and the current situation. And this just after the passion flowers, which stood for 'Religious Fervor.'

I looked up. "Listen Brandon, I don't really care what you think or what you've been told. I've read *Dracula*, and I've seen all the Hammer flicks, and I don't care what your dogma, or werewolfma, or whatever you call it, says either, since it just sounds like more of the same. All I can say is that I've met the vampires, and I've met Alexander, and while there are definitely bloodsuckers out there

who deserve to be locked in a tanning salon, the majority seem no better or worse than anybody else. Aside from their drinking problem.” I ripped a thorn from a foxglove, where it had no business being, then on second thought tossed the flower aside anyway, ‘Insincerity’ hardly one of my sentiments at the moment. “To be completely honest, I’ve come to the conclusion that all the stories are like the evening news—they tell you about the assholes and monsters because that’s what sells, not because they’re what you’re going to meet. From everything I’ve seen, the only thing that Alexander has in common with Dracula, aside from a pair of fangs, is a little bit of class and charm, a good wardrobe, and some really weird servants. And that’s it.”

Brandon Kearny did not appear convinced, except perhaps by the comment about “weird servants,” myself being a prime example, though at least he looked a little less sure of himself. Though not much. “Please, you don’t understand...”

“What don’t I understand?” I viciously twisted a primrose, for ‘Believe me’ and ‘The Impressionability of Youth.’ “Ancient propaganda? Supernatural blood-feuds? Petty lies and slander?”

“No,” he said, shrinking all the way back to human form, “Melanie and Malory. They’re Kin. My pack is sworn to protect them. And we don’t know, but they may be of the changing breed as well...”

I grimaced. “With as often as you’ve lost it, I think I would have noticed if either of them were in the habit of changing into wolfchildren.”

“It wouldn’t happen now,” he whispered, voice still clear in the fey silence of the night. “Not until much later, not until their teens.”

“Then they’ll deal with it then, the same as zits and prom dresses.” I shrugged. “Alexander is hardly the type to disown them just because they start baying at the moon, and you can bet money that it’s something he and Kate discussed before you killed her.”

Brandon flinched, his guilt almost a physical weapon every time I jabbed him with it, and I really didn’t need the giggling from the peanut gallery as the mermaids down the hill made their own

interpretation of the show. All it took was a look to my cat, and Mister Mistoffelees obliged by peering down at the water nixies, his green eyes glowing as he hissed. Rather abruptly, the mermaids went back to minding their own business, which seemed to mainly consist of suckling merbabies and tormenting frogs.

I stroked my cat fondly and looked back to Kate's violent cousin, though he still didn't meet my eyes. "That's another thing. I know you don't think a dead man makes a fit parent, but I'm sure you at least believe that people have a right to appoint a guardian in the event of their death. Well, Alexander's dead, and he's asked me to look after the children. So until he appoints someone else, I'm it, and you'll have to negotiate with me." I scratched Mister Mistoffelees once behind the ears, then took the chain back up, adding a wild daisy for 'Introspection.' "The way I see it right now, it's in the children's best interest to be raised at their father's house. That simple. And as for contact with their mother's family, what they do once they turn eighteen is their business. But anything before that I'll view as an attempted kidnapping, and you know I take a rather dim view of kidnappers..."

Brandon looked up at me, blue eyes plaintive in the pale light of the faerie moon. "But they may need guidance..."

"Then leave me your card. Their father is very organized, and he won't lose it. And if the kids ever really need to talk with you before they turn eighteen, you can expect a call." I completed the garland, twisting the last of it together, and in the processing stabbed my thumb on a sprig of raspberry I'd thrown in for Remorse.

I winced, sticking my thumb in my mouth. 'Remorse' was right. I was sorry I'd included it, but then again, there's no way to remove the thorns from a bramble short of throwing it away, plus the inclusion had inadvertently blooded my creation, and as I've said before, blood always helps to increase a weaving's power.

I set the blossoms firmly atop one knee, their stems plaited into a maiden's crown, which, if you know the Language of Flowers and read the chain in order, translated roughly as *Get a clue, butthead!* I took another moment, arranging it all to my liking, then looked at

Brandon Kearny straight, giving him my steeliest, witchiest gaze. “But if you’re just wanting to talk to the children and tell them your side of the story about their mother’s death so they won’t hate you, don’t bother. Even though he could have, at any time, Alexander’s never told the children how their mother died. I think because he knew they’d meet you eventually, and he didn’t want them to grow up hating someone their mother loved.”

“He... never told them?”

“No.” I adjusted the sprig of raspberry, flowers white, fruit loud as a Bronx cheer, then surreptitiously squeezed my thumb and smeared it with another drop of blood. “He never told them. Alexander loves them too much to play that sort of game, and even though it’s more than you deserve, he never did anything to hurt you either. I mean, it’s probably never occurred to you, but if he can afford to hire me to play nanny, then he could hire someone like Jodi to turn you into a pomeranian, or just send out a few hit men with silver bullets and have done with it.

“Here,” I said at last, holding up the flower wreath, “this is for you.”

“What—” he said, “what is it?”

“It’s a crown for the King of Fools.” So saying, I reached out and jammed it down on his head. “Congratulations, Your Majesty. You’re this year’s prize idiot. I could call you a number things much worse, but a witch is a lady whenever possible, and anyway, Kate asked me to be charitable.”

Brandon sat there, the wreath of flowers askew, the faerie moon of May Eve shining down on him. My spell was cast, for whatever good it might do; the weaving of daisy chains and tussy-mussies is just a twopenny charm any child can learn, but then again, children remember things most adults forget, and binding a man with chains of flowers is old magick, especially on this night. And while enslaving the will of another is usually considered part of the black arts, I’d been angry, and all I’d woven into the chain was a ‘Heads up!’ telling him to take a good clear look at who he was and what

he'd done, and draw his own conclusions from there, same as I'd told him to his face.

Assuming my spell even worked. I'd begun it on instinct, more to have something to do with my hands than anything else, and for all I knew, I'd just braided together a bunch of key chains and 'Souvenir of Ghirardelli Square' postcards, or at least their spiritual reality. And I had my reservations as to whether you could make the Language of Flowers apply to tourist baubles, which meant, God help me, that in the end I might just be depending on my own non-magickal powers of eloquence and persuasion.

That's the trouble with subtle magick and superstitions and all of the little one-and-two-and-threepenny charms I tend to favor: When they don't work, you only know that they didn't, and if they do, you have no way of knowing if anything you did made the slightest bit of difference, or if things would have turned out the same even if you hadn't done what you did. *See a pin and pick it up...*

However things actually came to pass, and whether it was my words or my Words that finally did the trick, I think, more than anything else, it comes down to this: While ignorance and bullshit can accomplish a great deal of evil, the truth holds an even greater power, and so does simple common sense. And I have to thank Kate's love and faith for reminding me of the fact, but there's a difference between the wicked and the simply misguided. When faced with the truth, the wicked just continue with business as usual, but the misguided...

Well, I've gone into a great deal of detail about Brandon Kearny's inability to control his temper, but I think the same is true of his other emotions, at least his capacity for sorrow and regret. With a howl as much wolf as it was human, he fell to the grass, sobbing and keening, a wail of mourning shivering through the air and making all the flowers, not just the ones in his crown, quiver in sympathy. And I felt the awful, blood-chilling calm you get when you know you've triumphed, but you can't in good conscience take any joy in it because you know the pain you've caused.

It's a terrible and frightening sight to see a big man laid low, one of those awful spectacles because it shows you that no matter how strong or powerful a person might be physically, the heart is just as fragile, the soul just as easily savaged and torn. Brandon Kearny lay there on the grass, whimpering like a puppy at the realization of what he'd done, a sound not quite human and all the more terrible for it.

I had the urge to cradle his head in my lap and smooth away his tears, and while I've done a lot of stupid things in my life, one thing Sister Mary did her best to teach me was that you should never shy away from an urge to do a good deed, especially comforting the sick and injured. Soul sickness is part of that, and if Kate could forgive her cousin for killing her, then I certainly could do no less, especially when the worst thing that had happened to me was having the crap scared out of me outside *Neiman-Marcus* and losing a handful of shopping bags.

As they also say, 'Be careful what you wish for, you may get it,' and now that my desire had been granted, however that had come to pass, I'd better be prepared to deal with the consequences. "Hush, it's all right. It's all right... Kate forgives you."

Unfortunately, comforting words like that only help so much, and after that what it takes is time, and a shoulder to cry on, or at least a lap. My seventies skirt would never be the same, in between tears, blood, chocolate, and faerie grass stains, but everybody has sacrifices they make for the cause, and I really shouldn't be one to make complaints.

At last, it was done, the last of the gasping sobs were spent, and I desperately wished I had my lunchbox, along with its usual contents, which included a purse-pack of Kleenex. But there is always something to be said for instinct, and I reached out and caught a beautiful gossamer moon moth by one wing. Then I shook it, and with a magician's flutter, it suddenly was revealed to be nothing more than an exquisite hand-painted silk scarf with an equally exquisite fifty dollar price tag.

I would have to remember this technique next time I needed something and didn't have the requisite cash, but be that as it may, I had the handkerchief I wanted, and as I wiped away Brandon's tears and let him blow his nose, my Totoro waddled up.

Just so you know, but a Totoro is a Japanese forest spirit, which looks like a bipedal chinchilla with pointy ears and a Cheshire cat grin, and he also happens to be the star of a really cute Japanese children's cartoon. He's also my change-purse, which is made in the shape of a pint-size plush Totoro with a duffel bag thrown over one shoulder (and firmly stitched down), and he usually resides inside my lunch pail or dangles just outside it from the string on his head.

This time, however, he was waddling up, having survived the destruction of my lunchbox and the ensuing chaos in the ice cream parlor, and having also made the transition to Faerie, or whatever else you prefer to call the B-side of reality. Unless, of course, this was his metaphysical aspect, and my change-purse was lying in a corner somewhere in the real world, waiting for me to pick it up. Regardless, I watched as he waddled up to a small stump, bowed formally, set down his duffel and produced three golden acorns. He dropped them into a hole in the stump, then picked up a number of smaller seeds, which vanished into the sack before he slung it back over his shoulder.

He then looked at Brandon's maiden's crown, eyes glittering like an appraiser's, then took out another acorn and two popcorn kernels, tossing them down the hole in the stump as well. Yes, boys and girls, all magick has its price, but I'd never considered until that moment it could be quite so literal. However, my Totoro only bowed to the werewolf, then waddled over to sit beside Mister Mistoffelees.

"You have potent spirit allies," Brandon remarked, with that tone of respect and reverence you only get when someone's been trained to kowtow on reflex, and I gathered that werewolves have a healthy dose of esteem both for spirits and for those who have a lot of them for friends.

"A girl does what she can to get by." I shrugged, nonchalant as I could be under the circumstances, and trying my damndest to take

it all in stride, since while I've talked to my change-purse on more than one occasion, it had never really occurred to me that he might actually be *listening*, at least on a conscious level. And while the case of sentience was fairly obvious with Mister Mistoffelees and Thing, they were both holdovers from the Brothers Grimm, so I didn't have as much trouble dealing with the concept as I might have otherwise. But now, with Totoro today, and the Stutz the day before, I was beginning to wonder how long it would be before I put both feet fully into the wonderful world of Disney and started to share the stage with dancing furniture and musically gifted porcelain.

Then again, I have only myself to blame for turning my life into a remake of *The Love Bug* and *Herbie Rides Again*. Politeness and promise-keeping are the rule with spirits, the same as with faeries—and for that matter *Miss Manners* and proper etiquette—and if you're nice to someone, or some *thing*, then you really shouldn't be all that shocked when it stops and says "Thank you." Captain Kangaroo and Grandfather Clock illustrated that point nicely enough when I was a kid, and if you need any more examples, just read your fairytales.

Then there's the matter of promises. Speaking as a witch with "potent spirit allies" (and there's a concept that's going to take a while for me to deal with), the last thing you want to do with spirits is tweak them off. Especially if you're operating under contract. "Listen, Brandon, I, uh, well, I've got to go. I've got your number, but..." I trailed off, looking to Mister Mistoffelees and giving him a significant glance.

"My Mistress has promised me an ice cream sundae," Mister Mistoffelees finished for me, "a treat which has been almost unpardonably detained. Yet since you now have everything you might possibly require, lupine, I see no reason why I should wait any longer." He returned my look. "You *did* promise, Mistress."

"Of course, Mister Mistoffelees." I gathered him up, along with my Totoro, and stood, smiling at Brandon so as to beg his indulgence. "Um..."

No words were really needed from me, as my familiar gave a looked of haughty disdain to Brandon Kearny, playing bad cat to my good witch.

Brandon looked down at the grass at his feet. "Listen, if you... Just call me sometime, okay?" He looked up, blue eyes plaintive in the moonlight, and I knew there was a great deal more he wanted to talk about.

"Be assured, wolf, that my Mistress will whistle if she ever has need of you." Mister Mistoffelees meowed then, with a tone of finality which said, *The audience is at an end*, and I gave Brandon an apologetic smile and turned away, wandering off into the faerie garden which somehow corresponded to Ghirardelli Square. Brandon Kearny didn't follow, and I gave Mister Mistoffelees a scratch behind the ears in way of thanks for his having put an end to matters, as well as his extreme patience in regards to his contractually specified delicacy of choice.

My familiar only stretched his neck and rubbed back against my hand. "Extra whipped cream, if you please, Mistress."

I most assuredly did please, but locating ice cream in Faerieland is another matter altogether. I don't know if you've done much tripping around in Looking-Glass Country, but if you have, then you've probably discovered that almost everything in it is a metaphysical reflection of something in the real world. Though like omens and prophecies, most mirrorings follow the bible's rule of "in a glass, darkly." In other words, while at first glance the Twilight Zone bears scant resemblance to the everyday world, after you look at it long enough, the shadow reality begins to make a perverse sort of logic, at least so long as you're up on your symbolism and have a well developed sixth sense, not to mention a witch's intuition.

The patterned bowers and hedgerows of the flipside of Ghirardelli Square reminded me a lot of the descriptions of Albertus Magnus's enchanted garden, the one where all four seasons existed at the same time. Or at least I was able to locate a row of bushes covered with snow and dancing sprites that looked like something from an Advent calendar, and more importantly, seemed to correspond to

the location of the ice cream counter, or at least where I remembered it being.

“Um...” I said, “a vanilla sundae, please? Extra whipped cream?”

Before you could hum the Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy, the sprites spun with the precision of a ballet corps, one catching my Totoro’s tossed acorn while the rest pulled out a frozen maple leaf, heaping it with snow-covered white orchids and icing it over with multiple plumes of frost from their wands.

The popular theory with faeries, sprites, spirits et cetera says that most of them have no fixed shape, and like the devil from Marlowe’s *Faust* (or Q from *Star Trek*), simply appear in a form that’s pleasing to you, or at least that you can comprehend. Which probably explains why I was witnessing a cross between Arthur Rackham and the San Francisco Ballet Holiday Gala. Regardless, I took the proffered dish, and then the glamour broke and it changed into exactly what was ordered and promised: a vanilla sundae, extra whipped cream.

“Thank you,” I said, the sprites bowing and going into an elegant end-of-production dance, then I turned and located a flat marble boulder which was suspiciously reminiscent of the parlor’s tables, setting the sundae and Mister Mistoffelees down atop it.

Mister Mistoffelees didn’t thank me, but then again, that’s a cat’s prerogative, and he had been more than patient as familiars judge these things. After sniffing the sundae and deciding that it met with his approval, he began to lick at the whipped cream, whiskers raised fastidiously.

I, for my part, did not order anything. Not only was I not hungry, but it is common wisdom that you don’t eat anything in Faerieland, since if you do, you either stay forever or for seven years and a day, depending, I suppose, on the local legal codes and how full Underhill is at the moment. Rather like the Hotel California or the Home by the Sea.

As for why my familiar was chowing down on faerie confections, since he was certainly old enough to know better, well, let me just say that the rules obviously don’t apply to cats, and I would pay

money to see a faerie try to tell Mister Mistoffelees he couldn't go exactly where he pleased. I believe it would be a very short conversation, and moreover, there are those who believe that all cats are of faerie blood to begin with, and therefore aren't bound by the laws that faeries set for mortals. Or at very least they don't apply to a cat such as Mister Mistoffelees.

My familiar continued to work on his sundae, and I just sat down on the mossy rock beside the stone table, looking to my Totoro, who really did look like a forest spirit from the cartoon, as opposed to the gray velour change-purse of an hour before. "I don't suppose you know where I could get a pair of fuzzy dice and a set of replacement mirrors?"

I did not expect to be answered, but then again, I hadn't expected my change-purse to be listening on the occasions when I'd said, "Well, let's see how much money we've got left..." either. With a businesslike nod, my Totoro bounced out of the crook of my arm and scurried off through the underbrush, and I sat there, in a relative state of shock at my new status as 'Mistress of the Spirits.'

My Number-One Spirit looked up from his sundae then, licking off the cream which had stuck to his whiskers despite his best efforts. I refrained from comment, and Mister Mistoffelees said nothing of it either, only, "Thank you, Mistress. This is most satisfactory." He licked off the last dot of cream. "You uphold your bargains well...." He cocked his head then, green eyes glittering.

Being able to judge your familiar's moods is a talent every witch should do her best to cultivate. "Except...?"

"Except," Mister Mistoffelees said, tilting his head down but looking up at me coyly, "while I am most pleased to find that you have learned to share my perceptions, and may thus better understand my needs, I am also a rather private creature, and do not casually allow such a degree of intimacy." He put his head up then, eyes bright and innocent. "When I did this thing for Mistress Jodilyn, your predecessor, she, in exchange, favored me with a suck from her third teat...."

I raised an eyebrow. "I don't have an extra nipple."

Mister Mistoffelees blinked, twin moons reflected in his eyes. “A third teat isn’t strictly necessary...”

I raised the other eyebrow, then winced. Just so you know, but the third nipple, also known as the infamous ‘Witch’s Tit’ (as in “colder than a”) or ‘The Devil’s Mark’ (as mentioned in *Type O Negative’s* ‘Black No. 1,’ among other places), is also said to be insensible to pain, a quirk which the Witchfinder General and his Witch Prickers are said to have taken full advantage of during the Burning Times—not, I suppose, even needing the retractable pins and trick daggers they have in all the museums if there really are such things as nerveless nipples. Which always seemed like a real Achilles’ heel to me, but now that Mister Mistoffelees had brought up the subject, being insensible to pain would be real plus if you had a cat gnawing on your tit.

Nevertheless, I wasn’t that eager to join Jodilyn Blake in the Triple-Nipple Club, even if it meant I would be among such august company as Anne Boleyn, Marky Mark, and Flea from the *Chili Peppers* (check out a few back-issues of *Rolling Stone* if you don’t believe me). Baron would probably jump at the chance—after all, it would be something else to pierce—and Blackrose would consider it just *too* outré, but call me old-fashioned, but I preferred to have just two, thank you, and both of them in working order.

My familiar, however, still looked expectant and hopeful. “Does it have to be my blood?”

“No,” Mister Mistoffelees allowed, “the milk of your breasts would be equally acceptable.”

Except, his expression added, *both* would be preferred, if at all possible. I didn’t need him to explain the symbolism—blood of my blood, milk of my breasts, et cetera—but negotiation is the name of the game with spirits, especially familiars, and I wasn’t about to grow an extra tit just to amuse my cat. Especially one that was ice cold.

I smiled, attempting to be my most diplomatic. “Well, Mister Mistoffelees,” I began, “while that may have been what you did with Jodi, she’s just a *teensy* bit behind the times. This is the nineties, and very few mothers breast feed anymore. Now we buy our third nipples

at the supermarket and run them through the dishwasher.” I winced, inwardly this time, frightened by how very little things had changed since the Middle Ages if you just looked at them in the right light. “What if I just do the hot-buttered blood trick I’m already doing for Alexander, then put it in a baby bottle? One of the *Hello Kitty* or *Winki-Pinki* ones I can get at the *Sanrio* store? I could even heat or ice the nipple to any temperature you like.” I tried my best to make it sound inviting, adding, “I’ll even dress you up in baby clothes and put you in a cradle, like they did in *The Three Lives of Thomasina*.”

Being able to read one’s familiar, as I’ve said, is a talent all witches should strive to cultivate, and I knew my cat was a sucker for his favorite movie. “Mistress Jodilyn never dressed me up in baby clothes....”

This, dollars to donuts, was because it had probably never occurred to *la beldame sans merci* that her familiar would like it, let alone that she could sell him on the idea. “I have a lovely lace christening gown you could wear. And I’ll make the bonnet myself. What color ribbons would you like?”

Mister Mistoffelees paused, considering. “Red,” he said at last. “It will accent my fur. But it must be silk. And you will have to sing to me.”

“Of course,” I conceded quickly, “any song that I know.”

Mister Mistoffelees purred and rubbed against me, eyes closed. “The offer is appreciated, Mistress Penelope. Consider our compact amended.”

I did, adding the baby clothes and bottle of blood to the fresh cream, Disney videos, and eel and quail-egg sushi he’d already contracted for, and a minute later, my Totoro waddled back, dragging the promised pair of fuzzy dice, along with a validated parking stub and a large floppy pink shoulder bag. He looked at it wistfully with his button eyes, and I nodded, knowing the expression. “Yes, that’s fine. I need a new purse anyway.”

The Totoro bounced happily, then pitched a volley of acorns back into the bushes, and I didn’t want to inquire too deeply into

how many he had left in the sack (quite certain that once I opened my change-purse in the real

world, I'd find my cash supply heavily decimated, along with a sheaf of ATM stubs, since there was no doubt a nut tree somewhere in the gardens which would correspond to the Ghirardelli Square Automatic Teller Machine).

Regardless, I took the purse and admired it, yanking off the price tag and tossing it away unread. There are some things you're happier not knowing, and fond as I am of Ghirardelli Square, it is *not* my hunting ground of choice in which to play Queen of the Bargain Shoppers. But the bag was otherwise nice, soft pink quilted cotton with a reinforced shoulder strap and incredible volume, one of those retro-seventies numbers that have enough storage capacity to smuggle a medium-size dog, which meant that there was more than ample room for my Totoro as he hopped in and made himself comfortable.

It also looked suspiciously like the shoulder bag of Kiki, the little witch who's the heroine of *Kiki's Delivery Service* (done by the same studio that did *Totoro*), and while I didn't have the broomstick, I already had the black cat, and it would be easy enough to get the red bow and slippers. I also wondered how much knowledge Japanese forest spirits have of the merchandising items upon which they are based, and those item's co-features, but as I've said, there are some matters you don't want to inquire into too deeply. I had my bag, I had my fuzzy dice, and once Mister Mistoffelees was finished with his sundae, I had my purring and contented familiar to place in said bag as I got up and went in search of the parking garage, wondering exactly what it corresponded to here, and whether there was any way of getting Stutzie's mirrors fixed as promised, or at least as Mister Mistoffelees had recommended.

Most magick, as I've been pointing out, doesn't so much consist of knowing how to work a particular spell as being able to figure out how to get something done when you need to, and using what comes to hand. I'd never really given overmuch thought to the spirit world, for all that I've visited it once before and had several conversations

with Peter since then. But Peter, as I've said, can be rather close-lipped, and on my sole previous sojourn into the Realm of Faerie, I'd been more concerned with freaking out and saving my skin than I had been in playing metaphysical tourist. This time came under similar circumstances, but I'd seen it before, so it didn't come as quite so much of a shock. A shock, yes, but nothing so bad as the first time.

Then again there was the "potent spirit allies" business. I'd never really given the matter much thought, but it seemed that Sister Mary Innocent's advice to always be polite and well mannered and to treat everything with respect (unless common sense dictated otherwise), seemed to be paying off. My Totoro was fulfilling his duty as personal banker beyond all reasonable expectations, and it seemed easy enough to get the spirits to do whatever I needed, just so long as I minded my manners and remembered the white magick words "Please" and "Thank you" that I'd stressed to Malory.

My head was also spinning with alchemical imagery and theory, specifically Paracelsus and Abra-Melin and their writings on the Elementals. You've probably already read all this before, but to reiterate the standard doctrine, there are the Gnomes of Earth, the Salamanders of Fire, the Undines of Water and the Sylphs of the Air. All very standard Western Hermeticism, nothing to write home about or even really worth mentioning, since it dates back well before even Theophrastus Bombastus Von Hohenheim (and you can see why he renamed himself Paracelsus) and his numerous bombastic writings, and likewise with *The Book of the Sacred Magick of Abra-Melin the Mage*, a.k.a. the *Reader's Digest* condensed guide to the Cabala. Everyone knows about the elementals, even if they haven't seen them up close and personal, so I really didn't have any trouble believing in gnomes, sylphs, salamanders and especially undines, given the giggling nixies down in the mermaid fountain. But I have to ask you where, exactly, in that sort of cosmology, do you fit snow sprites, let alone sugarplum fairies?

Right. Greater minds than mine have no doubt already wrassled with the problem, and probably ended up with something between

Shinto and *Fantasia*. But nevertheless, the practical application to all this theory is that if you want to get anything done, it's highly likely that there's a spirit that rules over that particular bailiwick, if only you look hard enough. Or at least I'd be willing to bet money that if you could get ice cream sprites to make you a sundae, then you could get something between an earth and a fire elemental to mend broken glass.

This, at least, was my working theory, or at least the best explanation I could come up with for the flaming crystals and phoenix eggs which corresponded to the general location of the overpriced paperweight shop. I really won't go into the wonder or the beauty of it, or how many dragon's eggs and crystal salamanders were competing for my attention, since I know you've been in shops like that, and you can probably imagine what it's like to be on the other side of the looking glass where you can admire the artistry and imagination that goes into each of the overpriced knick-knacks from the inside out. Especially when you're a witch who's just realized that familiars can be had for the asking—and a few trivial sacrifices—and you've just walked into the Alchemical Pet Shop.

Restraint really was in order, as was a certain degree of common sense. Familiars, as I've pointed out, can often cause as much trouble as they're worth, or at least make demands on your time and pocketbook, and if I went with impulse and took them all home, I'd end up spending the rest of my life playing curator to a collection of spoiled enchanted paperweights.

There was also the matter of jealousy, as Mister Mistoffelees had had for Toto (which is another reason why I'm glad to see Brandon's wayward member rejoined with its master, so to speak). Familiars, the same as pets, like to be first in your attention, and there was no question that Mister Mistoffelees was Top Cat in my household, for all that I had Stutzie and Thing and now Totoro to tend to.

I pulled my cat out of the bag, petting him and rubbing him behind the ears until he opened his eyes and blinked sleepily. "Is there something you require, Mistress?"

“Well,” I said, softly, trying to stroke his ego as best I could, “I was remembering what you said last night about Stutzie, and while I’ve got him the dice I promised him, I was thinking that maybe one of the glass spirits could fix his mirrors. But since you know so much more about spirits than I do, I thought you’d do a much better job asking than I ever could. And if you’d like to pick out one for a playmate...”

Mister Mistoffelees perked up. “Why yes, Mistress. I would like that very much.” He sprang out of my arms and onto one of the larger boulders of the rock garden, then began to look about at the crystal eggs and fire blossoms which corresponded to the shop’s paper-weights, patting the occasional one with his paw.

At last one moved, and Mister Mistoffelees chased an iridescent crystal toad across the stone garden, before at last pouncing on it and picking it up in his mouth. He brought it to me, dropping it at my feet, and the crystalline toad looked up with large frightened glass eyes. “This is Mistress Penelope,” my Number One familiar said. “She is a very kind and amusing Mistress, and you have nothing to fear from her. The only one that you need fear is me. Do you understand, little fire-toad?”

Peep... whimpered the little toad, and I reached down and picked him up, stroking his back to comfort him. He was cool as glass to my touch, for all that I could see greenish fire burning in his belly, and I petted him with one finger, like you would a real toad, assuming, of course, you had one for a pet and liked to pet them. “I think I’ll call you Prince.” I paused, looking to Mister Mistoffelees. “Unless there’s something you’d rather call him?”

Mister Mistoffelees looked up, speculative. “I was thinking to call him Greedigut.” He yawned, mouth very pink. “That was the name of my last toad.”

He refrained from mentioning the fate of his last amphibian, but I could only imagine. “Then why don’t we call this one Prince Greedigut. Do you like that name, little fire-toad?”

The little fire-toad didn’t seem to care one way or the other about his name, but appeared to enjoy being patted, or at least being kept

away from the ground and Mister Mistoffelees. I walked along, trying to pay as little attention as possible to the copious number of acorns Totoro was pitching out of my shoulder bag and into the stone garden—it's very nice to have a change-purse that can do its own math, but sooner or later I'm going to have to teach him a few things about creative acquisition—and Mister Mistoffelees led the way down one of the stone paths and into a grotto that looked suspiciously like a concrete stairwell. "This way, Mistress."

The caves beneath the garden were much creepier and less inviting than the lawns and bowers above, but then again, the Ghirardelli Square Parking Garage isn't the most pleasant place in the world either. Luckily, Prince Greedigut's inner flame illuminated everything with an eerie green glow, making it possible to see without my holding onto Mister Mistoffelees and making me feel like a real sorceress, following a black cat down into the earth with a flaming green toad cupped in my hand like my own personal piece of balefire, while strange growls and roars echoed in the distance.

I wished I had a camera to take pictures, though then again, it was probably best that I didn't. After all, I was wandering through the metaphysical reflection of a parking garage, with grass stains on my skirt, runs in my nylons, and hair that wasn't so much styled as bobby-pinned down to fit under a no-longer-extant wig, and I had no idea whether a camera would still operate the regular way in Looking Glass Country, and whether it would take pictures of the real world or what.

Thankfully, as with pets and small children, a witch is always beautiful in the eyes of her familiars, or at least I heard the happy purr of Stutzie's engine as we rounded the pillar and came out into the main hall of the cavern. Or at least I took it to be my Stutz, since Mister Mistoffelees, with an air of familiarity and authority, was happily padding up to a gray and silver carriage drawn by one of the Kalidahs from Oz.

I know I've already mentioned the Oz books, but if you're not familiar with them, then let me just say that a Kalidah is a cross between a bear and a tiger. And if you are familiar with the Oz books,

then you know that the Kalidahs are the most ferocious beasts in all of Oz, capable of eating people for breakfast without thinking twice, which is all the more terrible since Oz is part of Faerieland and no one is supposed to ever die there, including the chewed up bits of people lodged in the Kalidahs' stomachs.

The beast in front of the silver phaeton looked just like one of the John R. Neill illustrations from *The Magic of Oz*, except that it had made it into Technicolor, and it was hitched to an Art Nouveau interpretation of the infamous 'Surrey with a fringe' from *Oklahoma*, i.e. an incredibly stylish speed carriage with a fold-down top, the past century's answer to a snazzy convertible. And the Kalidah was purring at my approach, with the same tone and timbre as Stutzie's engine.

A Kalidah. Half bear, half tiger, circa World War I. A Bearcat. And it was purring.

"Hello, Stutzie," I said, rubbing the beast's right ear which I guess corresponded to patting the right front fender, and tried to keep my heart from beating quite so fast. "I've got something for you."

I reached into my new shoulder bag and pulled out the fuzzy dice, which luckily for my sanity looked like nothing more than giant pink dice made out of faux fur with obnoxious green vinyl spots. "See?"

The Kalidah immediately batted them out of my hand, claws black and wicked, then set to playing with his new toy. I raised an eyebrow and stepped back a foot, then after staring for a moment, went back to the carriage, where Mister Mistoffelees had taken up his accustomed perch on the dash, excepting that this dashboard was just that—a black-varnished wooden plank fixed in front of the driver's box so as to keep dirt from being dashed up into the driver's face.

I glanced around the underground stables, looking to the various jaguars and cougars and pintos and mustangs and assorted other totem animals, each of them hitched to assorted carriages and chariots, and realized that unlike my Bearcat, all of them were asleep. Excepting the mews at the end of the aisle, where among the

other birds of prey, a bald eagle and a golden eagle sat alert, their jesses tied to two chrome rickshaws, corresponding, as I hazard a guess, to a Harley and a Goldwing whose owners were as fanatical about their upkeep as I was about fussing over my Stutz.

Stutzie, my Kalidah, purred like a well tuned engine, gnawing on the fuzzy dice with outsize fangs, and I did my best to deal with it. This was the spirit world, after all, and the spirit of my car was appearing in a form that made altogether too much sense. He *could* have looked like Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang, or one of the kitty-pillar buses from *My Neighbor Totoro* (and was probably appearing to my change-purse as just that), but as I've said, I'm into the classics, and Baum's bearcats certainly qualify, as do silver phaeton carriages with their shades of *Northanger Abbey* and the other good Regencies and Gothic mysteries.

As for Stutzie's carriage, the various mirrors set about it were shattered, broken, at a guess, by the Bearcat himself when Brandon's werewolf cronies had tried to use them for their 'Through the Looking-Glass' trick the night before. I could easily see Mister Mistoffelees point, and I was glad for both his advice, and that of Sister Mary Innocent so many years before.

"Alright, Prince Greedigut," I said to the little crystal toad in my hand. "Time to earn your keep. Fix the mirrors, if you would please."

The little toad looked at me with liquid crystal eyes.

"Yes, you must," I said, then sweetened the demand, "but if you do a particularly good job, when we get home, I think we..." I paused, trying to think of a particularly good bribe for an expensive paperweight, "...we might find you a lovely bowl of glass cleaner. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Apparently that would be very nice indeed, or at least seemed more than sufficient bribe for my new familiar, since he hopped to it, quite literally, going from one mirror to another and breathing a fog of green fire across the surface. But when it cleared, the glass was smooth as ice in midwinter, without even a trace of cracks to show it had been broken, and likewise missing the scratches and nicks

which the Stutz's mirrors had gathered over the past seventy odd years.

"Thank you, Prince Greedigut. That was very nice. I'm sure that Stutzie very much appreciates it." The Kalidah growled in assent, or at least it sounded like he was pleased.

Regardless, I picked up my latest familiar and sat down in the driver's box, noting that the Bearcat's reins were looped around a peg on the dashboard and Mister Mistoffelees had his paws on them. He blinked at me. "If it would please you, Mistress, I could drive...."

I blinked back. Shades of 'Toonses the Driving Cat,' and this time I wasn't drunk. But then I realized that fond as I am of the literature of centuries past, knowing a phaeton from a hansom cab doesn't tell you how to *drive* one, let alone a fringe-top Surrey drawn by a John R. Neill illustration. Whereas Mister Mistoffelees *had* lived in those centuries, and since he knows how to operate an automobile, it stood to reason that he also knew how to drive a carriage. Like Puss-'n-Boots, or any of the witch's cats from folklore who braid horse's manes preparatory to joyriding—which is what he was asking to do, even though he'd couched it in terms of *him* pleasing *me*. "Why yes, Mister M. That would be most kind." I put my purse in my lap, trying my best to be prim and demure and not freak at the thought that I'd just told my cat he could take the wheel. Or the reins. Or whatever.

Mister Mistoffelees hooked the reins with his claws, giving them an expert shake. "Home, Cousin Bearcat. It has been a long night, and our Mistress has children to attend to."

Stutzie the Kalidah padded forward, the wheels of his carriage creaking, and Mister Mistoffelees yowled something in feline which I didn't understand, but the Bearcat obviously did, snarling in return.

"It would be nice if we could stop at a grocery store," I added quickly. "We need a little more butter."

"Sweet cream?" Mister Mistoffelees asked hopefully, glancing back.

"But of course." I took Totoro out of my purse and stopped his ears. "Gotten by less than ethical means, if you might find that possible...."

"Of course, Mistress," Mister Mistoffelees said, licking his lips, then shook the reins and yowled again.

Totoro pushed at my fingers, as if wondering what I was doing, then I scratched him on top of the head. "Get the parking validation ready, if you would be so kind, little banker. It's time to go home."

Totoro bowed, then came back up and pulled the validated parking slip from his pouch, holding it out to the shadowy figure that stood to the left of the exit to the caverns, its long left arm barring the way. It took the slip with its other clawed hand and raised it to its dark hood, then took its arms back and bowed to my Totoro like a skeletal monk.



Stutzie roared and we exited to caverns, the carriage careening right, Mister Mistoffelees yowling and shaking the reins, and the Bearcat bounding forward until suddenly he leapt into the air, the harness stretching taught, and wheels of the phaeton left the bumpy cobblestones with a spark and a grind. I gripped the seat as I was thrown back, not having expected to become airborne, but then again, I'd never driven through the spirit world before, so I really didn't have much experience for comparison. Except, perhaps, for the *Peter Pan* ride at Disneyland, since the view of the gardens and twilight houses of the Faerie City seemed vaguely reminiscent of my recollections of the flight over J.M. Barrie's London, so long as you kept the pixie dust and dancing shadows, omitted the screaming kids and insipid theme music. And in place of Big Ben, substituted the Transamerica Pyramid, which looked eldritch and mystical in the spirit world, despite the fact that most residents of the City refer to it as the Zippy the Pinhead Building.

As we rounded the spire, a gigantic golden eye opened near the top and winked at me, which is something I've never seen it do before, and trust me, I would have remembered. Having architectural landmarks give you the Masonic hi-sign is something you generally recall, and while I'm certain that folks like Spooky Pete

had seen it on more than one occasion, I was nowhere near as well tuned to the psychic wavelengths as our coven's resident necromancer. Peter probably sees all-seeing eyeballs and witches flying through the air on a regular basis, and simply doesn't bother to mention them unless they have some immediate bearing on standard reality.

Then again, I'd always wondered how witches kept people from noticing when they flew to the Sabbat, and likewise, I'd always been both a bit envious and a bit unbelieving when I'd read about Medea and her chariot borne by griffins or Lohengrin and his swans. But now that I was flying through the high astral reaches in a fringe-top Surrey, drawn by the fiercest monster from L. Frank Baum's imagination and driven by my cat, I can only say that I know the pleasure, my curiosity has been satisfied, and I don't envy them the swans or griffins in the slightest.

Say hey and nonny-nonny. I had a Bearcat, and that beat everything by far.



Penny Dreadful™

A Mage: The Ascension® Novel in Eight Parts and an Epilogue

Part Six

Wherein Penny appreciates a helping hand, Alexander inquires as to a matter of life and death, and Mister Mistoffelees confronts the notion of delayed gratification; a loss of conventional power accompanies a rise in mystical power, Señora Duarte makes a false assumption, Roland and Alexander give horsey rides, and Penny is reminded of a her many responsibilities, not the least of which being a baby bonnet; also regarding Melanie's errand and a number of unpleasant surprises, including the not-so-romantic truth behind the covers of Gothic romances, the fabled Bird of Glory, and the care which must be taken not only when choosing ones enemies, but when choosing between one's friends.

Kevin Andrew Murphy



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Later Walpurgis Night
The Witching Hour
Thursday, the 2nd of May

While I can't say anything about the right hand, its whereabouts or current activities, I have to say that the left hand definitely knows what it's doing, and does its, or really I should say *his*, work with every bit of cleverness and dexterity usually ascribed to the right. And, I must admit, I'm very glad that Thing knows how to take dictation, despite the fact that this is about the only aspect of my life that has become any simpler since I got back. This, and the ease with which you can commit astral shoplifting.

My bed was strewn with a treasure trove of *Hello Kitty* baby stuff and assorted stolen dairy products—now that I know that the charm works, it makes sense to stock up—and I was in the process of getting out my sewing kit so as to fashion the promised baby bonnet when suddenly there came a rapping, rapping at my chamber door, and I mean the conventional sort, involving knuckles and wood or at very worst Poe's raven, as opposed to the type you get in Oakland. "Penny?" It was Alexander, voice slightly tinged with concern.

I set down the basket. "Just a moment." I went over to the desk, where I had my Book of Shadows open in the place of honor, Thing halfway down the right-hand page, balanced on his stump and pinkie and the nib of my *Mont Blanc*, causing it to produce the

world's most gorgeous gothic script, the likes of which it had never penned before. Prince Greedigit—now revealed to be a beautiful, albeit immobile, example of *Lalique* crystal—weighted down the page beside him. “You guys just catch up,” I whispered. “I’ve told you the rest.”

Thing raised the pen and patted his new companion on the head with a mummified pinky, as if to say that he and Prince Greedigit had the matter well in hand. Not to mention paperweight, and I hoped it was just a trick of my eyes, but I thought I saw the pages of my Book of Shadows rustle for a moment, for all that it had begun as an artist’s blank-book I’d bought at a stationer on Haight.

“Thanks. See you later.” Not wanting to deal with yet another familiar, or any additional weirdness, I pulled down the top of the roll-top and locked it, pocketing the key, then went and unlocked the main door. “Sorry, I just got back.”

Alexander stood there, looking at me, and I knew I must look a sight, with the grass smears now transmuted into city soot and grunge, my hair spiked at random angles with bobby pins, and my makeup still streaked from the rainstorm which had started brewing just as we reached the estate, notwithstanding that the Stutz was in the spirit world at the time. “Um,” he said. “*Señora* Duarte said you’d gone out, and I didn’t see you come in.”

I shrugged and grinned. “Sorry. Didn’t use the front door.” I glanced back to the dressing mirror. “Sometimes an old dog can teach you new tricks. And you’d be surprised how easily doors open if you just have the right tools....” I reached up and squeezed the Silver Key around my neck, now folded back into Nutmeg shape.

Alexander didn’t ask for further explanation, and I didn’t offer to tell him that I’d figured out how to play Alice, for all that I looked more like I’d fallen down the rabbit hole than having just stepped through the looking glass. “I wish you’d left word of where you were going. *Señora* Duarte is very upset; she was planning on taking the evening off.”

I shrugged. “Sorry I kept her from catching up on *Rebecca*. I had stuff to take care of, and apologies, but I didn’t want the kids to know

exactly what." I brushed a stray strand of hair and bobby pin out of my face. "Brent and I went to the City, and I met with Brandon."

That got Alexander's attention, and I don't know if you've ever seen a vampire turn white, but I'll say they do a better job of it than any of us mere mortals could ever aspire to. "You... spoke with Brandon?"

I nodded. "I gave him back his... property... and I made it clear to him that if he laid one claw on the children—or you—I'd make it fall off on the floor."

Alexander turned the whiter shade of pale, his five o'clock shadow showing in stark relief, and I could see from his expression that while he'd hired a witch to solve his custody problems, he hadn't considered that the dispute could be settled in so novel a fashion. "Um... thank you."

I smiled into the uncomfortable silence that followed. "Don't mention it." I glanced around the room, biting my lip. "Um, listen, why don't you come in while I get freshened up? Then I'll see about making some blood for you and Mister Mistoffelees."

Alexander glanced over to where my familiar sat atop the folded quilt on the hope chest, and my cat looked back, smug. "I get the blood first. *I* was the first to ask this evening."

There's a matter of how much you let your familiar get away with, and grateful as I am to Mister Mistoffelees, I wasn't about to let him boss the boss, at least not in his own house. "Alexander was promised it first, Mister Mistoffelees. And he needs it more than you do." I tried to make the reprimand kind, but firm. "Anyway, there'll more than enough for two, so we shouldn't argue over who gets served before whom. And besides, wouldn't you prefer to have your bottle *after* I get the bonnet and cradle ready?"

Mister Mistoffelees blinked, obviously unfamiliar with the concept of delayed gratification. "Yes, Mistress." Duly chastened, he sat back down, paws tucked under, but he wouldn't lock eyes with Alexander, which is a cat's way of pouting. Alexander just looked befuddled, but came inside anyway, shutting the door behind him,

while I smiled an apology and headed for the bathroom, grabbing out a T-shirt at random out of the top drawer of the chifforobe.

The bolt clicked behind me, and I glanced in the mirror, then shrugged. Except for the Buckwheat in Bobby Pins hairdo, I didn't look as bad as expected. Then again, I don't know if you've ever run Goth makeup through a rainstorm. If you do, you end up with something like Marilyn Manson—which is a style in and of itself, but one I usually just leave to Blackrose. Doing yourself up like a corpse is also probably not the best idea if you're working for one, especially if he's in the habit of using bronzing powder to make himself look more alive. At best, it would look silly, and at worst, you'd end up offending him.

Which is why I was glad I'd forgone the black lipstick and kohl standard in the scene. This time my makeup had begun as 'seventies,' which only meant that the foundation was streaked and the eye shadow had run, making me look like an environmentally aware Tarryton smoker or Tammy Faye Baker's little sister. Which is bad, I'll admit, but under the circumstances not anywhere near as awful as looking like a cadaver wannabe.

I pulled out the bobby pins and did a quick pass with makeup remover, tossed the blouse and skirt in the hamper, the pantyhose in the trash, then put on my T-shirt. The ones I keep in the top drawer are men's extra-larges, which make perfectly good babydolls for me, so long as I tug them down and add underwear. The one I'd picked was one of my *Emily* shirts, black-and-red on white with a little girl with a trio of black cats and—appropriately enough—the quote, *Emily didn't look tired or happy. She looked like she always looks.* STRANGE.

Penny felt entirely the same way, at least at the moment, and she got her robe, since babydolls only cover so much. Then she—I mean I—left the bathroom and went out to where Alexander sat at the window seat, watching the rain come down.

He turned, glancing at what I'd changed into, but he couldn't read the T-shirt with the way my robe was tied, which is probably all to the good, since I didn't really want to advertise at the moment.

And I felt terribly underdressed, since Alex was sitting there, wearing one of his immaculate white shirts with the hundred-dollar tie and cockatrice-crest gold stickpin, and much as people may go on about Dracula, I personally think that Alexander Gorian dresses better. “Um, well, let’s see about that blood...”

Alexander smiled and chuckled slightly. “You know, it’s very refreshing to hear you say that word. Most of the Kindred, at least my Clan, refer to it as *vitae*.”

I unscrewed the lid from a *Winki-Pinki* baby bottle. “Some people are in heavy denial.” I ripped open a package of unsalted butter and unwrapped a couple sticks, dropping then in. “So far as I’ve read, magickally stolen butter turns into blood if you cut it with a murder weapon. The folklore doesn’t mention anything about *vitae*.”

“I don’t care what you call it,” said Mister Mistoffelees from his spot on the quilt, “I simply like the taste. And I’d like mine soon, if you please.”

I’d already gotten out Jodi’s little silver dagger, which I noticed had the hilt cast in the shape of a weeping cherub. “Patience, Mister Mistoffelees. Patience. Remember, I’m not a milkshake machine.” I stabbed the butter repeatedly, watching it ooze blood, and wished I did have a milkshake machine or a hand-mixer or some other *Black & Decker* power tool I could stick the cherub’s head in and go to town. As it was, I felt like some ghoulish Julia Child, stirring the blood by hand until the last flecks of butter were mixed in, leaving a red froth on top. Which would probably be appetizing if you *like* that sort of thing, but as matters stood, was doing very little for the state of my stomach.

I scraped the sides of the blade on the inner rim of the bottle as best I could—waste not, want not—then held it out to Alexander. “It’s hardly *Baccarat*, but...”

He took it anyway, grateful, pausing only a second to look at the impromptu highball with *Hello Kitty*’s little brown sister and her gingham dress printed on the side. “Cheers,” he said, then tossed it back.

Mister Mistoffelees looked at him, then back at me and the bloody knife. "Would you like me to wash your ritual implements, Mistress?"

I glanced at him, then at the blood-smeared blade, and made a quick translation: *May I lick the knife?* "Of course, precious," I said. "That would be very helpful. Thank you." At this, Mister Mistoffelees hopped to the floor, then up onto the windowsill, and, once I held it out for him, began licking the blade like it was the world's most delicious all-day sucker.

I took the baby bottle back from Alexander with my other hand, clamping it between my knees while I fumbled out another couple sticks of butter. "Seconds?"

"Yes, please," Alexander said. The wind shook the windowpane, rain splashing the bottom edge. "Good thing you got back when you did. Miserable night to be out driving."

Not to mention flying a fringe-top surrey through the high astral reaches, but same net effect. Stutzie had managed to land in the carriage house, which had looked rather the same as it did in reality, and with Mister Mistoffelees' help, as well as my own knack for finding things, I'd been able to sneak into the shadow house, navigate the various wards I'd set up, then locate the mirror in my room and step through. "Yeah. I bet storms can hit pretty hard out here on the coast."

"You have no idea." Alexander looked out at the wind-tossed ocean. "The one back in January took out half the cliff near the driveway. I've been meaning to have someone shore it up, but Roland says that most of the contractors are booked, and they can't really do a proper job until summer when everything dries out anyway."

Once my familiar finished with the knife, I played Bloody Mary mixer, trying my best to ignore the baby cries coming from the bottle. A good stereo would probably drown them out, and I kept reminding myself that most of Jodi's murders had happened centuries ago, so there really wasn't much I could do about them. And in the great scheme of things, it really is better for Alexander to be

drinking the blood of infants hundreds of years dead than for him to be out prowling the streets, or doing whatever else dapper and sensitive young vampires do.

As for Mister Mistoffelees and the ethical question there, well, let me just say I'd rather spill a little antique baby blood than give up any of my own. And *Hello Kitty* baby bottles are far preferable to third nipples like with Anne Boleyn and Jodilyn Blake, if just because they aren't considered part of your standard proof of witchcraft, and even the Men in Black would have a time of it making them out as anything even remotely incriminating.

"Here you go," I said, handing Alexander his second round of blood and stabbing the blade into the butter package so that blood pooled out, making the windowsill look like a cover still for *Murder by Cholesterol*, or whatever you'd call a mystery featuring a bloody dagger, a cube of butter, and a happy black cat. "Let me get Mister Mistoffelees' bonnet put together now. Just tell me if you want another."

Alexander sipped it down a bit more gradually this time, not even getting a blood moustache, and I dug through my scrap bag. There was a lace cuff I'd never be able to find the mate to, and with a few snips and tucks, and a length of red silk ribbon I'd gotten from Blackrose, it would make a perfectly Goth baby bonnet for me to put on my familiar.

The rain pelted the window, and Alexander looked at me with his dark eyes. I expected him to ask something about the bonnet, like maybe why my cat wanted it, or how I'd been able to convince Mister Mistoffelees that baby clothes were *haute couture* for modern familiars, but instead he said, "I— I just wanted to thank you. Since you've come, the situation has gotten much better..."

"If weirder," I finished for him, and he nodded and smiled, self-conscious. I measured out a length of ribbon and snipped it off, threading it onto a tapestry needle and working it through the larger holes in the lace.

"I was wondering," he said, "can you... do you know how to..." He trailed off, then looked up at me, and the gravity of his expression caused me to pause, "...return the dead to life?"

I set down the needle and the ribbon. "You're not talking about yourself, are you?"

"Can you— Can you do that too?"

I grimaced, thinking the legend on my T-shirt more appropriate than ever: *Penny didn't feel tired or happy. She felt like she always feels.* STRANGE. "Listen, I— Well it's complicated, but, well..." What I was stumbling over my tongue to convey was not the question of whether or not I could resurrect the dead, but the fact that the thought had never occurred to me, since I'd never had the audacity or presumption to even consider it.

But now, put on the spot, I couldn't do anything but stall. "Let me think for a moment..." I picked up the needle and began to lace red ribbon in earnest, and not just because Mister Mistoffelees was looking at me, as if wondering why so basic and straightforward a question would make his Mistress stop work on anything as important as the promised and contractually specified baby bonnet. "Well..."

Well what? Either I could or I couldn't, and that was the heart of the matter. Even though, as I said, I'd never really considered it before.

"Well," I said at last, "there are some problems. Resurrections don't come cheap or easy, and unless you're a saint or a god—and trust me, I'm not—there are only two ways I know of that you can pull them off. If you catch someone who's dying, or maybe who's just died, but isn't very far gone, then a necromancer who knows what he's doing just *might* be able to stop Death from collecting the soul, at least for a while, and a really talented healer could *maybe* use that time to fix them up." Case in point being what Peter and Sasha had done with Dorothea only the Saturday before, and as I was just admitting to myself.

"Or," I said slowly, "I know it's possible to reanimate someone who's been murdered, but only if you kill them in just the right way,

or get to them just after they die, or do it by witchcraft or something like that. I'm not clear on all the particulars, but I think you have to catch their soul and their life force so you'll have it ready when you put them back together again. Voodoo stuff."

Alexander nodded, as if he was all too familiar with this manner of resurrection, and I realized that he and Brent had more in common than they might think. Likewise, come to think of it, so did Thing, since the Lovecraftian trip Blackrose had used on Brent is closely akin to what I know regarding the creation of a Hand of Glory.

I shrugged. "Besides necromancy like that, the only way I know to return someone like Kate—and I know you're talking about Kate—would be for someone who loved her more than life itself to travel to the Underworld and bring her back. Leimenkanen was brought back by his mother, Ishtar brought back Tammuz, Orpheus almost did it for Eurydice, and I don't know how many other stories there are, but it's always the same—mother for child, girlfriend for boyfriend, husband for wife." I finished threading the ribbon, then drew it up to see how it looked. "I'm sorry, Alexander. I've— Well, I saw Kate in my dreams this morning, and I can see why you loved her so much. But that's it. I don't love her more than life itself, and I'm not willing to sacrifice everything I have just to get her back. And that's what it would take."

Alexander sat there, face working, biting his lip, and he blinked hard. "Nothing— There's nothing else?"

I pursed my lips. "Nothing white." I set the bonnet back in my lap. "Not much gray either. Just demons. Dark necromancy—murder magick, life-for-life stuff—and, well, even if you did it, you wouldn't want Kate coming back to you that way. Nothing good ever comes of magick like that." At least not if folklore or literature are to be believed, but I have a talking cat, a Hand of Glory, and had just flown a witch's chariot up the coast from San Francisco, so I saw little cause for doubt. "The only path open is the Journey to the Underworld, and since you're a vampire, well, you're pretty close to the edge yourself. I don't know, I couldn't say..."

Alexander started crying bloody tears, and I quickly grabbed a swatch of lace from the scrap bag, pressing it into his hand. He squeezed his eyes tight, causing more blood to pour out, but he took the scrap and wiped the drops off before they fell on his shirt, practical as Kate had said. “I have the children to look after. Even if... I couldn’t...”

“I know,” I said. “Kate knows. And she understands.” I wished, for one hate-filled second, that I had Brandon’s member back in my hand, if just so I could whack it once on the floor or transfer the contents of my pincushion to it.

Then the moment passed, and I comforted the second man that evening, though Alexander was far more quiet and dignified than Brandon ever will be. “I—I know it isn’t much comfort, but I talked with Brandon, and he’s sorry, for what it’s worth. And he realizes it was his fault.”

Alexander laughed bitterly until he choked. “Well there’s cold comfort. Let’s hear him tell it to Melanie.” He paused, looking at me, alarmed.

“No, don’t worry,” I put a hand on his arm, “I haven’t told her. I haven’t told either of the children.” I set aside the bonnet, and Mister Mistoffelees gave a disgusted look, but I glared at him until he looked away. “It’s a brave thing you did, Alexander. And a kind one too. Don’t blame yourself.”

I gave him a quick hug, but Alexander, as I’ve said, has far more self control than Brandon Kearny ever will, and he pushed away. “Don’t worry, I’ll be alright.” He wiped the blood from his eyes with the scrap of lace, then looked at it in chagrin.

“Never mind, I have plenty more.” I picked the bonnet back up and set about stitching the two cuts I’d made. “Why don’t you see if Mister Mistoffelees might like it? He’s been very patient.”

I didn’t know if I’d just made a *faux pas*, or else said something significant, but Mister Mistoffelees and Alexander both looked up, then exchanged glances, and my cat said, “I am actually rather fond of the blood of Cain. But if you think it will make me beholden to you, nightgaunt, then you are sadly mistaken.”

"I wouldn't dream of it," Alexander said, and while I didn't know exactly what they were talking about, suffice it to say that they obviously did, and that was what mattered. "Here, if you like." Alexander held out the scrap of bloody lace, and my familiar sniffed it, then began to delicately lick at the drying blood.

I finished closing one of the slashes, then just as I raised the gold stork scissors I'd inherited from Great-Aunt Eudora, the light flickered and went out. All except for the moonlight from the ocean and the slitted witchfire of my familiar's eyes.

Alexander sighed. "Power failure," he said, absolutely unnecessarily, except perhaps by way of apology.

My special gong had started bonging, and not because I was sitting in the dark with a vampire, or because I was poised and posed like the eldest of the Fates, with a pair of scissors in my hand. It was because while power failures may be all too common in seaside houses, especially with the state of the weather and PG&E the past few month, a witch has her instincts, and mine had set my personal alarm ringing like church bells in June.

"Let me get a candle." I cut the thread and set aside my sewing project, then went to my bedside table, where, after my dream that morning, I'd bothered to set out my Gothic heroine candleholder. It's one of those quasi-antique reproductions you find at the *Bombay Company*, a simple but elegant bit of silver plate with a plain finger-ring and a space under the candleholder to fit a matchbox, and it's just the sort of thing Regency cover girls are supposed to have in their hands when they flee windswept mansions, at least if the pictures on the checkout aisle books are to be believed.

We already had the windswept mansion, and I took one of the matches out and struck it. The light flared, and I touched it to the candle—one of Grimm's 'White for Purity and Protection' numbers—and while the angel candle didn't have much more magick than a regular bit of beeswax, I'd become a bit spoiled over the past few months since I'd been using Thing for most of my magickal workings, giving me rather exaggerated expectations of what a candle could do. Compared to a Hand of Glory, even hand-dipped

beeswax tapers are nothing special, no matter how many oils and chrisms you douse them with.

Regardless, it still illuminated the room, and looked really Goth on top of it (not that I cared at the moment), so I didn't have any real cause for complaint. "Let's go find the kids," I said. "Malory's probably frightened by the storm, or at least I bet they'd rather not deal with *Señora Duarte*."

Alexander looked at the candle, and I think I saw a trace of fear in his eyes, or at least he looked away a bit more quickly than he should have. "Let me get your sewing." He dropped the scrap of lace, and Mister Mistoffelees looked at it, annoyed, then up at me.

"I don't have a doll cradle yet," I explained quickly. "But I think I saw one in Melanie's room, so I thought we might ask her."

"Very well, Mistress." Mollified, he licked the last flecks of blood and butter from his whiskers and leapt to my shoulder, and I was glad that my dressing gown is quilted and that I never removed the shoulder pads. "I would be very content to curl up by a fire while you finished your stitchery."

He left it unspoken that he expected me to build him a fire as compensation for yet another delay, and while I didn't make any promises, it seemed like a reasonable suggestion, if just because lack of power meant lack of television, and with the VCR no longer on call, *Señora Duarte*'s skills as babysitter were probably at an end.

Her patience was something else that had met its maker, even though that is no excuse for shining flashlights in people's eyes, even if you do suddenly come upon someone in a dark hallway. "There you are."

I squinted and pursed my lips. "Yes, Officer Duarte. Could you get that thing out of my face?"

Mister Mistoffelees was less polite, but far more eloquent. He hissed. And I shouldn't have to mention it, but he only does that when he gets exceptionally annoyed.

"*Señora Duarte*..." Alexander was more diplomatic, but sounded no less peeved.

“Oh, *Señor* Gorian.” She lowered the flashlight. “I had no idea you’d already found her.”

“She was seeing to my dinner,” Alexander said, but explained himself no further.

The expression of shock on *Señora* Duarte’s face and her quick attempt to hide it were reward enough. “Oh, my apologies.” She looked at me, and I could tell that it wasn’t occurring to her that I might have given Alexander blood in anything aside from the usual manner. For example, taking advantage of the bizarre side effects of remote dairy theft spells and antique murder weapons so as to fill up Lucite baby bottles with pictures of *Winki-Pinki* on the side.

Then again, a few days ago the thought wouldn’t have occurred to me either, so Alexander’s housekeeper really can’t be faulted for that. But I wasn’t about to enlighten her just yet either, if just because it was fun to watch her squirm as she realized she’d gotten in bad with what might be the new mistress of the house.

I looked her in the eye. “You look like the type of woman who buys Duraflame logs. Do we have any, or is there any regular wood so we could start a fire?” I smiled brightly. “I thought the children might enjoy one until we get the power back.”

Señora Duarte gave a sour expression, for the thought had clearly never crossed her mind. “The children are with Roland. He’s giving them horsey rides.” She shuddered, as if unable to comprehend why anybody would want to do that, especially an almost seven-foot ghoul, then gave a furtive glance to Alexander. “As for fire logs... well, yes, we have a couple. Instant ones.”

Real firewood would of course be too much to ask, but I understood why there might not be much of it around the house.

Alexander glanced up at us. “I’ll leave the fire to you two. I’m not much good with matches.” Then he grinned and looked off down the hall. “I think I’ll go see if I can cut in on a couple horsey rides.”

He vanished into the darkness, obviously not needing the candle or flashlight, and I glanced to *Señora* Duarte, then touched my hand to Mister Mistoffelees’ tail and set off after him. Cat’s eye vision expanded around me, and I could see why Jodi Blake had been so

upset at losing her familiar, since Mister Mistoffelees was showing himself to be useful in dozens of ways, despite his hang-ups about baby bonnets and other frills.

I followed Alexander down to the main living room, which is this huge sunken conversation pit with a bank of windows along one side and the fireplace in the center, the type that was popular in the sixties, with a cone-shaped blue-enamel hood suspended over it and a spiral-mesh screen hung round 360 degrees. It was also completely dead, so the only illumination came from the half-light of the storm outside and a battery-powered nursery lamp sitting on the edge of the fire pit.

Malory and Melanie were in the process of tormenting Roland, both of them astride his back while Malory flogged him with Bruno. And I don't know if you remember, but a teddy bear or doll makes a pretty effective blackjack, especially if it has a reinforced nose and you hold it by the hind legs.

Alexander grinned. "Can I cut in?" Then with a cry of "Daddy!" both kids tackled him, my sewing basket spilling to the floor.

Roland seemed more than grateful for this relief, or at least stood rather quickly just as *Señora* Duarte caught up. She took in the scene, then gave me a look and smile which said, more eloquent than mere words, *It's your problem now, brujiita. Enjoy.* Then she turned to Roland. "We will be having a fire tonight. Fetch the logs."

He nodded, a slight look of surprise on his face, and loped off while the children commandeered their father behind the sofa. *Señora* Duarte switched off her flashlight, slipping it in the pocket of her latest brown velvet dress, then stooped and began replacing the spools and seam rippers into my sewing basket, more, I think, because she couldn't abide a mess than from any real desire to help me.

I set my candle down on the redwood burl coffee table mandatory in all California coastal homes, then set about retrieving my scrap bag and the baby bonnet to-be. "Thanks, but that's not necessary...."

“We are of a difference of opinion, *Señorita Drizkowski*,” she said, picking up the last of the bobbins and the basket, then handing it all to me just as Alexander came around the corner of the sofa and put his hand down where there’d been a razor-spiked pattern marker only a few seconds before. “A servant must do her best to anticipate every eventuality.”

I took the basket and smiled in thanks and acknowledgement, and she actually returned the smile. Not a nice smile, I’ll admit, but I won’t begrudge her a chance to put me in my place, at least if she’s right. I will also admit, however, to being more than a bit distracted. Aside from the horsey rides, the sewing project, Mister Mistoffelees’ patience and the half dozen minor concerns attendant upon those, there was also the storm. Lightning struck again, flashing the room like a strobe, and I didn’t need to count to three before the thunder to know there was witchery in the air.

As I said earlier regarding traffic jams and other elemental forces, thunderstorms can be summoned by witchcraft, but it’s only your vanity and the determination of your enemies which says whether or not the foul weather is actually focused on you.

It was an easy bet that Jodi Blake knew how to brew a tempest in a teapot, and since it looked like the thundercloud had followed me home—or at very least had been waiting here for me—I strongly suspected that the storm was her doing. The lightning flashes over the ocean were just a little too picturesque, if you catch my drift, the sky just a little too ominous, though frankly this wasn’t what was bothering me. It was something very different.

I don’t know how up you are on your Shakespeare, but remember the three witches from ‘*MacBeth*’? Remember the line about *For though the bark cannot be lost/Yet it shall be tempest-tossed!* Well, standard rule of black magick, not to mention Shakespearean interpretation, but you can’t kill someone with witchcraft.

Yes, yes, I know, this goes against half of what I’ve been saying, including the point of the ‘Pynnes & Poppets’ spell and a half dozen death curses. But it’s not quite the same thing. Magick, at least medieval magick, goes a lot by intent, as well as personal cost,

including a sliding scale depending on what you want to get done and how pissed off you are. The witch from *Macbeth* couldn't sink the bark (i.e. the ship) since the worst thing that happened to her was that the sailor's wife had said "Aroint thee, witch!" and refused to share her chestnuts—roughly the equivalent of "Get your own bag!" from modern potato chip advertising. And as Sister Margaret Anne had said in my English Lit class, the Devil can't kill someone outright, since only God can do that. Kind of like the "You can't kill anyone" rule of the genie from *Aladdin*, at least the Disney version.

Of course, the Devil isn't particularly well known for obeying God's rules, so I'll add my own caveats and qualifiers right now, even though I style myself as a white, or at least funky gray, witch. Even *if* the Devil and the powers of Hell *can't* kill someone, they can come pretty damn close to it, at which point the person's own foolishness or ordinary bad luck usually tip them over the brink, and Heaven and Hell aren't the only forces on the block to begin with.

If you're going to summon the winds to do your bidding, the prices they charge depend on what you want to get done. "Go knock out that bitch's power!" is nowhere near as steep as "Send her house to Oz!" and likewise, even if you're not dealing with the spirits (who can be bribed by the witch on the other end) any directly offensive spell can be volleyed back, with charms as simple as lighting a candle and chanting "I send thy spell back at thee."

With stuff like that to contend with, most witches have the sense not to use death magick, except as their swansong, simply because 'Return to sender' spells tend to fizzle if the sender is already dead. Besides which Jodilyn Blake always struck me as a 'hands-on' sort of girl, and if she wanted to kill someone, she'd do it herself with a knife, up close and personal, no magick involved.

Anyway, as I sat by the window and watched Roland start the fire, I was troubled not by my dead certainty that the storm was Jodi's doing—and trust me, I was pretty clear on *that* fact—but that she'd known where to send it. I'd tossed a milkshake on her that afternoon, and fair's fair, but as witches measure these things, she was perfectly within her rights to knock out my electricity. Fine. No

trouble on that point. But she knew where I was, and that had me spooked, and with good reason, given her résumé.

As for how she'd found me, well, that was another matter. Mister Mistoffelees may have been her former familiar, and some might think that he would be a thread she could trace, but honestly, when a pact is broken, it's broken, and no one can find a cat unless he wants to be found. Likewise with any witch who's with the cat, especially a particularly magickal one that she's taken as familiar, and even when I was not with Mister Mistoffelees, I had my Udjat Eye at almost all times, yet another token of protection, and even without it, I'm sure that my sixth sense would pick up if some other witch were inquiring after me, at least by mystical means. Brent's cell phone was also about as untraceable as the Men in Black could make them, so no dice there either.

However, just like I said how a witch knows when someone opens one of her books (unless the reader takes really good precautions), I think it's just as reasonable for a witch to know when another witch works one of her spells. Sort of a supernatural copyright clause, and it's not as if I had a chance to light any candles or do any of the other rituals it's usually wise to do before attempting magick. And even if mystical copyright weren't the case with that particular spell—the idea of lopping certain things off is rather ancient, after all, and probably predates even Jodi—I'd bet money she'd been in town yesterday when I'd pulled off the trick and had her psychic radar up and said, "Oh wow! Someone did the old willie-napping spell! I better go welcome her to the club!"

A bit like my idea of the Magickal Nannies Guild, only not as nice.

But even if Jodi hadn't been able to track me down directly, due to black cats, Udjat Eyes, or just the hazard of tripping my sixth sense, she most certainly had been able to track down Brandon Kearny. Which explained her appearance at Ghirardelli Square, not to mention the traffic jam beforehand. After all, it's a standard terrorist tactic—take out the bridge and you block everyone, enemies included (plus you won't alert them until it's already too

late)—and while Brent’s phone line was secure, it was a pretty safe bet that Brandon Kearny’s was not. Especially since he’s listed in the San Francisco White Pages.

Which only left the puzzle of how Jodi’d tracked me down directly without alerting me to the fact. Possibly through Roland and the kids leaving early yesterday, possibly through tracing Alexander, maybe just from floating on a black cloud and watching with her opera glasses while I went flying through the Aether in a carriage pulled by a half bear, half tiger, and piloted by her former cat, and that was pretty spectacular even for the Spirit World....

“My bonnet, Mistress?” Mister Mistoffelees inquired, eyes glimmering in the half-light.

I sighed. It really didn’t matter how Jodi had tracked me down. The point is that she had. “Of course, dearest.” I set him down on the window ledge and opened my sewing kit. Paranoia is one thing, even reasonable paranoia, but there’s no sense in tweaking off your familiar unless absolutely necessary. As it stood, I hadn’t the faintest idea what I needed to do now, except think, and sewing is one of those activities that helps you concentrate.

So do charms, and as I stretched the thread taught, I began to sing, “Needle, needle, sew away. Make my bonnet bright and gay.” Julie Andrews I’m not, but the sliver of metal twitched in my fingers, almost guiding itself, and I let the spell take over, stitch after perfect stitch, weaving magick into my familiar’s new haberdashery. Mister Mistoffelees purred, watching the work, and began to knead my lap in time to the stitches. And it would have been a scene of perfect homespun granny magick if it weren’t for the lightning flashes and the wrestling children.

There’s a strange sort of calm that a witch gets into when she’s working a spell, especially if it’s via any of the ‘useful arts,’ and it had taken over me quite nicely. “Melanie?” I said, putting up one hand and catching her sleeve with a light touch as she ran past. “Mister Mistoffelees would like to be babied, and we were wondering if he might borrow your doll cradle?”

Melanie paused, then looked at my familiar's glowing eyes, then at me, and I must have looked pretty witchy right then, what with the needle and thread and the golden scissors glittering in the firelight. She blinked and almost dropped a curtsy—and would have if she'd ever been taught. "Sure. I'll go get it."

With the almost preternatural speed she'd demonstrated that afternoon, Alexander's daughter darted off, disappearing through the archway.

"Will I have silken sheets and eiderdown?" Mister Mistoffelees inquired.

"I don't know," I said. "We'll have to see what Strouds has on sale." I put the needle through the cloth again, witchcraft guiding my fingers, and I picked up the song anew. My familiar might be getting a bonnet and a baby bottle full of blood, but he had the talent of a congressman for tacking amendments and riders onto his contract, and I wasn't going to let my pact with him get so elaborate that I forgot any of the particulars.

Roland's fire was going nicely, the flames burning blue as pale cobalt glass, and I would have been alarmed if they didn't usually do that with Duraflame logs. Then I looked at my candle, and I suddenly stabbed the needle into my thumb I was so distracted.

The pain brought me sharply out of my trance, and I stuck my thumb in my mouth, sucking at the blood as I looked at the candle sitting on the redwood burl.

The flame was burning blue as a pilot light. And I shouldn't have to say it, but that was a sure sign that dark witchery was in the air. I'd seen it before, and by the pricking in my thumb, something wicked had most assuredly come this way. And with cold certainty I knew that wicked something to be none other than Jodi Blake.

As calmly as I could, I set down the baby bonnet and took my thumb out of my mouth. "Is it done, Mistress?" my familiar inquired.

"Almost just, precious," I said, standing up and smoothing down my dressing gown, then looked to *Señora* Duarte. "Shouldn't Melanie be—" I caught my breath as the thought suddenly occurred to me. There was no reason why Jodi Blake would choose to strike at me

directly, and I knew exactly how well kept her oath not to trouble ‘me or mine.’ And after targeting Peter, who was the closest I might have to a boyfriend, Melanie Gorian most certainly fit the bill of someone Jodi might try to snare.

And I’d sent her off into the house alone.

There is a cold and deadly calm that comes with witchcraft. “Come, Mister Mistoffelees. We have business to attend to.”

“What of my doll cradle?” my familiar inquired as I scooped him up onto my shoulder.

“Well,” I said, “we need Melanie’s permission to use hers, and I think it best that we go see what’s keeping her.”

Señora Duarte picked up on the words between the lines, and while she may not like either me or Melanie, she’s been serving the Gorian family for so many years that she knows when her domain is threatened. “Perhaps we all might go as well. It would be unfortunate to be separated on a night like this, and the girl may be frightened.”

Alexander stood there in the flickering blue light from the fire pit, and maybe it was my aura he was reading, or possibly just the subtext of the interchange between me and *Señora Duarte*, but he suddenly stood as still as the dead man he is. “What’s going on, Penny?”

“Well,” I began, and while it’s a great aid in many things, a witch’s calm doesn’t help much with the uncomfortable truth, “you know how you have troubles, except I took care of one? It’s sort of the same thing with me. And I’m afraid that one of my troubles followed me home.”

Alexander didn’t ask anything further, only scooped up Malory and his teddy bear. “Then let’s go.”

I took the lead, Alexander behind me, with *Señora Duarte* and Roland bringing up the rear. My Bombay silver plate candleholder was in my hand, and the flame glowed an uncanny blue, outdoing even Mister Mistoffelees’ eyes for sheer eeriness.

The glitter was echoed in Melanie’s room, blue witchlight reflected in the eyes of her dolls and stuffed animals, glimmering in

the shadows of the canopied princess bed. But she wasn't there, and neither was the cradle. Though a creaking sounded from the next room.

The door was open, and I stepped through, holding the candle high, into the nursery. Not nursery in the baby sense, but in the old British meaning—what most people now call a playroom, though with the rocking horse and mobiles casting long shadows onto the walls. Melanie was nowhere to be seen. But in the middle of the room was the promised cradle, rocking as though touched only moments before. Bettina, Kate's old doll, sat in the middle, and her embroidered eyes shone in the witchlight with bits of silver thread.

I paused, listening to the creak of the rockers, then reached out and stilled them. I'm no Spooky Pete, but even so, I swear, I could feel Kate's presence, and her fear. But beyond that, well... I picked up the rag doll and handed her to Malory, since with Jodi Blake on the prowl, the Gorians needed every bit of protection I could muster. Alexander did not comment about the appearance of his wife's childhood doll, and I didn't bother to say anything more. After all, I couldn't actually *see* anything, just feel it, vaguely, and if Bruno saw or heard anything more, he wasn't telling me.

Mister Mistoffelees also had the good grace not to ask about the cradle, or at least was following to the letter of my promise and the straight fact that only Melanie could give him clear title to the use of her toys. Familiars are very particular about such things, though it also may have been the fact that it was obviously Bettina's cradle, and my feline companion would not impinge on her rights unless Melanie gave him permission.

The thunder crashed outside, and I glanced around, wondering where Melanie might have gone, and where Jodi would make her entrance, if at all. Kate was here, if I wasn't deluding myself, but the ghost of Alexander's wife was either unknowing or unable to tell me where I should go next, and my usual lucky direction sense wasn't helping much either. "Please," I whispered, "just a sign..."

The lightning flashed again, outlining a pile of books on the windowsill in stark relief. Books. Books. *Jodi's books...*

The witch's books were upstairs, locked in my steamer trunk with no more protection than an easily picked lock, and Melanie knew the uses of a hairpin almost as well as I do. "My room," I said, then led the way out into the hall and up the back staircase.

The old Spanish woodwork around the door to my chambers loomed eerie in the witchfire, but the door was still unlocked as I went in. The room was calm and still, without even the scritch of my *Mont Blanc* from the rolltop, but the candleflame still burnt blue.

I ran my fingers through my hair, producing one of the hairpins I invariably miss, then leaned down and picked the lock of my magician's trunk. I threw the lid back with a crash against the wall, shining the light inside, and while it was a disordered mess, it was the same disordered mess I'd left it in, with both of Jodi's Books of Shadows still in the smaller compartment, weighed down by my Tarot cards and Dover reprints of the Lang 'coloured fairy' series.

I shut the trunk, then went to the rolltop, hairpinning the latch and rolling it up to reveal my own Book of Shadows, now wrapped in Madame Cleo's diamond-spangled shawl, with the crystal toad, my *Mont Blanc*, the inkwell, and the mummified left hand laid out neatly atop it, all but the Hand glittering in the candlelight.

Some explanation was of course necessary, as *Señora* Duarte looked disapprovingly at this grisly trophy in the middle of her immaculate house, but Hands of Glory have many uses, and I was about to put Thing to the test.

I lifted him up by the stump, then touched his fingers to the blue flame of the candle, intoning, "Hand of Glory, reveal to me, the path which leads to Melanie..."

The blue flame caught, eldritch and eerie, limning the Hand in flame, and Alexander and the rest stood there, transfixed by the Satanic glory of what I held in my hand. Then Thing released them from his power, the rays of unholy splendor drawing back, then stabbed together into a single beam of blue radiance as the mummified hand twisted in my grip and pointed one finger to the window.

The light struck the windowpane, twinkling like a laser on the rain-streaked glass, then continued on, pointing down into the

darkness. Then the lightning flashed, blue as the rest of the Satanic radiance, illuminating the beach, and far, far down the strand, a single figure, running towards another who stood at the water's edge, her arms outstretched.

"Kate..." Alexander gasped, looking as if he'd seen a ghost.

"No," Malory said with all the firmness and conviction of a preternaturally perceptive four-year-old. He hugged Bruno and Bettina to himself. "That's not mommy."

"It's Jodi," I said, and I know that something in my tone must have conveyed all the fear and horror the woman brought with her.

Señora Duarte looked at me with frank candor, one pencil-fine eyebrow raised. "Shall I get my gun?"

It hadn't occurred to me that *Señora* Duarte packed heat, having always thought of her as more of the Mrs. Danvers type, but then again, this was real life, not literature. "No," I said quickly, "don't bother. Just tell me the quickest way down to the beach. I can't match Jodi for speed, but the bitch is old-fashioned, and she won't leave without gloating first."

"This way," Roland said, and then I saw him do the first violent act I'd ever seen from the man. He popped the catch on the left-hand lancet, shoving it out beyond the crossbar's full extension till the metal screamed and the screws pulled out of the frame, then he jumped out, disappearing into the rain and darkness.

Before I could even gasp, I saw hands raised up, and I went to the window. While the promenade is a good story below my room, Roland, with his height and the stone planter directly below, was just able to make up the difference.

I stepped onto the window seat and hitched up my dressing gown with my free hand, not out of modesty, but to keep from snagging on the splintered window frame. Then Roland grabbed me with his huge hands and lifted me down.

I didn't wait. The beam from the Hand of Glory stabbed through the rain, leading down the marble steps and off past the switchback to the beach, where Melanie stood with Jodi at the ocean's shore,

the waves ravaging the beach to either side but never quite touching them.

While I may be a fan of gothic literature, running from a seaside mansion in your nightdress in the middle of a thunderstorm is not a circumstance to be envied. For one thing, all that picturesque whipping of the wind does not stop once it reveals an ankle or a nice bit of leg—and had, in fact, not only unknotted my dressing gown so it flapped behind me like Witchy-poo's cape, but was also attempting to lift my babydolls over my head despite my best efforts to hold down the hem. For another, the sand that flies with said wind scours every bit of exposed flesh, the rain pounds you in freezing sheets, and while I was able to partially shield my eyes with my other arm, I am nevertheless eternally grateful to several gods that I don't wear contacts. But at least my Ugg booties (which are a favorite of surfers) gave some traction on the wet sand and moreover kept me from pitching onto my face as I fought my way down the beach.

Jodi stood at the shoreline, looking like some twisted Madonna (the Mother of Jesus, not the pop star) or Venus arisen from the waves on a bad day, since, unlike me, she obviously knew the word to complete the eggshell charm: Beneath her perfectly pedicured feet was a coracle made of equal parts bone and moonlight, a pearly white boat somewhere between the half-shell Botticelli and Kilgore Trout had both given Venus and the lunar crescent that the Virgin of Guadeloupe plays surfer chick with on all the votive candles in the 'Ethnic Specialties' aisle of the supermarket. Jodi'd perverted the rest of the iconography to her own ends as well, including a sexier version of the Madonna's red dress and blue mantle, capped with the tiara of stars over her flawless, smiling face, which, needless to say, didn't look a day over twenty-five. The long golden curls were a calculated touch, trailing off only slightly in the air, unsullied by a single drop of rain, as I stumbled over a heap of kelp and into eye of the storm.

The wind abruptly stilled to a pleasant breeze—despite the fact that it was near gale force but a few feet behind me—the rain lessened to nothing more than sea spray and ocean mist, and the

barest edge of a wave lapped the beach in front of me, turning the sand into a reflecting pool for a split second. And in that split second I saw Jodi again as she truly is: an ancient toothless hag with one milky eye, this time got up in a red dress and blue cloak, a crown of dime-store tinsel on her head. Like Queen Zixi of Ix, who no matter how beautiful she made herself appear, the mirror always revealed her true age and ugliness.

Then the wave washed back, and only my Ugg boots and an instinctive recoil from the truth I'd seen kept me from falling to my knees in front of her. "Ha-hahahahaha!" Jodi trilled, her laughter tinkling like Glinda the Good's after she'd learned that the Witch of the East had just had just been crushed to death by a falling house. "Hello, Penelope dearest. My, you certainly look a fright. And whatever is that awful thing you're holding?" She stroked Melanie's hair with one beautifully manicured hand while Melanie hugged her as if she were her long lost mother—and it was a safe bet that *that* was exactly what Jodi was having her see.

Unfortunately, I didn't have any milkshakes, let alone a gallon of plain milk, to shatter even the most trivial of her illusions, and there was also the sad fact that the slightest splash of wayward dairy product would also douse Thing, whose light was the one protection I really had. The business at the ice cream parlor had also been rather impromptu, and there was no way I was going to take Jodi with the same trick twice in an evening—even if it would have been satisfying to dump a bucket over her head and watch her makeup run. And it's not as if a second application of the milk bath was likely to melt her into a puddle screaming, "Oh who would have thought a good little Goth girl like you would destroy all this beautiful wickedness...!"

Given this, bashing it out head-on appeared to be the only course of action. I held the Hand of Glory high, doing my best tribute to Mrs. Zimmerman from *The Letter, the Witch, and the Ring* and *The Voice a la Frank Herbert*. "Melanie, get away from *that bitch*. She's not your mother." Thing's unholy radiance reached out to tap Melanie on the shoulder, but Jodi only waved her long crimson nails

and a shimmer rose up from the edge of the eggshell boat, surrounding her and Melanie in a bubble of light, just like Glinda's in the movie.

A warding circle. Very classic. And something completely invisible to the naked eye if it weren't for the witchlight from the Hand of Glory smearing unholy fingerprints all over the surface.

Jodi did her affected Glinda laugh again, and I swear, she deserves death if just for that. "How very clever of you, little witchling, to turn my own handiwork against me. I applaud you. Such initiative." She gestured to nothing in particular, rolling her eyes, then looked to me, one finger kept upraised. "But before we talk any further, let me ask you one question, just girl to girl..." She made a little moue, which is the short and fancy way of saying she pouted her lips, dimpled her cheeks, and looked up coquettishly as she brought her finger to said prettily pouting lips. "How *did* you manage it?"

"Manage what?"

Jodi waved offhandedly and rolled her eyes again in one of those gestures you only see in silent melodramas and pre-Raphaelite paintings. "Why, the sheer *size* of it." She flourished her nails in wonderment, then brought them to her breastbone, the classic 'Be still my beating heart, Oh! I think I might faint, my corset is cinched so tight...' gesture made famous in the Victorian age. "I'm familiar with the spell—*very* familiar, in point of fact—and while I'm pleased to find a young maiden taking up the tricks of our Sisterhood, I must quite frankly admit that it was a bit of a shock to find that it was *you* who most recently invoked the spell—and quite prettily too, I might add. But what I found of greatest interest was your signature flourish, that little personal touch you added to the weaving." She waxed rhapsodic, striking a pose like one of Rossetti's dewy-eyed beauties. "And the resulting *size*! The *beautiful* proportions! And to have it be true, and carnal, and fleshly, not some trifling glamour which will fade with morning's light. Oh, the Sisterhood owes you a debt of gratitude for such an *innovation*. And to have it work so *quickly* too..." She leaned over, flirting and conspiratorial as only a woman

discussing such matters can be. “Tell me, just between us girls, what is your secret?”

Though she was playing it up, I could also tell that the flattery was sincere, or at very least the old biddy was curious and it was driving her nuts that she couldn’t figure out what it was that I’d done.

I gave a mental shrug. It wasn’t as if I really cared if she knew, and diplomacy is a touchy game, so I might as well brag and get it over with. Especially since she’d pretty much admitted that my casting that spell was what had tripped her up to my location. “Beltane, microwave popcorn, and the Tears of Kali for pet food dishes.”

She paused, looking off into the gale and placing her finger back upon her lips. “My... yes... I can see where that *could* work.” She gave me a sharp look then. “Did you say ‘Tears’? You have more than one?”

I shrugged for real this time, since I had let it slip. “Three of them. I had four originally, but I gave one to Grimm.”

I’d managed to impress her a second time that night, not to mention shock a bit of the curl out of her hair. “You had four? *Four* of the Tears of Kali? And you let one slip through your hands, then you used the rest as *pet food dishes*?”

I smiled as winsomely as I could. “I was thinking to use them for potpourri, but they’re a little tacky, and anyway, I didn’t have any faux cobwebs.”

Jodi grimaced like an art dealer who’s just discovered the Mona Lisa hanging in a bathroom (where, as point of historical fact, it actually hung once), then shuddered and brushed the thought away as a concept she obviously didn’t want to deal with. “Never matter. It is of no importance. Four is still too few for my needs, though...” She trailed off, then looked to me. “Very well then, my young and *extraordinarily misguided* Sister. You have told me some of your secrets, and so, in turn, I will reveal some of mine. And more plainly than I did to your friend Peter, if he ever told you the tale.”

She gave a prim smile then, peacocking demurely, as if she were a Miss America contestant who had just been asked what cute and

wonderful thing she'd like to do for the world. "Suffice it to say I am old, I am desperate, and my hour is up in two nights time, at midnight on the Moon of the Full Flower and the final minute of Holy Rood Day. Unless—and here is the catch—I find the means to appease my Lord Charnas, the Duke of Mockery.

"This one," She paused to stroke Melanie's hair with her long, curved nails, "is a child of magickal blood. Not of perfect innocence, otherwise I could not hold her now, but close enough for Charnas's purposes. For her soul, if I can convince her, I might get a few more years. For her heart, perhaps a month. Little matter. It's time, and that's really all I care about at the moment." She smiled a smile that promised blowjobs for all the male judges, with similar favors for the women, and the moon shone on her like a spotlight, almost to full. "And I must thank you for leading me here, little magpie. Finding such a prize would have been troublesome otherwise, and I'm always happy to find a fee that will settle more than one account."

I clutched the Hand of Glory tighter, feeling its cold fire chill me to the bone. "You want me to take your place on the contract." The words were plain and simple, but I wanted them spelled out.

Jodi dimpled. "If you would be so kind, dear." She dimpled again. "It's not so bad as it sounds. Charnas can be a kind master, so far as demons go. At least for the first few centuries. And he's always amusing." She gestured grandly, as if she expected roses to be tossed at her feet any moment. "Why, for such a service I'd even be willing to forgive the slights you've done me thus far. Really, little Sister... burning my mansion, running off with my tricks, and worst of all, stealing my dear, darling, precious Grimalkin...."

She looked just to the left of me, barely breaking eye contact. "Have you tired of your wanderings yet, my pet? Mumsy is willing to let bygones be bygones. Just come back now, and in two nights time, I'll let you lick the knife."

Mister Mistoffelees reached out one paw and flexed his claws luxuriantly, magickally as dry as Jodi, even though I was soaked to the skin. "Mistress Penelope let me lick the knife not half an hour ago. Twice." He pulled his paw back, then reached out and stretched

the other. "Plus, she's making me a baby bonnet, and has promised me a cradle."

Jodi paused, digesting this information, and I believe gathering from it the facts that A). Her former familiar liked baby bonnets, and B). Her current adversary, despite being a good little Goth girl, seemed to have no qualms about human sacrifice.

She looked at me, then at Mister Mistoffelees. "But is it your favorite, precious? Sweet innocent babies' blood?"

Mister Mistoffelees pulled his paw back and began to knead my shoulder possessively. "Exactly like you used to give me, Mistress Jodilyn," he said in his strange talking-cat voice, not mentioning that it was, in fact, the *exact same* blood. "Plus Mistress Penelope thinks to give me playthings you never gave me." He purred. "Only last week, she gave me *The Aristocats* on video."

Jodi paused at the last item, obviously having to digest this tidbit of information as well, then looked to me, and gave me the third look of respect I've ever gotten from the woman. "Bravo," she said. "You're progressing nicely in your studies. I didn't expect such pragmatism."

I didn't expect to be put in this position, but then half of magick is illusions and appearances, and it wasn't as if Jodi Blake would be the first woman to draw the wrong conclusion that night. "One *must* do what one has to to please one's familiar and honor the compact. Otherwise, he *might* just find a better Mistress." I petted Mister Mistoffelees with my free hand and he purred in agreement, neither letting on nor caring that I procured his innocent baby blood via any method aside from the usual.

Jodi gave an expression like the princess who has just kissed the frog, only to discover warts instead of a prince. "Of course one must...." She looked to Mister Mistoffelees. "Very well, Grimalkin. I wish you happiness with your new Mistress. For however many years she might last. I suppose I took you for granted, and for that I am truly sorry, though my offer remains open...."

She smiled to me then, a nasty smile, with a glance like Glinda signaling her Munchkin contractors and the crane with the second

farmhouse. “Yet there is one whose loyalties I will not question. Sinestro—slap this little minx and return to your true Mistress!”

The Hand of Glory quivered in my fingers, the radiance drawing back into flaming nails atop the fingertips, and I looked up at it. “Thing,” I said, with all the witchiness I possessed, “who let you out of your box? Who’s gave you two new friends in the past two days?”

“Sinestro...” Jodi threatened in the voice of the bitch-queen She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed.”

“And who,” I added, “is the bitch who cut you off your body, bound your soul into your fingers, and is the old hag who’s been calling you ‘Lefty’ for the past four-hundred years?” I held the Hand of Glory closer to my face, both to show that I trusted him not to claw me (nasty as that would be) and to look conspiratorially over at Jodi. “I’ll tell you who. That bitch over there....”

“Smite her, Sinestro!” Jodi shrieked and the Hand of Glory flared, and I swear, I would have dropped it right then except my own hand was clenched so tight and the flames were so cold that my fingers were just about paralyzed. “You’re a murderer! What are you waiting for? Strike her down! Let her cheek bear your mark! Then return to your true Mistress....”

“I know you killed someone, once,” I said softly, looking at the flaming mummified hand, “but that was a long time ago, and I bet you didn’t want to do it. It’s just that you stole something, and you knew they’d kill you if you were caught. And the only reason you stole anything is because you were poor, and you couldn’t get a job, because no one trusted you since you were born left-handed, and they said that that was the Devil’s hand, and you couldn’t change the way you were, even though you tried and tried....”

I know, it’s not your usual witch’s trick to psychoanalyze undead mummified extremities, but it seemed a safe bet given the available data, plus what little I knew about gangbangers and street people. Not to mention unpleasant memories of the second grade when Sister Mary Agnes drove poor Ellie Mitchell to tears, even though Ellie was the sweetest girl you’d ever meet and the last person you’d nominate for ‘Spawn of Satan.’ “The bastards said you were born

bad. That you were ‘evil.’ But you weren’t, everyone just treated you like you were, and finally, one day, you got angry. Nothing strange in that. Nothing anyone should even blame you for. But someone died, and they hanged you, and then, before you could finally rest, this *evil bitch* here used black magick to drag you back to be her slave. And what’s worse, she never even called you by your Christian name—she just called you ‘Lefty’ for the next four-hundred years. Isn’t that right?”

I don’t know if it’s possible for a mummified hand to weep, but the fingers wilted and the cold flames trickled down like Ellie Mitchell’s tears.

“Sinestro!” Jodi screamed. “You are one of the Creatures of Darkness! You are a Tool of Power! Now revel in it and do as I say!”

The Hand of Glory quivered, the fingers curling down in shame as droplets of blue flame fell to the beach. Then one finger stiffened, sticking straight up as the wrist twisted in my grip to show Jodi the back of his hand.

Jodi gasped, and I’d hazard a guess this was because in all her many years, she’d never been flipped-off by a Hand of Glory. Especially not her own. “*Et tu, Sinestro? Et tu?*” Jodi struck another pre-Raphaelite pose—‘Wounded to the Heart by Foul Betrayal’—clutching her breast, but she certainly wasn’t getting my Oscar nomination, since she kept one hand wrapped tight in Melanie’s hair.

And this was the moment when Roland, *Señora* Duarte, and Alexander and Malory stumbled through the curtain of rain beside me. Obviously unable to find Ugg boots in his size, Roland pitched forward onto his face, but *Señora* Duarte was able to spare herself from a similar fate by stepping on him. Together, we both caught Alexander and Malory, steadying our boss on his feet.

Roland got to his knees and reached for Melanie, but the moment his hands touched the globe of moonlight, the eggshell boat danced back, bobbing on the surface of the unnaturally calm water around it.

Jodi laughed, this pratfall allowing her to recover her good humor and false air of gaiety. "Oh, you amuse me, giant. Such forwardness. I like a man who knows what he wants."

Roland said nothing, and Señora Duarte, having stepped back off of him, looked at Jodi, and I knew she would have done to her what the English nanny did to Madame La Farge at the end of the *Tale of Two Cities*. If, that is, she had her gun, and it had any hope of working.

"Let Melanie go, you bad old witch." Malory glared at her, and I could tell that he wasn't even seeing Jodi's illusions and glammers.

Jodi laughed again. "What are you talking about, little one? Can't you see? I'm your own dear mother Katie, and I've come back for you. Your daddy can see very well...."

Malory continued to glare, his look of disgust only matched by a scowl of righteous indignation so pure only a child could make it, and Jodi then looked to Alexander, attempting to salvage what she could of her illusions. "Alex, darling, I'm back... I forgive you..." To me, she just looked like the pretty Venus/Madonna clone, but I could tell from Alexander's expression that he saw Kate, and he began to take a step forward.

"No, daddy!" Malory screamed. "Don't look at her! She's not mommy! She's just an ugly old witch with one eye and no teeth!" Alexander didn't seem to hear him, caught in Jodi's false visions, until Malory took the short expedient of hugging his father's head, blinding him with pajamas, teddy bear and rag doll and knocking him off balance.

Jodi may have been able to project her pretty lies through a lot of obstacles, but getting someone to ignore a four-year-old wrapped around his head was out of the league of almost any witch. And I could tell that Malory's words and knowing look had wounded her worse than even Thing's betrayal.

"Forget them," I said, brandishing the Bird of Glory and its unholy one-fingered salute. "Forget them, Jodi. This is between us, and I'll call the Fates to witness it." I'm not certain why I said the last, but the lightning flashed, crossing and forking like a spider's web.

Jodi's eyes flashed with what looked to be a trace of fear, or at least I'd shocked her away from the distraction of her vanity. "Don't trouble the Higher Powers, little fool. You don't know what you meddle with."

"No," I allowed, "but I seem to be doing an excellent job of winging it. And I didn't say that I am. I only said that I will."

"Even such promises hold power." Jodi's eyes darted as Malory smothered his father, flogging him with the teddy bear and rag doll, and Roland tried to keep them from stumbling into the ocean. "Very well, then. The matter is between us. I have the girl. What would you give for her ransom?"

I glanced around, not wanting to offer too much, but knowing Melanie's freedom wouldn't come cheap. "The Tears of Kali?"

Jodi sneered. "You offer me your old pet food dishes?"

Before she let loose with another fake laugh, I cut in with, "No, I offer you the sacrificial cups you almost dropped your dentures over not five minutes ago."

She pursed her lips and glared. "*Touché*, witchling. Very well then. But I'd need at least ten of the twenty. Could you obtain those in the next two days? Do you perhaps know any of your little friends who might be using them for potpourri?"

I shivered. Serendipity only goes so far. And while I'm confident in my skill as a finder of magickal toys and playthings, I was not about to bet Melanie's life on my luck at garage sales. "Maybe in six months," I said. "It takes a while to find anything."

"True," Jodi said, "and while I know from the whisperings dear Bryce has set loose that you discovered not only the Golden Pear of Böttger, but the Elector of Saxony's Silver Key—and I now recognize the talisman you wear as if it were some lesser bauble, for all that you think you have it hidden beneath your blouse—it's not much use by its lonesome, and I don't think Bryce would part with his half of the prize so easily as you might. Extortion sets a bad precedent in his business, even to ransom a girl so sweet as this." She clenched her hand tighter in Melanie's hair. "Besides which, while the Pear holds

the promise of immortality, promises are not necessarily kept, and at present I'd prefer not to bet on anything short of a sure thing."

I took a deep breath. "So you want my soul."

Jodi shrugged, shaking her hair so the long curls bobbed and the stars twinkled on her brow. "Not necessarily yours, Pretty Penny. Your friend Peter's would do just as nicely, if not more so."

"Besides, little Sister," She gave a smile of camaraderie, "we're not so very different, are we? You've already obtained Grimalkin's favorite sweetmeat, so I can hardly understand your reluctance, or even the importance of this child here—except, I assume, for the fact that your dealings with the nightgaunt depend on her safety?"

She sighed, oh-so-very-pleased with herself. "And I'll freely admit, I don't have my heart set on this child being my gift to Lord Charnas, any more than Lord Charnas must have *this* girl in particular. So you're perfectly welcome to come up with a substitute. It's not as if friends and lovers aren't cheap and plentiful as fish in the sea anyway, and trust me, but you can always get more." She dimpled. "Why, if you like, we could summon Lord Charnas together. You could learn from my experience, Penelope, while I might profit from your youthful innovation."

I gritted my teeth. If Jodi Blake knew the full scope of my 'youthful innovation,' she would have dropped her false teeth then and there. Just before flying into a rage at being played for a fool again, since even if it *does* work, sacrificing shoplifted butter in lieu of innocent babies is not one of those things that readily springs to mind. Besides which I'm pretty certain that 'Lord Charnas' is nowhere near as easy-to-please as my familiar, and would probably not be satisfied with any of my little 'substitutions' even if I were to offer him the entire yearly output of *Ben & Jerry's*.



Though I knew better than to let *that* on. "I will have to consider my options, Jodi. So many friends—How could I possibly choose between them?" I smiled the vilest Wednesday Addams' smile I could. "I suppose I'll figure it out. Where will you be conducting the rite?"

Jodi may have been fooled, but was not so much of a fool that she spelled it out. “I love evil spirits, don’t you, Sister Penelope? *They* know. The dark spirits have *always* known. All you need to do is call them and they’ll take you there...” She laughed another laugh, this one starting as Glinda’s and ending as the Wicked Witch of the West’s. “I will take great pleasure in introducing you to Lord Charnas and the joys of his service, and I know you shall find it a... revelation.” She pulled Melanie tighter to her, just in case I might attempt any last-minute treachery. “But for now, Pretty Penny, I’m afraid I must take my leave, to prepare the spirits to rejoice in My Lord’s arrival. I look forward to your company in two nights time, and my apologies, but... I shall return home now. *Paraka.*”

The moment she said “Thank you!” in Romany, the eggshell boat spun round, the wind whipping round it and the globe of moonlight, and the next moment, it sped out to sea, and I felt the chill of age-old truth run down my spine: *Over the sea, away from home/Far by night the witches roam.*

The next moment, the wind came up in earnest and we were swamped by a wave. “Higher ground! Quickly!” ordered *Señora Duarte*.

For once, I was not inclined to argue.



Penny Dreadful™

A Mage: The Ascension® Novel in Eight Parts and an Epilogue

Part Seven

In which Alexander isn't hysterical, in either sense of the word; Penny keeps a promise, Mister Mistoffelees talks of how things used to be, and of how he would like a pie; Penny sends Thing on a trip and is inspired to a Devilish scheme involving Great-Aunt Eudora's carpets; Señora Duarte picks out a corset, and Malory reminds Penny of the importance of saying "Thank you," a game of cat's cradle, and the trouble with the morning commute; Penny and Roland visit Den-Wa's, and Penny's subsequent excursion to the crossroads, where she rolls out the red carpet for a gentleman of wealth and taste; and finally, a wild hare seeks to repay a debt.

Kevin Andrew Murphy



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Friday, the 3rd of May
Full Flower Moon
Holy Rood Day
Just past dawn

Odds are you've never had to deal with a hysterical vampire, and I'll freely admit that before the wee hours of Thursday morning, I never had either. Not, of course, that I could blame Alexander—he'd hired me (albeit unknowingly) to protect his children from kidnapping by lycanthropic in-laws, and while I'd done that neatly enough, I was also the indirect cause of his daughter's abduction by a witch who planned to offer her to a demon as a 'just because' present.

Well, to be honest, Alex wasn't hysterical. For one, you need to be a woman to do that, since if you go by the old beliefs, particularly the writings of Aristotle, hysteria is what happens when your womb becomes loose and goes dancing off on its lonesome. Which is enough to make any woman flip out, or at least would do the trick for me. And while until recently I subscribed to the interpretation popular in the local women's community and wrote the idea off as sexism and the silly notions of those superstitious Greeks, after the events of the past few days, I cannot altogether dismiss the possibility, and moreover think the shade of Aristotle deserves an apology from modern feminists, at least on this one point.

After all, what's sauce for the gander is also sauce for the goose, and I can only hope that the Cosmic Powers don't give me a taste of my own medicine for the phallus-filching spell and let me go hysterical myself—in the old Aristotelian sense of the word.

But as for Alex being hysterical, in any sense, he was actually just being frantic and rational, which was far, far worse. You can ignore hysterical people, or at least just tell them they're paranoid and delusional and dismiss whatever it is they're ranting about. Yet the cold truth of the matter is that all the horrifying scenarios Alexander came up with were completely logical and reasonable, given the available data and everything I knew of Jodi Blake. And unfortunately, while Alex is an actual vampire, and could have called in favors from his vampiric clansmen—if the phones were in working order, or at least the thunderstorm quit playing havoc with *Cellular One*—his clan specializes not so much in turning into bats and commanding armies of wolves as mundane stuff like politics and business and banking.

Ruining Jodi's credit rating seemed somewhat less than useful—even if we suddenly got the phones back, which didn't seem likely any time in the near future—and doing anything more than that would let slip that his children were blood relations to the werewolves, and *that* would cause even more problems than we had already.

I was heartily grateful for the sunrise, for all that the only sign of it was Alex slumping to the floor and falling face-first onto one of my Turkish carpets. I was also momentarily perplexed, never having witnessed vampiric narcolepsy, but *Señora* Duarte was obviously an old hand at it. "Roland, take the Master to his chambers. The sun is up." She glanced to the window of my bedroom, her expression adding, *Not, of course, that you can tell.*

The storm still raged against the glass and spat through the cracks in the broken frame, the winds doing every bit of work Jodi had contracted them for and then some, despite the fact that the witch had long since sailed away. Oh well, I suppose there's something to be said for honesty among the supernatural work force.

Regardless, since Jodi's little present had sealed us all so neatly inside the house, without power, phone, or any other contact with the outside world, I continued with the other part of what had Alex so upset: Namely, honoring my pact with Mister Mistoffelees.

"The three little kittens, they lost their mittens, and they began to cry, 'Oh mama dear, see here, see here, our mittens we have lost. Meow, meow, meow..." My familiar nursed happily from his baby bottle, his paws wrapped securely over the form of Winki-Pinki, and with the bonnet and christening gown and Malory's old baby blanket, he looked remarkably like the cat in *The Three Lives of Thomasina*. With the notable exception, of course, that Thomasina had been an orange tabby, a female, and had only drunk milk from her baby bottle, not blood.

I continued on with my best Julie Andrews impression, which always seems to be helped by just a touch of British accent: *"What bad little kittens—You've lost your mittens? Then you shall have no pie! 'Meow, meow, meow..."*

I'll admit, it was hardly 'Oh I Love Little Pussy,' but I'd rather spoiled *that* song on our first meeting, having used it to lull Mister Mistoffelees to sleep before stuffing him in my lunch pail. The alternatives—'Stray Cat Strut,' 'Love Cats,' and POT-USA's 'Kitty'—all left something to be desired as well. At least 'The Three Little Kittens' was easy enough to turn into a lullaby, and moreover, had a happy ending, which was very much to be desired under the circumstances.

Mister Mistoffelees pushed the bottle out of his mouth. "Shall I have a pie, Mistress?"

I rocked the cradle, smiling as prettily as I could. "That depends.... Tell me more about Mistress Jodilyn." I smoothed down the blanket and its design of anthropomorphic blue gingham mice. "Especially her pact with the demon."

"It's rather dull." Mister Mistoffelees yawned, curling his pink tongue. "Nothing out of the ordinary. Just long life and protection from death." He pulled the bottle close, taking another suck of baby's blood, then added, "Very foolish, if you ask me, though she did

it long before I took her as a companion. I'd have advised her to at least ask for something *useful*. Like being a cat. Then she would have not only gotten nine lives, but beauty as well."

"How very foolish of her to pass that up." I placed the bottle back in his mouth and scritchd his ears until he purred. "If she'd been clever, she would have sought you out before she even *thought* to talk to a demon. Though then again, I don't see why she'd even need a silly old demon once she had you."

Mister Mistoffelees purred, his ego nicely stroked. "She wouldn't; I'm *much* prettier than a demon, and much cleverer too. And demons *are* silly; they're always making mistakes."

I scratched a bit more. "Such as?"

He pushed his bottle down and rubbed back against my fingers. "Oh, stupid little errors. Appearing as Rhine maidens but adding chicken feet. Wearing the wrong number of heads for this world. Things of that nature." He purred louder, snuggling. "Even Mistress Jodilyn spins her Seemings better than that, for all that they're shadow-thin. And it was very foolish of her to break the pact and displease me. She's all but blind without my aid."

I knew, without asking it, that he did not mean physically (even though when I'd pierced her glammers, I'd seen that her right eye was covered over with cataracts, like the Wicked Witch of the West's in the Barry Moser illustrations). He meant mystically, like his own power to see through illusions, or Peter's ability to see Death, even when It came walking through the men's room of a Goth club.

When Jodi had encountered the pooka, she'd been as completely and utterly bamboozled by his faerie tricks as I was until I picked up my cat and used his whiskers for crosshairs. Which meant that for all the years that she'd had Mister Mistoffelees (then Grimalkin), Jodilyn Blake had come to rely on the cat's supernatural awareness. Not just since his perceptions were nothing short of amazing, but because they had the added advantage that a witch didn't have to use them unless she wanted to.

Let me explain: Jodi is old. And she's vain. The scene in the ice cream parlor when I stripped away her illusions proved that if

nothing else did. And like any woman that old and that vain (though admittedly most won't ever get *that* old), she doesn't like to be seen without her makeup. Which includes seeing herself without it.

Mister Mistoffelees sees her the way she truly is. Not that he cares; after all, he's a cat. But Jodi, looking at herself through his eyes, would see the crone she truly is, the one I'd seen in the water and the one everyone had seen in the ice cream parlor the day before. Which means that if Jodilyn Blake ever made use of her familiar's perceptions, she'd used them the way you would a pair of reading glasses—look, don't look—and having an advantage like that, she'd never have trained herself how to see without him. Not like someone like Peter could.

Which also meant that I had an edge against the old biddy, since I had Mister M— and she didn't.

I still had no doubts that Jodi could focus her magickal perceptions if she needed to—if she got suspicious of anything, she could no doubt still give a mystic squint and see what was up—but so far as casual notice goes, automatically stripping away the deceits and illusions, sorry. She'd lost that ability along with her cat, just as I'd gained it with same, and it took a natural talent like Peter to use the Sight without squinting or getting help from a familiar. Which is why she'd been fooled by the pooka; he hadn't given her any cause for suspicion, or at least not enough to risk the horror of seeing through her own illusions.

As I've said before, a witch can learn a lot from her familiar.

"Thank you, Mister Mistoffelees," I said, tucking the blanket around him. "That's very interesting to know...."

"I'm glad you appreciate me, Mistress..." he purred, pulling the bottle closer, and gave it a suck, his expression intimating that if I *really* wanted to make my appreciation known, I'd offer him some other pretty plaything. Like baby bonnets and bottles of blood.

I just smiled, rocking him in the cradle. He was a *very* clever cat, and next thing you knew, he'd be wanting a pair of boots and a pirate hat. But while I had no problem giving him extra pretties, I'd rather

save the Puss-'n-Boots ensemble for a really big bribe. So I just smiled wider and said, "What type of pie would you like?"

He looked up from his bottle. "Fatted mice and larks braised in butter?"

I glanced over to *Señora* Duarte. "Does *Swansons* make those?"

My enemy of the day before had become my ally, or at least Alexander's housekeeper understood the importance of mollycoddling Jodilyn Blake's former familiar if we wanted to understand the witch's *modus operandi* and get a few more clues as to how to proceed. "I'm afraid not," she responded, deadpan, "but I believe we have a turkey pot pie."

Mister Mistoffelees licked his lips. "May I have a turkey pot pie, Mistress?"

"Of course, precious," I rocked the cradle, watching the blood wash back and forth in the bottle, "but not immediately, I'm afraid. The power is still out, and as luck would have it, the kitchen doesn't have gas."

Mister Mistoffelees began to wail. "I want a turkey pot pie! I want a turkey pot pie! I was cold and wet and got ducked in the water, and now I'm tired..."

"And very, very cranky. I know, sweetie. I'm tired too." Not to mention that I hadn't the slightest chance to get cleaned up beyond dropping my soaked dressing gown and T-shirt in the corner and wrapping myself in my bathrobe. "Just rest, precious, and *Señora* Duarte and I will see what we can do." I leaned down, slipping the bottle out of his paws, and kissed him on the nose. "Sleep now."

"Yes, Mistress Penelope," my familiar said, curling up in Melanie's doll cradle, which I'd decided to appropriate regardless of the proprieties. It's not as if Melanie didn't have bigger things to worry about at the moment.

Señora Duarte, in some testament to the fanatical dedication of a vampire's servants or I'm not sure what, still stood there in her water-soaked brown velvet dress. "Is there any way I might be of assistance?" she asked in a low undertone, so as to not wake Mister

Mistoffelees, or, for that matter, Malory, who was tucked into my bed under the Union Square quilt.

“Get me the pot pie,” I whispered back, then, after a glance at the Turkish carpets and my new pink shoulder bag, added, “and also a metal lunchbox, if you have one.”

Señora Duarte only raised an eyebrow, but did not question anything further. Something I’d gathered during the hours-long rant with Alexander, but she was *much* older than her Master, and had been passed down by the Gorian family, along with Roland, the house, and a majority of the furnishings. It was odd to think of people as heirlooms, but then again, it made an odd sort of sense in a vampire dynasty, and giving the new Master a well trained servant who could fill him in on all the proprieties probably saved trouble for the rest of the clan in the long run.

She’s also one of those people who’s born to serve, which is probably why the vampires tapped her in the first place. And while I’m not much into servitude or calling anyone ‘Master,’ I can still understand the mindset, since I myself can’t resist helping people.

Especially if I’m the one who’s partly to blame for the mess to begin with. “Mister Mistoffelees?” I whispered, leaning over and tickling his ear.

“Yes, Mistress?” he asked sleepily.

I licked my lips. “If I wanted to summon a demon, could you help me with that?”

He grumbled. “Of course, Mistress. But I’m tired. Couldn’t we do it later?”

“Of course, precious. Just sleep...” I rocked him a few more times, glancing again at Aunt Eudora’s Turkish carpets and accent rugs, a wild scheme beginning to take shape in my mind.

Now follow along with me here, since this is a bit complicated: Given that, in two night’s time, Jodi Blake was going to meet with her demonic master, whom she called Lord Charnas for lack of a better name, or at least this was a good enough moniker for the creature of the Outer Darkness who held the mortgage on her soul. And also given that, since she’d admitted to doing it numerous

times in the past, she would try to renegotiate her contract, using Melanie or whoever or whatever else came to hand to buy herself a little more time.

Now, given all this, just to make a supposition, mind you, well... what would happen if the demon didn't show up?

Wouldn't she feel stupid?

I've seen all the nastiness on *Geraldo* with 'Young Satanists Who Sacrificed Their Mothers,' and I knew Jodi Blake didn't fit into that crew. She wasn't the sort of woman to just sacrifice someone unless she knew, for certain, that there was a demon there ready to accept her offering, or at very least an imp authorized to give her a receipt for her stipulated monthly payment.

Not that I think she's above just killing someone for the hell of it, but by her own admission, she likes to "find a fee that settled two accounts," meaning that she wasn't going to commit murder without at least figuring out something amusing to do with the corpse. And if she was going to kill someone for Hell, with the capital H, she was going to make certain the Dark Masters sat up and paid attention when she put the apple on their desk, so to speak.

Now if, *in two nights time*, Jodi was making ready to suck up to Lord Charnas, and ask for extra time on her contract, pretty please, with sugar and extra blood on top, what would happen if, *in one night's time*, I had my own meeting with Lord Charnas—after which he might be, well, shall we say, *indisposed*, and therefore unable to make it Jodi's party?

After all, demons, from all the stories, are fussy about manners, same as the rest of the spirits, and Jodi was hardly going to cut the cake before the guest of honor arrived. And she wouldn't dare do anything else with Melanie until she'd figured out where Lord Charnas had gotten to, since the last thing anyone wants is a surprise visit from the boss.

There was also the plain fact that, while dealing with the Devil is dumb, stupid, bad for your immortal soul, and several other things Mother Catherine Claire and the rest of the Holy Sisters did their best to drill into my head, if I had to choose between summoning Lord

Charnas myself, or standing by while Jodilyn Blake made her good buddy from the Outer Darkness feel welcome, well, I'd take Door Number One, thank you very much, Monty, and leave it at that.

Which simply left the spell and the method. Jodi's notes on 'How to Summon the Demon Charnas,' while detailed, were somewhat less than useful, and this was even more the case with the related section on 'How to Conduct a Satanic Orgy.' First off, I didn't have dozens of horny devil worshippers to help with the decor, and secondly, I really wasn't planning on pledging my soul to the creatures of the Outer Darkness as the invocation suggested. Especially not if they had "a member lyke unto that of an asse, yette forkyd and colde as ice..." If Jodi's reports are to be believed, but frankly, I saw little reason to doubt them.

Which left my personal favorite, Christopher Marlowe, and his *Tragical Historie of Doctor Faustus*. My main experience with Marlowe's *Faust* was helping with set design for a production of it Rex staged several months back—Blackrose doing the sluttiest Margaret it's ever been my displeasure to witness—but I've seen it and read it, and the folklore seemed just as accurate as Shakespeare and everyone else's. Plus, I had a witch's cat who could give suggestions as to how to improve my own solo act.

I put the play into my satchel, along with Zipes' translation of the *Deutshes Volksmarchen*, a.k.a. *Grimm's Fairytale*s, the King James Bible, the paperback edition of *The Key of Solomon*, the assorted miscellany I'd emptied from my lunchbox the day before to make way for Brandon's magnified member, and, for good measure, an olive wood rosary my Aunt Janice had sent me from the Holy Land. I then added my *Mont Blanc*, my Book of Shadows and the shawl, along with Thing, now extinguished and apparently exhausted from his own confrontation with the Bitch from Hell.

I paused, looking at the mummified hand. Poor Thing had quite literally spent himself, and his fingertips were singed where he'd run short of the tallow of murdered men. And while I hadn't really planned to refuel him, that was before he'd proven himself to be so useful and helpful and switched his loyalties from Jodi to me.

I glanced at the last sticks of butter, wondering whether they'd turn into the fat of dead babies instead of the blood if I poked them with an apostle spoon or something, but I really didn't have time to experiment at the moment. Likewise, I'd also have to ask Thing to write out his real name sooner or later, even if I didn't have time for that now. It was one thing to be all Goth and have fun playing Morticia Addams, sitting in your peacock-backed chair while you read the mail, and another to realize that your Hand of Glory is a real person, or at least had been, and that he deserved a little respect same as anybody else. Calling him "Thing" was just a step above "Lefty," and while I might salve my conscience to think that my Hand of Glory is an Addams Family fan, my guess is that he just has the world's worst self-image, and was merely happy to be called anything aside from "Lefty," so long as it was said nicely.

Inspiration, however, is a wonderful thing, and I was thankful for one brief second that Jodilyn Blake is such a traditional old hag. After hunting around in my conjurer's trunk a bit, I located the fourth item which every wicked witch worth her circle of salt has in addition to the Hand of Glory, the Book of Shadows, and the black cat, and which I'd also pinched from Jodi's mansion before burning it down. No, not the broomstick. What I had was the flying ointment, which is the active ingredient a witch really needs to grease up her stick and go.

Jodi's was in a cute little iron cauldron of the type you find in New Age shops, just the size for holding incense charcoal or setting on a mini-altar in a student apartment, and I'd guessed what the pretty green pomade inside was the moment I smelled it. Just so you know, but flying ointment—alongside betel, belladonna, henbane, wolfsbane, and black and white hellebore—also contains hashish and poppy straw extract. And you can't live long in the Haight without learning to recognize the last two ingredients by scent.

Aside from the obvious entertainment value of the recipe, the herbs also have their symbolic meanings—Belladonna for Silence, and Hemp for Fate (yes, really)—but flying ointment is also, traditionally, made with the fat of unbaptized birth-strangled ba-

bies, *a la* ‘MacBeth’ and *Warlock*. And while most modern witches substitute stuff like *Crisco* and hand cream, Jodi had proven herself to be one of the “If it was good enough for us in the Middle Ages, it’s good enough for me now” school and wouldn’t put up with new-fangled notions unless she had to.

I dunked the Hand of Glory in the pot, the chartreuse grease releasing the scent of flowers and head shops. “Consider it a well earned trip. You deserve it.”

The Hand came alive just long enough to burrow down into the salve, the flying ointment nearly overflowing the pot, but I put the lid on and quickly snapped the cute little locking catch, just as *Señora* Duarte came in with the turkey pot pie, still in its box, and a black metal lunch pail circa 1950s that would easily go for twenty to thirty bucks at a retro boutique.

“Will these do?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, “nicely. Thank you.” I took the turkey pot pie and threw it in my shoulder bag along with the flying ointment and Thing, then took a moment to raid my stash of band stickers and personalize my latest lunch pail, adding ones for *Faith and the Muse*, *Martyr Colony*, *Abstinence*, and *Machines of Loving Grace*, these seeming the most appropriate for tweaking off a demon lord. Then I added an easily removable overlay of low-tack stickers by smearing lint on the back of ones for *The Electric Hellfire Club*, *Christian Death* and *Leather Strip*’s ‘Legacy of Hate and Lust,’ all of which looked to be just the sort of thing to turn Lord Charnas’s crank and convince him I was *his* sort of girl.

“You are preparing to go out.” It wasn’t a question, just a plain statement of fact, and I was not about to give *Señora* Duarte a snappy comeback, not with as tired as I was and what had just transpired.

“Yeah, I’ll have to.” I took a glance around, taking in my sleeping cat and Alexander’s sleeping son, and wishing I could take the luxury myself. “Let me take a shower.”

Señora Duarte nodded. “I will lay something out for you.” It was not a question, just another statement of the way things were, and I could tell that the woman’s personal coping mechanism for crises

was to be as neat and calm and orderly as possible until everything sorted itself out. Which I was grateful for, given the circumstances.

“Thanks. I’m going to have to look my best.”

She nodded, her expression giving tacit acknowledgement that I was the only person with even a remote chance of solving the current predicament, and given that, the best way for her to serve the Master was to serve me. A slight narrowing of the eyes added that if I failed in my task and allowed the Master to get hurt, it didn’t matter what Heaven, Hell, or Jodi Blake had in store for me—she would see to the matter first.

I nodded in return, acknowledging this but too tired to say anything more, then took my Bombay silver candleholder into the bathroom, threw my soaked clothes into the corner, took a comfort break, then stumbled into the shower, drawing the curtain around myself. While the power had been out since midnight, no one had used the hot water, so thankfully there was more than enough for me to wash the salt and sand out of my hair. I emerged wet and exhausted, but relaxed, and what I wanted more than anything was to crawl into the bed beside Malory and fall asleep.

However, *Señora* Duarte was standing ready with a cup of coffee when I came out. “Roland located the fondue pot,” she explained, and while it was cheap instant without the grace of cream or sugar, I was nonetheless grateful.

She’d also taken out my widow’s weeds: the Victorian mourning gown with the multiple petticoats, the black-dyed kid loves with the miniver cuffs, and the hat with the raven feathers and the black veil. Not my prettiest, but certainly my darkest, and since Victorian costuming was designed to stand up to soot and muddy hansom cabs, the traveling gown was also the most practical for a rain storm. If anything could be called practical given the circumstances.

“You haven’t an appropriate umbrella,” she said, both faulting me and pointing out that she’d noticed. “I’ve sent Roland to borrow one of the Master’s.”

I nodded, sipping the bitter instant brew, and glanced at the ornaments she’d laid out. *Señora* Duarte had selected the raven-

headed hatpin, the black pearls, and the onyx and marcasite clip-on earrings which completed the outfit. I set my coffee down on the corner of the dresser and drew the Nutmeg over my turbaned head, laying it out beside them once I unsnagged the chain from the frazzled collar of my bathrobe.

The woman glanced at the Silver Nutmeg in disapproval—pendants are never worn in addition to pearls, except as lockets hidden under the dress—but then I fished around in my jewel box and took out my vintage *Felix the Cat* pocket watch, laying it at the other end of the headmistress chain such that it was obvious that I meant the chain as chain and the Nutmeg as fob. A bit masculine, perhaps, but then many a lady had carried a pocket watch before, and so it wasn't unprecedented in the history of costuming.

I then took out my Udjat Eye and its orange ribbon and set it beside them. *Señora* Duarte looked at them all and nodded, not challenging the additions, but it was implied that it was she who would decide how best to incorporate the ornaments into my ensemble.

After this one last bit of resistance, I submitted, allowing her to dress me like a doll, or, more accurately, like a highborn lady of a century ago. With the instincts of a woman who had lived in those centuries, she stripped away my robe, dried me, dusted me with the *Chanel* bath powder I saved for special occasions, then assisted me in donning one item after another. First, the unmentionables, then the stockings, the petticoats and camisoles, then the corsetry (done loose to begin with) and so forth. Then she unwrapped my hair from its turban and began scrubbing it dry, curling it with twists of rag and styling gel. "A hundred years ago, we could have heated irons on the stove..."

And a couple hundred years before that, they would have heated a completely different set of irons for the captive witch. *Nobody expects the Spanish Beautician!*

"Hold still," she said as I struggled to hold back hysterical laughter at the thought of antique curling irons and the small difference between them and red-hot medieval pincers. I know, it

probably isn't that funny, but I was exhausted and stressed out and needed a release which was not forthcoming.

Then the thought abruptly vanished from my mind as *Señora* Duarte savagely yet efficiently hooked me into my corset. "Breathe out," she said, then cinched it tighter, and I think it was at least a minute before I could breathe at all. During which time she stepped me into my dress, buttoned up the back, and arranged the small traveling bustle so as to give the petticoats a flounce.

Time went into a fugue state then as *Señora* Duarte worked her magick, fastening the pearls about my neck, buttoning my gloves *just so*, twisting the orange ribbon about her fingers and pinning it in a rosette over my heart, the Udjat Eye prominently displayed beneath, like some medal for Gothness above and beyond the call of duty, and I swear, she may not be a witch, but I know magick when I see it. There's a reason why women jokingly refer to makeup as "putting on their war paint" and why the most frightening thing an enemy could hear in the ancient days of Britain was that the Celts had gone down to the river to do their hair. The magickal rituals behind military costume are as ancient as warfare itself, and I was girding up for battle just as surely as if I were putting on plate mail (and you know there's very small difference if you've ever put on a Victorian-era corset, even the ones where you don't have to remove your ribs first). And if you've ever wondered what "girding your loins" means, well, it involves girdles and loins, both of which were making each other's intimate acquaintance at that moment, thank you very much.

And I have never seen anyone work as fast as *Señora* Duarte. My watch was tucked into my pocket, rags were pulled out of my hair, and if it weren't for the fact that my coffee had not cooled appreciably, I would have thought I was on drugs or suffering from even worse sleep deprivation than I was, the woman moving in the proverbial blur of activity.

She finished with my boots, adding spats to cover up a scuff which she looked at disapprovingly, and Roland arrived as she did so, carrying a brass umbrella stand.

Señora Duarte gave him a disapproving look as well, but didn't take the time to scold or bully. "The one with the ivory handle is most appropriate, but with this weather, one of the Master's golf umbrellas would be more practical. Give her both."

Roland ducked in under the doorframe and set down the stand, taking out an elegant black barrister's umbrella with an antique ivory handle, as well as an oversized black number which matched him better than me.

Alexander's housekeeper pinned my hat in place, removing the last of rags and making certain that the Proud Maisy curls didn't interfere with the veil. "Neither of your bags is suitable, though I'm certain you're aware of that."

"Yes," I said, "they're work tools." After I disengaged her from my hat, the veil arranged perfectly for my tastes, I went and collected the shoulder bag, then leaned down and selected two of my great-aunt's carpets: the tiny red accent rug and the larger cream-colored one with the numerous seals and sigils. I rolled them up, stuffing them in my bag, then went and gathered up Mister Mistoffelees, still wrapped in the baby blanket and christening gown.

"Mistress?" he asked sleepily.

"Hush, precious. Just rest." I nestled him in between the two rugs sticking out of the bag, adding the last of his bottle for good measure, and then I went to kiss Malory on the cheek. "Sleep well." I took a moment to brush his hair away from his face.

He woke slightly and grabbed my hand. "I know the answer, Penny. I know...."

I leaned closer. "What answer, Malory?"

He whispered it in the voice all children and most magicians use for the greatest of secrets: "I know the word that makes the witch boat work. You said it yourself." He paused. "Thank you."

I paused as well. "Thank you'?"

He nodded, eyes grave. "But not that way. The gypsy word."

I paused, stunned. *Paraka*. Jodi had said it, just after "I shall return home now." The gypsy word for 'Thank you.'

The cold chill of truth ran down my spine, and I knew he was right. Like half the magick in the world, the answer had been sitting right there in plain sight all these years, like the Purloined Letter. I'd read it countless times in Leland's *Gypsy Sorcery and Fortune Telling* and a half dozen other books, and the only thing Leland hadn't noted was that the witch's final word to the girl in the little folktale was the charm itself.

What's even more chilling was that I'd said it myself without realizing it, trying to give the kids something cute and innocent and instead stating one of the most basic metaphysical truths. The spirits work for those who propitiate them, as the winds whipping around the house proved so eloquently, and given that, it's little wonder that 'Please' and 'Thank You' are indeed magick words. If, that is, you say them in a language that the spirits can understand. And with as much as they've traveled, you can bet that all the spirits understand Rom.

"Thanks, Malory," I said. "Wish me luck." I hugged him, tears running down my cheeks.

Malory hugged me back. "Good luck, Penny. Bring Melanie back."

"I will," I said. "I'll try." I kissed him again, dabbing my eyes with my handkerchief, then set about collecting one last item: the eggshell. I got out my Tai Chi balls—the type with the jingle bells inside, one tuned to the 'dragon tone,' one to the phoenix, but more importantly, the type that come in a padded silk-lined chest—and dumped them into my trunk with an unceremonious jangle. Then I went to the rolltop, where I'd stashed the eggshell in one of the pigeonholes. I put it in the box, snapped the catch, and tucked it down near Mister Mistoffelees feet.

My pink Kiki bag was seriously overloaded, I should add, and even the empty lunch pail and the two umbrellas didn't do much to counterbalance it. Regardless, I made my way out and down the stairs to where the wind was shaking the front door as if it would like to rip it off the hinges, and for all I could guess, that may have been part of Jodi's bargain.

However, it wasn't part of mine. "Ladies and gentlemen," I said, as loudly and witchily as I could, hoping the spirits understood English, "would you mind?"

Apparently the wind did mind, and could understand English as well, or at least it screamed louder and shook the doors again. "Would you please stop?" I asked as politely as if I were addressing a group of unruly picketers at the gate, and for all the difference it made, I probably was. "It's very difficult to hear oneself think, and I'd like to go out now. So if you could take your act elsewhere, I'd very much appreciate it, thank you."

The wind screamed again, definitely hearing me, but not paying much attention beside that, and unfortunately, I don't speak Wind. Peter would have probably known where to tell them to get off and how to get bent, but I didn't.

However, I did know a bit more in the way of classic witchcraft, and when asking nicely doesn't work, threats sometimes do. "Has anyone out there heard of Olaus Magnus? Ever hear how you can tie the wind into knots? Well, I've got my Girl Scout merit badge and I'm not afraid to use it!"

The wind definitely heard *that*, since the next second, it slammed into the door, the wood splintering around the lock, and I was slammed onto my butt and propelled back to the base of the stairs, only the bustle and its multiple springs saving me from a fractured tailbone, and as it was, the wind nearly ripped my hat off—and would have if it weren't for *Señora* Duarte's overzealous use of my hatpin collection.

Roland, however, was almost as fast as the elemental spirits, and I think the wind was even more surprised than I was when Alexander's giant chauffeur vaulted over me and bodily wrestled the doors shut. *Señora* Duarte had not been kidding when she said he was strong, and obviously supernaturally so to be able to stand up to the wind.

The air in the entry hall calmed, a spit curl falling down into my face, and Mister Mistoffelees put his head up from my shoulder bag, still wearing the baby bonnet. He narrowed his eyes, which were glowing with witchfire, the only real source of illumination in the

room. “I was taking a nap.” He sounded extraordinarily peeved, but I could tell that this was only slightly at me.

“Your right, dear. That certainly tears it.” I gritted my teeth and smiled, fixing my eyes on one of the drapery cords from parlor curtains. “However, mumsy was just thinking about earning herself another merit badge. The kid gloves are coming off...”

Literally. I stripped off one, then the other, but I didn’t throw them down, both because the challenge had already been made, and honestly, because it had taken far too long to find them, especially in black, and I wasn’t about to let some upstart wind whisk them off to Oz. Instead, I tucked them into my skirt pocket, got up and dusted myself off, then went and fetched the drapery cord.

I came back to where the wind was attempting to dismantle the door around Roland, shivering the timbers and sneaking through the cracks. Mister Mistoffelees leapt to my shoulder, the christening gown trailing like a sheet, and then I could see exactly where the wind was doing this.

I’m certain you’ve seen the rain, but if you ever have your familiar show you the trick of spying out the wind, you’ll notice that it comes in all the colors of the rainbow, rather like it does in the only worthwhile scene in *Pocahontas*, and so far as shape goes, it looks very much like those pretty, swirly satellite photos you see on the weather report.

I tied a regular granny knot, then waited until a cold white tendril ventured too close. I pulled tight and the wind screamed, some part of it getting pinched, but I really didn’t care whether I’d caught a finger, a nose, a tail, or some more intimate part—I grabbed hold of the thread of the wind itself, tying and looping it and knotting it around my fingers on instinct, until I suddenly found that I’d made the first pattern of cat’s cradle. The first pattern, let me emphasize, strung from vivid, pulsating threads of energy stretched taught between my fingers.

“May I, Mistress?” Mister Mistoffelees asked, and he held this paws out, claws spread, balanced on his hind legs on my shoulder, his rear claws dug through the christening gown and the shoulder of my dress.

“If you would be so kind, dearest,” I responded, and then, and I’m not kidding, we proceeded to play cat’s cradle, taking the wind through each of the basic patterns—soldier’s bed and diamonds, candlesticks and cat’s eye—and then on to several I hadn’t seen before, but my familiar guided me through each step until at last we macraméd the wind into a hammock of knotted light.

Then we started on the next one, then the next. *Señora* Duarte must have thought we were nuts, standing there in the entry hall like the invitational street mime challenge while Roland valiantly wrestled the door, but at last the wind died to a mere whisper due to the simple fact that what breezes and screaming zephyrs we hadn’t tied into knots had apparently decided that Jodi had gotten more than her money’s worth from them, or at least that they’d rather not become part of Mister Mistoffelees’ macramé project and help me earn my witchcraft merit badge.

“Thank you, Mistress,” my familiar said as we tied the last knot. “This cradle shall do very nicely.”

He leapt from my shoulder, the connection to witchsight abruptly severing, and I found myself standing there in the entry hall holding a rather attractive though apparently mundane rainbow silk hanging basket, my familiar sitting in the middle, patting it down with his paws as if he were testing the springs, the train of the christening gown trailing over the side.

Roland wonderingly opened the front door, which was still badly damaged, but the air outside was calm and tranquil except for a light mist of rain.

I handed *Señora* Duarte Mister Mistoffelees’ new bed. “Hang this in my room, and don’t, under any circumstance, untie the knots.” Once she had hold of it, I collected my familiar from his air mattress, cuddling him and gathering up the trailing lace as I contemplated our handiwork. Olaus Magnus had mentioned how you could tie the wind into knots so as to let it out when you needed it or sell it to those who did, and while I hadn’t thought to permanently bind the wind into a cat’s cradle, the technique seemed to work well enough.

Alexander's housekeeper gave an appraising glance to the macramé project, which looked nothing half so much as one of those expensive and mostly useless fiber-art pieces you find down in Noe Valley, the only remaining bit of the original cord being the white tassel at the bottom. She sniffed. "I've been meaning to shop for new drapery cords anyway."

That was the closest thing to "Thank you" or "Well done" I'll probably ever get from the woman, but fair's fair, it wasn't as if I'd exactly finished with the task either. I collected the umbrellas and my bags, tucking Mister Mistoffelees and his baby clothes back amid the rolled-up accent rugs, then pulled my gloves back on and went out the front door to survey the damage.

The walkway was awash in needles and pine cones, along with the shattered bits of eucalyptus branches that people have been finding up and down the Northern California coast ever since the great eucalyptus scam of the last century. Regardless, I went down to the carriage house, Roland opening the door and cranking Stutzie up. "Would you like me to drive?" he asked once he had the Bearcat out and purring.

"I think this is mostly a solo deal. But thanks." I leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Take care of Malory."

"Sure thing." He unfolded himself from the car, holding the door open for me, and I set my bag and lunch pail and cat in the rumble seat and took off. Without much of a hey-nonny-nonny, I'm afraid, but I was at least in somewhat better spirits after having dealt with the wind.

Do you remember how I said that part of the way that the Devil does away with people is to let their own foolishness and bad fortune do the trick? Well, I was suddenly faced with a very good example of this as the Stutz's engine abruptly died.

I put on the brake, stopping the car and getting out with a "What's wrong, Stutzie? Did Jodi— Oh my..."

My sudden outburst of shock and wonderment was caused by nothing less than a fifty-foot gulf directly in front of the car. Alexander's fears had indeed become a reality, and it would take

more than a few contractors to shore up the driveway, it would take an entire bridge crew. Not to mention PG&E and Pac-Bell, since the telephone pole which delivered both services to the estate had also joined the driveway on its jaunt down to the beach, and the downed lines were still sizzling on the exposed earth.

As for getting past all this, the direct route of scaling the slope back to Highway One was still a possibility, but not in my current outfit or with as rain-soaked as the hillside was. And while Stutzie is one tough and magickal little car, he is not a Humm-Vee, and there was no way he was going to make it four-wheeling through the cypress trees.

Which left magick as the only real option.

I considered the items I had at my disposal. I had the flying salve, and while I didn't have a broomstick, I did have a car, a pair of Turkish carpets, and my choice of two different umbrellas, giving me the means to recreate the appropriate scenes from *Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang*, *Aladdin*, or *Mary Poppins*.

Unfortunately, the plain fact of the matter is that it's one thing to do magick in the dark of night outside the sight of mortal men, and quite another to fly your broomstick in the morning commute. Reality doesn't like it. And while it is possible to do showy magick during the day, it's better to do it in your *sanctum sanctorum* with the door locked and the drapes drawn, or at least when people are distracted by something else. Like, for example, the nine-foot-tall werewolf standing outside Neiman-Marcus.

Even if I had Thing coat the axles with Jodi's flying ointment, there was a good chance Stutzie would end up plummeting down to the beach if I attempted to play Evel Kneivel and leap the gorge in a vintage Stutz Bearcat. Likewise, using an umbrella to play Mary Poppins or Button Bright also held a chance of failure, and in addition, I had no sure way of knowing whether the buddies of the winds Mister Mistoffelees and I had tied into macramé weren't lurking in the treetops, just waiting for something so tasty and attractive as a Goth girl attempting her maiden flight on an oversized black golf umbrella. And the carpets I had other uses for,

and would cause as much comment in the commuter lane as a broomstick, whether or not the CHP counted them as single passenger vehicles.

Plus flying salve, when used properly, is supposed to be smeared on the wrists, the genitals, or all over one's naked body, depending, I suppose, on how much you need and whether your prescription comes in regular or extra-strength. And all of the finger-licking good eleven herbs and spices still have their pharmaceutical properties, in addition to the metaphysical, and would definitely count as driving under the influence. Not to mention that while a stoned naked woman in the car pool lane would definitely draw attention, even that sort of spectacle would not be enough to get people to ignore the fact that she was flying a broomstick, an umbrella, a carpet, or even a suspiciously levitating vintage car. I'm sorry, thank you, no.

As for commuting through the spirit world, I wasn't certain whether that was possible during the day. And regardless, while it seemed easy enough to get *out* of Looking Glass Country, assuming you had a Silver Key or other appropriate metaphysical hairpin, the only reliable ways I knew to get *in* were to run round a church widdershins, which is the old fashioned way of telling someone to make a series of left-hand turns, or to grab onto a werewolf's willie as he dives through a section of plate glass.

Having neither of these items on hand, I was just at a bit of a loss, and while theoretically I could stick the Silver Key into any available keyhole, even one drawn in the air, and open a door to the Other Side, I had only the vaguest idea what might be lurking in the fey version of the Gorian estate, and that would be the poisonous bat-winged chicken on the family crest up at the front gate. And consult any medieval bestiary or book of heraldry you like, but a cockatrice is nothing you want to deal with, even if you're working for the family it guards.

If I was even that lucky. For all I knew, once I started playing with the Key, I could end up with a bunch of animated action figures, or a lifetime of indentured servitude to the Queen of Faerie. Stranger

things have been reported to happen to people who stuck the right keys in the wrong locks, and this is the Elector of Saxony's no-longer long-lost alchemical music-box Key we're talking about here, not just your run-of-the-mill enchanted antique novelty item.

To put it bluntly, I didn't have time to experiment with the Elector's pretty little toy, even if it *was* my best bet of getting into Land of Dreams. And while I might have been able to improvise something with the mirror in my bedroom, there was no way I was driving a car through an opening that small. And likewise, while I was certain that Malory had divined the right charm for the eggshell spell, I still hadn't tested it, and a Goth girl surfing a magick white boat into Pier 39 would raise more than a few eyebrows, even if the tourists wrote it off as an advertising stunt.

After a careful review of my magickal options, I decided to go back to the mundane. I got back into Stutzie, popped the brake, and rolled down backwards to the carriage house.

Roland was still there, surveying the damage, but he stood up straight as we pulled up beside him. "The driveway's out."

"Shit," he said, and I must say, it was refreshing to hear a man swear, and so reservedly too.

"Do we have a chainsaw?"

Roland wasn't so unblinking as *Señora* Duarte, but regardless, he felled one of the eucalyptus trees, making a precarious, albeit mundane and normal, bridge across the chasm. We didn't bother with the umbrellas, not wanting to tempt Fate, or at least the winds, more than was necessary. But for safety, Roland scaled the bridge at a crouch, with me clinging to his back and Mister Mistoffelees to mine, rather like the Bremen Town Musicians—though if Roland was the pack mule, that made me the old dog, which made for a less-than-pleasing metaphor.

However you look at it, we still got to the far side of the chasm with nothing worse than Roland smelling like he worked at a cough-drop factory. Then we walked up to Highway One and hitched a ride.

Luckily, the first car to stop was a VW bus, containing happy vegans from Humbolt getting an early start on the weekend. Roland had some headroom, and though we were welcome to share the ride all the way to San Francisco, we just got off at the next sign of civilization, that great paragon of banality and American kitsch, *Denny's*.

After entering *Den-Wa's*, as we Hollowers like to call it, Roland went off to use the phones, calling Cal-Trans, Pac-Bell and God knows who all else to deal with the damage from the freak storm that had touched ground at the Gorian Estate. I was a bit more selfish, getting real coffee—at least as real as you can get at *Denny's*—along with a potato sausage scramble, a soft-boiled egg on the side for Mister Mistoffelees and just to add some confusion to the chef's life.

Roland had a pitcher of orange juice and a good deal extra of everything, but the meal passed in relative silence, both because *Denny's* isn't the sort of place you talk about Satanic witches, demon lords, and your poor, put-upon vampiric master, and the simple fact that both of us were tired enough that it was a wonder we weren't falling face-first into the hash browns.

He paid and left, going off to take care of the mundane realities of maintaining a vampire's secluded retreat, while I propped myself up with the Turkish carpets and fell asleep, Mister Mistoffelees curled up on my chest. Due to some combination of kind waitress, general Northern California coolness about travel routes and paying customers, my Udjat Eye's protection for 'wanderers and travelers,' and Mister Mistoffelees' projection of *Pay no attention to the cat and the Goth girl sleeping in the corner booth*, I was able to get more than a full eight hours sleep, waking to find the table clean and neat and myself in desperate need of the rest room and a dress without a corset.

I did my business, this at least possible with Victorian skirts and a traveling-size bustle, then set about doing the makeup I'd forgone that morning. Thank *Max Factor* and *Revlon* both for waterproof mascara, but I got myself looking fully Goth, and not a little evil to boot, an effect you can get by applying dark eye shadow in a subdued

version of Agnes Moorhead's 'Endora' style, making sure to mix a touch of lavender into the base.

The waitress chattered pleasantly when I came out, and I ordered more coffee, with extra cream for Mister Mistoffelees, polishing off a full pot along with cherry pie and a Super Bird, in that order. Mister Mistoffelees also had the promised turkey pot pie, a fresh hot one, while I surreptitiously ditched the now-thawed frozen version in the bathroom trash can. I then bought one of the local interest maps from next to the cash register, asking innocuous Goth girl questions about graveyards, historic murders and the like, chatting with the waiters and waitresses, and at last located a nearby spot that was as close to perfect as I was going to get without driving off into the Central Valley.

It took almost forty-five minutes to walk there, what with granny boots and the completely superfluous umbrellas, but by the time we came to the crossroads, my vintage 30's watch read eleven twenty-three, at least according to the hep cat position of Felix. I then got to work.

Just so you know, but one of the most classic bits of folklore is that the Devil—along with vampires, witches, and any number of interesting supernatural creatures—comes to the crossroads at midnight.

Now, not just any crossroad, mind you. If it was every crossroads, there'd be a vampire, witch or devil hanging out on every corner in suburbia (though with the supernatural population we seem to have in this area, that might not be too far from the truth). Regardless, the folklore goes that vampires, witches and devils tend to congregate at *otherwise deserted* crossroads at the stroke of midnight, and so far as the accuracy went, well, there was already a witch at *this* particular crossroad, though I'd left the vampire at home for his own safekeeping.

The other reason for the folklore is the simple fact of power. Magickal power flows all over the planet in lines—ley lines, dragon paths, call them what you will—and where those paths meet, well, that's where you get a wellspring for magick. Which is why churches,

temples, inns, and now things like 24-hour gas stations and *Denny's* get placed there in the current age of the Technocracy—it's a matter of power and control.

Denny's would have actually worked on one level—it's a cross-roads inn, and the archetype of the caravanserai and the oasis still hold power, no matter how much the Technos try to plasticize them—but the waitress was nice, and didn't deserve to have the Devil walk in the front door, even supposing I could pull it off. The invocations were also a little showy, and not the sort of thing you performed in between the *Please Wait to be Seated* and *Grand Slam Breakfast* signs—even the Devil has taste, or at least I hope so, and I should probably just say that the mystic resonance was wrong and leave it at that. Not to mention that privacy was best for the type of blasphemies I was about to attempt.

Luckily, the Technocracy has to abide by its own rules, and one is that supply-side economics applies equally to everyone. Some locations, no matter how ancient or magickal, are just plain bad for business, as evidenced by the weed-choked line of gas pumps standing mute testimony to the death of a one-time filling station, back some fifty years when Cal-Trans had moved this particular section of Highway One and failed to provide a convenient off-ramp.

But I could still feel it in my bones, the sense of history. Even though it was now nothing more than an old frontage road, it had once been the only route up the coast, back to the pioneer days and before, one of the old roads of power. And crossing it was another one, the main street of some failed frontier town, a tiny valley bringing the Yin energies of *feng shui* out of the low lands to cross the Yang of the old coastal route, with a crumbling graveyard as the only testament to the town that once was.

Weeds had claimed the blacktop of the filling station, cracking it and turning it back to fields and mud, and the site was eerie, desolate and very creepy. With the moon one day to full, it was also the witchiest place you could get without building a full Satanic temple, and for a witch on a budget, it certainly would have to do.

I found a spot of bare earth near the roadside—deserted it might seem, but this is California, and only an idiot would do her invocation in the *middle* of the crossroads—and laid out my carpet, the larger one with the concentric diamonds. I set the blasphemous lunchbox in the corner nearest the road, the *Christian Death* sticker prominently displayed so as to be as hellishly inviting as possible, then used my black lace hanky to extricate Thing from the pot of flying salve, despite the fact that he obviously didn't want to leave.

"Sorry, vacation's over. Back to earth, Major Tom. We have work to do..." I wiped the excess salve off on the lip of the pot, then fished around in my pockets and located one of the packs of matches I make a point of picking up at clubs. "Let those who are awake, stay awake!" I intoned as I touched off the fingers, one by one. "Let those who are asleep, stay asleep!" The air filled with the sweet and pungent smell of herbs, including opium and hashish. "And let those who aren't invited mind their own business!" This last for Jodi, in case she decided to check in on me at any time during the night. "Oh Hand of Glory, Hand of Glory! Or Thing. Or Major Tom. Or whatever it is you prefer to be called once we have a chance to talk about it."

The nails flared, brighter than ever with their fresh coat of grease, and the Hand of Glory gesticulated as quickly as only something stoned on flying ointment could.

"Come again?" I said, leaning back, and I swear, you could get high on the fumes alone.

The Hand made the positions again, slower and less excitedly, and while I was able to recognize that he was signing, and that there were six letters, I hadn't studied sign language since third grade and a little book about Helen Keller, and not left-handed signing at that.

Thing repeated himself, again.

"Mister Mistoffelees?" I glanced down at my familiar, who was resting in the carryall like a baby in a bassinet, still wearing his bonnet and lace christening gown. "Do you by any chance know sign language?"

“No,” my familiar admitted, “though that hand originally belonged to Deiter, the baker’s son. Before he was hanged and Mistress Jodilyn cut it off, that is.”

I raised an eyebrow. It hadn’t occurred to me that Mister Mistoffelees would have known the hand’s donor personally, before he died and became a Hand of Glory, but then he was a cat, so why should he care? “Thank you, Mister Mistoffelees.”

I looked to the Hand of Glory. “Deiter then, is it?” The Hand waved excitedly, then gave me a thumbs up followed by the ‘okay’ sign, which I took to mean that yes, I had it right, perfect in fact. “Okay then. Sorry if I ever hurt your feelings. I’m sort of new at this witch business.”

The Hand—I mean Deiter—waved back and forth twice, the classic sign for ‘Don’t worry about it—not a problem,’ and I smiled. “Okay then. Friends. But I need you to get on top of the lunch pail and look Satanic.”

He held up his index finger, which I wasn’t able to interpret quite as precisely, but I said, “No, don’t worry about it. I think I know what I’m doing. Sort of. But thanks for asking... Deiter.”

I refrained from making “Touch my monkey” jokes, the reference something I’m sure he wouldn’t get, since I doubt that Jodilyn Blake ever let him have the remote, let alone access to her television. Which was something I’d have to remedy.

After all, a witch does her best to keep her familiars happy. But what do you get for a Hand of Glory? Well, a remote control seems like a pretty good start.

Deiter twisted out of my grip, turning a bodiless handspring, then came down atop the lunch pail with his fingers up in the Cornu, a.k.a. the Horns of Asmodeus or the “Hail Satan!”/“Ozzy love you!” hand sign you see at all the heavy metal concerts. Which would hopefully make Lord Charnas feel just as at home.

I set out the other rug and various bits of regalia, using a sense of aesthetics somewhere between A.E. Waite and *Better Homes and Gardens*, such that everything was aligned with attention to mystic significance and looking impressive, but was also easy to hand.

Then, the basic decor taken care of, I drafted Alexander's ivory-handled umbrella for use as the ceremonial sword. It had a metal tip, which would work well enough, and I used it to draw the circle in the dirt around us. "Light the candle, draw the curtain, put the lock upon the door..." I sang my favorite variant on the privacy charm, completing the circle and the spell and locking it with an elaborate swirl, knotted in the shape of the Udjat eye to match the one over my heart.

My sixth sense hadn't tipped me off to any of Jodi's spying—not that I'd given her much cause for it, apart from usual witchly caution—but now that the curtain was drawn, I could speak frankly if I needed to. "Would you be so kind as to check my circle, Mister Mistoffelees?"

He yawned, then glanced over the side of the satchel and back, rubbing his paws at his ears under the baby bonnet and in the process pulling it down over his eyes. "Mistress?" he asked, maintaining his dignity as best he could. "Would you help me off with my finery? I don't want to muss it, and it doesn't look very professional for the task at hand."

I refrained from chuckling, though luckily my familiar couldn't see me biting my lip with the effort. "Of course, Mister Mistoffelees." I hooked the umbrella on one wrist, then helped him untie the ribbons under his chin, refraining from asking whether he'd like me to make him a kitty-size business suit, since he'd probably take me up on the offer. I then slid him free of the christening gown and set him on the ground, giving him a quick stroke to smooth down his fur.

While I folded the bonnet and smock, Mister Mistoffelees paced out the inner bounds, not crossing the line, but giving the impression that he would if he wanted to, and it was only because it pleased him that he was walking in circles. Like I said, he's a cat. But at last he finished, sitting down facing me, and curling his tail around himself in his own personal circle. "It will serve, Mistress Penelope."

This, I knew, was the highest praise I was going to get from him, but then again, basic wards and conjuring circles are just geometry,

and like all of mathematics, there isn't good or bad, there's just right or wrong, and you don't want to get it wrong.

Mister Mistoffelees gave me a look which said, *Will you get on with it? I'm getting bored* so I just took the umbrella and began to scratch a few more witch patterns and lesser circles from *The Key of Solomon* in the dirt, with corrections as dictated by my familiar. "Place the demon's name in the bottom corner," he suggested. "They like it even better if you write it in blood."

I took the baby bottle out of my Kiki bag. "Do you mind?"

"Not in the least." Mister Mistoffelees began washing his right ear, still not moving his tail out of its circle. "I don't care for it once it's clotted."

It was still liquid enough under the scab, however, and I anointed the tip of the umbrella, sketching in the name and sigil.

There came whispers from the weeds around the gas station then, little scuttling sounds like the scrape of dry leaves on concrete, the creak of rusted metal and chain, and low moans began to issue from somewhere. Then the light of the moon began to fade, a pall cast over it, even though it was a day to full and it was a clear and cloudless night.

I shivered. There was nothing, come Hell or high water, that was going to get me to set one foot off Great-Aunt Eudora's carpet now that the seals were in place and the "dark spirits" that Jodi had mentioned had taken notice.

I checked my watch for the time: 11:38. There were still a few minutes to add a extra sigils, and I did. Anything to keep me busy. Then I noticed, whenever I wrote a *Tetragrammaton* or *Elohim*, the letters filled with blood on their own, the fluid seeping out of the very ground.

I hadn't considered that my sacrilege of a few days before was going to help me with a demon conjuration, but whenever I wrote any of the names of God, they bled, warning me of the folly of what I was about to attempt, and I hope helping to protect me at the same time.

Then I held out the bottle and intoned one of the simplest charms of demon conjuration there is, one which any child can learn if she has right—or should I say wrong—book of fairytales: “Come now demon, time to sup. Seven drops of blood in a cup.”

Well, actually in a baby bottle, and there were probably more than seven drops, but I tossed the nipple back into the blackberry brambles next to the gas pumps. Then I leaned down and placed the bottle on the ground outside the bounds of the carpet, dropping it the last inch so as to not spill anything, while also making certain not to make contact with the ground myself.

Then I straightened back up, licked my lips, and began the lines I’d cribbed from Marlowe and Jodi Blake: “Come, Lord Charnas, Fiend of Frivolity, Duke of Dark Mirth. Come, Master of Black Comedy and Lord of Foul Amusements. I am here, I have made the sacrifices, and I bid you come, by the power of the Names I have written here, and the blood of the One who died so that sins might be washed away. By all these tokens and more, I bid you come.” I took a breath. “I bid you come, Charnas, in a form that is pleasing to me, the form of...”

I paused. Christopher Marlowe had had Faust conjure Mephisto in the shape of a holy friar, the form which “suits the Devil best,” and much as I like Marlowe, I’d done too much Catholic school to want Lord Charnas impersonating any priest I might know. The form of a pregnant nun had its attractions, but then again, I knew too many nuns, and I didn’t want to give Charnas the chance to pull my chain any more than having a demon appear in front of me was going to do by itself.

Then I thought about Jodi, and I made my choice. “Come in the form of a seventies pimp, since that form suits a demon who would have dealings with a bimbo like Jodilyn Blake.”

The wind moaned, but didn’t touch me, warded away by the sigils and my great-aunt’s rug. Then... nothing happened. There was no cry, no flash of fire, no sulfur clouds or “Why have you summoned me, foolish mortal?” None of it. And I felt very silly just standing there with blood dripping from the tip of my umbrella.

However, as I've said, I've read my fairytales, and one of the standard tricks of the Forces of Darkness is to lull a would-be demon summoner into a false sense of failure. Then the moment he or she steps out of the circle—Bam! Surprise, kid! Guess your spell worked after all.

I checked my watch. Felix the Cat looked like he'd been suspended by the wrists, which meant it was midnight. I watched with one eye as the shorter hand ticked to one, and then two minutes after. At three minutes after, I said, "Lord Charnas, I realize this wasn't a scheduled appointment, but if you *are* coming, would you please do me the honor of doing so soon? My feet are killing me, and I'd like to go home and get out of this corset."

There was no answer, but not thirty seconds later, headlights appeared off in the distance, down the left-hand path out beyond the graveyard. The car approached slowly, leisurely, cruising speed even though there didn't appear much to see or be seen by, but at last it stopped beside me at the signpost, revealing itself to be a black stretch limo, a classic, but not one I immediately recognized, it had so much custom work.

The windows were smoked mirrors, impossible to see into, and the twin blue flames atop Deiter's devil sign reflected in the glass. Then the backmost one rolled down, smooth and silent, and a whiff of sulfur and tobacco smoke drifted out. "Hey, shugah.... What's a fine momma like you doin' out on a night like this? Come on in and take a load off...." The coal of a cigar glowed in the darkness within, flaring briefly as the owner took a pull. "Got some primo shit right here, and I's been lookin' for a lady to share it."

Politeness, as I've said, is always the rule with spirits, and even though I was literally shaking in my boots, I wasn't about to forget it. "I'm sorry, sir. I appreciate your kind offer, but I'm waiting for someone."

There was a dark laugh from the interior of the car. "Hey baby... how's you know I'm not the man you been waitin' for?"

I gritted my teeth, biting back several sarcastic remarks. I mean, how many sleazy pimps do you find cruising Bay Area back roads at

the stroke of midnight, offering rides to Goth girls just as they're attempting demon conjurations? Odds are, not many.

Of course, you can't be a Goth or anyone in the club scene without knowing how to deal with the whole court dance. "I'm not certain, sir. If you'd only step out of the car and let me see you, then I could make sure." I made a little moue then, the same type Jodi had the night before. "After all, you could be just anyone.... And it would be unforgivably rude of me to stand up my date and leave with some other gentleman. Even one so fine as yourself."

The voice laughed again, and I didn't need to hear the answering wail from the dark spirits in the air around me to know that I'd gotten the right one. "You's one smaht and sassy momma.... Blackie, get the door. Let the lady check me out in all my finery...."

A shadow detached itself from the crowd around the front of the car and came to the back, opening the door with a bow as graceful and silent as, well, a shadow. A black wingtip appeared, shiny patent leather, with spats and diamond studs, and I made my move. With a twitch of the point of the umbrella, I whacked Great-Aunt Eudora's crimson accent rug, the little carpet unfurling just as the foot came down.

"What's this, momma?" the demon asked, obviously surprised.

"Merely the red carpet treatment, Lord Charnas. Surely it's been offered to you before?"

The demon laughed, stepping out and onto the accent rug and it's ancient Turkish sigils. "You's one classy momma. I think I's gonna like you...." He stood there, swinging his watch chain, zoot suit and all, and I got to take him in all his Satanic glory.

I also abruptly learned that the Devil is a Deadhead, or at least had chosen a form that would have been familiar to them. I don't know if you're familiar with any of *The Dead's* old albums from the seventies, but one, *Easy Street*, has a piece by Gilbert Sheldon on the cover, an underground comix illustration of an empty-faced demon in a zoot suit and pimp hat with a twirling watch chain, white gloves, white spats, and a "Keep on Truckin'" pose.

Now picture that and have it not be cute or funny or printed on a sticker on the back of a hippie bus. Right. The glowing eyes and toothy grin floated in the middle of nothingness just under the hat, and the only sort of laugh I could make was a nervous one. “Lord Charnas, I presume?”

“The one and only....” he said in a voice as rich as Louis Armstrong’s, sweeping off his hat and bowing low. “At yo service, baby.... What kin I do ya for?”

Well, what he could do me for he’d just done, since he was standing right in the middle of the King Solomon sigils woven into Great-Aunt Eudora’s accent rug. I merely smiled, looking at him.

He laughed. “Struck speechless by my glory, huh baby? Tha’s right, I’m one hep cat....” He snapped his watch chain in a Z, the diamond fob spinning like a championship yo-yo. “An’ I see you’s got yo’se’f a hep cat too. Hidey-ho there, kitty.... Ain’t you the one they call Grimalkin?”

Mister Mistoffelees cocked his head, looking at the demon, and well, you know the phrase ‘A cat can look at a king?’ Well, a familiar can do the same thing with a demon prince and be just as unimpressed. “Actually, I prefer to be called Mister Mistoffelees.” My familiar blinked green witchfire. “My new Mistress gave me the name, and there’s even a poem in my honor. Not to mention a musical.”

The demon in the zoot suit looked at my cat and grinned wider, the teeth nearly coming full circle. “Tha’s cool, kitty. An’ if I might be so bold as to ask, who is yo’ *fine* new Mistress? She’s got the pussy, an’ she’s got the Hand, an’ I’m ready ta guess she’s Judy Lynn’s li’l sistah.”

“Or her heir,” I added, since “The Goth girl who ripped her off” didn’t sound anywhere near as pretty. “You may call me Penny Dreadful.”

“Well hey there, Penny,” the demon crooned. “Pleased ta meetcha. Folks know me as Lo’d Chahnas, the King of Fun, but in this aspect... I’ll let ya call me ‘Professah Charm’ if ya like.”

“Thank you, Professor Charm. I am honored.”

He laughed again. "Well, I know yo' cat ain't got yo' tongue, so now that you's got me here, what *is it* that you might want? How might I bring pleasure to a fine high-class momma like you are?"

I hadn't considered all the ramifications of having him appear as a seventies pimp, but since I'd never particularly liked that style, or being called a "fine momma," it was probably all to the good that I wasn't drawn to his sleazy charms. Likewise, even though I found his mere existence offensive, I was also glad that I wasn't an African-American activist, otherwise his caricature would have set me screaming and asking for a machine gun.

"Boy, you is a strange one, Penny. Mos' ladies would be yackin' up a storm, but not you. You jus' stand there with your li'l folded parasol, pleased as can be, like the cat that got the canary...."

I continued to smile. "I've got the canary."

The demon laughed. "Yeah, right." Then he tried to take a step off the rug and found his feet stuck down as tight as if I'd super-glued his shoes to the carpet. "What the fuck? What sort o' shit is this?"

I clenched the handle of the umbrella tighter, feeling the ivory press against the bones of my palm, my black goatskin gloves stretched taut. "It's the red carpet treatment, like I said." I waited a beat, then added, "I'm also heir to my Great-Aunt Eudora. She picked up that rug on her honeymoon in Turkey in 1910. Isn't it pretty? I think the designs are based on the patterns of the Ring of Solomon."

"You's fuckin' right they ah, bitch!" the demon hissed. "Let me the fuck out right now. This ain't no way ta treat a gentleman of quality...."

"It's really a very lovely carpet," I said, preening. "I can't understand why you wouldn't like it."

"You's know fuckin' well *why* I don' like it. Nows let me out." I didn't say anything, so after a moment, Charnas, or I should say, Professor Charm, said, "Awright, bitch.... You win. We coulda done this nice, you scratch my back, I scratch yo's, but if you's gonna have me make a deal for ya ta spring me, fine. Name yo' price. But I's

wahnin' ya—I's an im-poh-tant man in Hell, and yous don' wan' me fer an en'my."

I certainly didn't want him for an enemy, but since I already had his head cheerleader for that, I didn't see what difference it made pissing off the boss too. "I don't want you for an enemy, Professor Charm. I just want you."

He paused swinging his watch chain, pulling it up short. "Wha' didja say, momma? You wants me?" His eyes lit up, literally, and he slapped his knee. "Hot damn! You's one of the kinky ones. I knew this was gonna be a good night aftah all...."

"No," I said, "you misunderstand me. I don't want to have sex with you. Especially not if you have a two-pronged pig sticker you could chill beer with. What I want is what I've got right now—you."

He paused. "Yous wants ta bind me to you, to be yo' slave? Yo' one of them dominatrix bitches?"

"No," I said, "though I do know a few. What I want is you. Where you are right now. Forever."

The demon's grin disappeared, becoming as nonexistent as Hello Kitty's, and he looked around himself. "You can't keep me here fo'evah, bitch.... Circahs get broken. Someone'll come by.... You *know* that."

"Yes," I said brightly, "but that's the lovely thing about accent rugs. They're strong and durable, and they roll up wonderfully for easy storage."

"Roll up?"

I smiled. "That's right."

I didn't, however, step off of my carpet to roll up Professor Charm's. 'Blackie' was still out there, along with all the rest of the dark spirits who'd shown up to wave their pennants. I just stood there, waiting, and wishing that I'd brought a pair of concert earplugs, since I really could have done without the non-stop temptations.

By the time that dawn finally broke, Professor Charm had offered me riches, eternal youth, the Miss California crown, a thermos of

coffee, and armies of nubile young Goth boys to service my every need. I refused to talk, not wanting to give him a toehold on the things that might actually tempt me (though the coffee and the armies of Goth boys both did have their attractions), but Deiter's Hellish light shone on everything, and since part of a Hand of Glory's enchantment is that "Those who are awake, stay awake," I didn't have to worry about nodding off while keeping vigil over the demon lord in the zoot suit.

The dark spirits did manage to lure two police cars and one possible serial killer on a dirt bike to the crossroads, but Mister Mistoffelees black cat bone, my warding circle and my silence did the trick: All three left, having apparently seen nothing aside from a very creepy moonlit crossroads and an abandoned gas station. No black cat, no Goth girl, no Hand of Glory sitting atop a lunchbox atop a mysteriously mislaid Turkish carpet. And no demon lord managing to simultaneously offend the NAACP and the followers of the *Grateful Dead*.

There came an actual rooster crow from some nearby farm, then the rays of sun cut through Professor Charm, erasing first the pimp hat, then the grin, then the padded shoulders and so on, until only my great-aunt's red accent rug lay sitting on the ground next to a condemned filling station. The other shadows vanished as well, and I looked around myself to find the crossroads looking nowhere near so spooky or unpleasant. Except, of course, for the blood-soaked sigils cut into the ground.

However, I was not taking any chances. "Mister Mistoffelees, have all the demons except 'Professor Charm' gone now?"

My familiar glanced around, then hissed at a shadow that was clinging just a bit too tightly to the weeds around the gas pumps. It vanished with a rustle of dry grass. "They are, Mistress. And Lord Charnas is sulking."

"In the middle of the red carpet?"

Mister Mistoffelees blinked. "Yes, Mistress."

"Good," I said, then got out the olive wood rosary. Carefully, I stepped out of the protection of the cream colored carpet, then put

my other foot out as well. Nothing happened, so I picked up my cat and perched him on my shoulder, cut a door in the warding circle around us with two slashes of the umbrella, then leaned down and gingerly rolled up the red accent rug.

I'm sure you've heard the phrase *Handle with kid gloves* and that was exactly what I was doing. 'Kid' is just another name for goatskin, and everyone knows the importance of goats and devils. Especially black goats.

Muffled screams and whispers came from the carpet as I rolled it up, and I began to sing "Just a Spoonful of Sugar..." since, well, I'll admit it freely, in every job there must be done there is an element of fun, and trapping demons in your great-aunt's decorator items certainly ranks up there.

"Deiter, if you would be so kind?" The Hand of Glory hopped to, whisking the Satanic stickers off of my latest lunch pail and revealing all of the vaguely religious and holy ones. Then he popped the catch and opened the box up. I looped the rosary around the rug twice, then stuffed it inside, slamming the lid, snapping the catch, and finally securing it with a *Spottie Dottie* toy padlock and an advertising sticker for *Vision: The Music of Hildegard Von Bingen* I'd saved for just such an occasion.

I smiled, sure that Hildegard would approve of her likeness being used to seal the Devil inside an iron chest, and as for what Sanrio might think of my use of their licensed character, I didn't really much care. Dalmatians are traditional guardians and protectors, and puppies make pretty good symbols of innocence in my book, so on both counts, *Spottie Dottie* seemed cut out for the job.

I followed this by dowsing Deiter and putting him back in the pot of flying salve. After which I swayed rather shakily on my feet, then abruptly sat down on my butt, the bustle cushioning me slightly. Mister Mistoffelees yowled, digging his claws in, but luckily Victorian silks are thick, which saved me from the other worry. I put up a hand to steady him and smoothed down his fur. "I'm sorry, Precious. Mumsy's just a bit tired...."

He grumbled, mollified but only slightly. "I'd like a dish of cream."

"Of course, Mister Mistoffelees. Just as soon as we get a chance."

I shook my head. All that had been keeping me awake and coherent had been nervous energy and Deiter's enchantment. And with those gone, well, there was the simple reality that I was exhausted, off in the middle of nowhere—or at least a forty-five minute walk from a *Denny's* off Highway One—with no car, a cat, a bag of miscellaneous items, and a lunch pail holding a demon bound with nothing more than a Turkish carpet, a rosary, a toy padlock, and an advertising sticker for a hit album by a nun dead eight centuries.

However, I was also sitting in the middle of several blood-soaked conjuring sigils, which would look mighty suspicious to the police if they were to stop by, now that the crossroads was not so creepy and they might feel like getting out of the car. The clotted baby bottle looked equally incriminating, especially with the picture of Winkipinki on it, and while I don't believe in littering, I believe even more strongly in getting rid of evidence. I tossed it into the blackberry bushes near the gas pumps, leaving it for whatever detective got assigned to investigate the human sacrifice that had completely failed to accompany my demon conjuration.

It's not as if I planned on ever doing it again, and if it caused problems for the real devil worshippers, well then, fine, I'd be happy to see my tax dollars at work. Or maybe they'd link it to some serial killer and put him away for just a bit longer.

With this happy thought, I stumbled to my feet, gathered up my other carpet, my umbrellas, and the all important box with the demon, and I set off down the road before either police or the possible serial killer came back to investigate the creepy crossroads.

This is something they never seem to cover in all of the stories—How the witch gets back from the crossroads after attending the mini-sabbat. Then again, that's also probably why the Witching Hour cuts off at three. If you end the festivities there, you have plenty of commute time in the wee hours of the morning before the

dawn banishes the dark spirits, as well as the chance to do things like flying your remaining carpet back home.

Of course, I'd waited till after dawn, so there wasn't much chance of that. Even if I wanted to attempt Dr. Faust's cloak-flying spell, and honestly, I'd left my copy of *Der Rabenschwarz* at home in my trunk. Which would be assuming—wrongly—that I hadn't already had my fill of demonology for the week, if not my lifetime. Sorry, no. It wasn't as if I needed extra credit to earn my Junior Princess of Evil demon-conjuration merit badge.

However, if I wanted to get to anywhere approaching safety, and wasn't going to use a flying carpet or the flying salve any other overtly magickal means of transportation, then this required either a forty-five minute walk back to *Denny's*, followed by a long and tedious bus ride—assuming Greyhound even stopped around here—or else a bit of luck at hitchhiking. Which would still be a nice trick to manage since I was wandering around on a deserted stretch of frontage road off Highway One, near a graveyard and an abandoned filling station, just a few minutes past dawn, with a 'Don't notice me' black cat sitting on my shoulder, a demon locked in my lunch pail, and to my rear, probably as some punishment for blasphemy, a bloody reversed butt-print of some portion of the demon's sigils or the Names of God, I wasn't sure which, from where I'd sat down in my own conjuration circle.

It is *not* for moments like these why my friends call me Lucky Penny. Rather, it's for finding what I need when I need it, and right now what I could use was a friend or at least a friendly stranger to give me a lift back to something approaching civilization, plus a hidey-hole where I could stash my stuff and get just a bit of well deserved shut eye.

After all, I'd just risked my immortal soul, triumphed over the Forces of Evil, or at least the Devil, and I didn't think it was asking too much to just want a lift. In plain fact I felt very much like Mister Mistoffelees from the morning before: I was tired, I was cranky, I'd worked hard, I had the Name of God stamped in blood in reverse on my butt, and I wanted my damn pot pie and I wanted it now!

But enough of my fussing. Prayers are only answered if you make them, and knowing this, I clutched my Udjat Eye, sigil of protection for wanderers and travelers, and moreover my closest link to Peter and Baron and Neville and Sasha and Brent and yes, even Blackrose, hoping to get by with just a little help from my friends. And if they couldn't manage it, then at least that St. Christopher or Hermes or any of the other saints or gods who look after us poor wandering ones would send *someone* I could trust and who'd help me. Which is why I attempted to lift my voice up to Heaven, or at least out of the back of my throat, as I began: "All I want is a room somewhere, far away from the cold night air, with one enormous chair... Oh wouldn't it be lovely?"

Alright, I've admitted it more than once, Julie Andrews I'm not, but even if it wasn't a very original prayer and I completely gave up on any attempt at a Cockney accent, at least the sentiment was honest and the demands fairly reasonable. It wasn't as if I were singing Veruca Salt's aria from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, though if I were to actually get "pink macaroons and a hundred balloons and performing baboons," that would probably spell the end to my sanity right there.

I trudged down the street, singing myself hoarse with my California-accented tribute to George Bernard Shaw, with my feet demanding release from my granny boots and my waist all-but-paralyzed by my corset. And it was in this state, about fifteen minutes later, just as I was about to pull Deiter out my bag of tricks and see I would have better luck hitchhiking with a Hand of Glory, that the Volkswagen Rabbit pulled up beside me.

It looked like a hundred other battered little cars you see in Northern California, with pink triangles and *Rainbow Alliance* stickers plastering every available bit of bumper, and a sun-faded Roger Rabbit doll crucified with suction cups to the back window. The driver leaned out his window, smiling, unity rings flashing around his neck. "Need a lift?"

I returned the smile, thankful for the kind rescue, even if the guy wasn't Baron or Peter, yet was nonetheless grateful. Especially since

the guy was also as gay as they come (at least to judge from his car and choice in jewelry) and I wouldn't have to worry about getting hit on. Or at least not much. This even assuming that any man would *attempt* to pick me up, as haggard as I undoubtedly looked.

Then I blinked, for in my line of work, few things happen by sheer coincidence. And while I didn't think that we'd met before, there was a certain look to the face, the line of the eyebrows and so on, that seemed very familiar. But it was the smile, and the Peter Gabriel rabbit teeth, that clinched it. "Padraic Kearny?"

He shook his head and I had a fleeting impression of floppy brown rabbit ears, for all that when his hair settled back, he only displayed a surfer-boy mop-top. "No, I'm his evil cousin Brandon." He grinned wider. "Got any *Trix*?"

I sighed, not having time for this. "Padraic Kearny...."

"Ain't no mistaking it." If he had rabbit ears, in this form, he would have twirled them like a propeller beanie, and I had a distinct feeling that if I linked to Mister Mistoffelees, that's exactly what I'd see. "You're quick, girl, I'll give that to you." He looked up and down the road. "You expecting another ride, or do you want a lift?"

Well, the plain truth of the matter was, I did want a lift, but not from a known psycho-bunny. Then again, there might be a serial killer stalking the area, and I'd definitely seen the police, and as they say, there is the case of the Devil you know... and I'm certain the same held true with faeries. "Why are you here, Padraic?"

"Well, I just happened to be passing by, and my lucky rabbit's foot hit the gas pedal and..." He grinned. "Well, to be honest, I was trying to find you, and I was having the damndest time of it too. Usually, when I'm looking for someone, I can find them like *that*." He snapped his fingers as an underscore. "But you, well, I've been driving in circles for *hours*—you are one hard woman to find when you don't want to be found, let me tell you—and then I've just given up and I'm about to go home, when suddenly *Pow!* my tape deck starts playing the cast album to *My Fair Lady*. Which is really weird since the tape's *Erasure*, or at least was until fifteen minutes ago." He shrugged. "Oh well, far be it for me to complain about miracles and

wonders—the world has too few of them as it is—but at the same moment Andy Bell turns into Julie Andrews, my rabbit ears start working and the reception comes in loud and clear. So here I am.”

I grimaced. He’d adequately explained my spell, but not other half of it. “Yes, but why are you here?”

He grinned back rakishly. “What, you mean in the grand, existential sense? Or the boring mundane sense?”

My feet were killing me, and the corset was helping to finish the job. “I mean in the basic ‘Why are you here?’ sense.”

He gestured to one side. “Well, you’re walking along the road, you’ve got your thumb stuck out...”

Witches can glare very mightily when they feel the need, and black cats can do the same. “What my Mistress wishes to know,” Mister Mistoffelees said in cold, brittle tones, “is why you came to be seeking her out, such that you were able to find her once she allowed it.”

“Yes,” I said, trying to mimic the catty tone, “what he said.”

Paddy Kearny grinned and only looked at us sideways, like a rabbit who’s noticed not one but two cats looking at him and can’t figure out yet whether it would be safer to bolt or to just sit there. “Well,” he said slowly, obviously having trouble speaking the plain if not simple truth, “truth is, I owe you one. At least. All debts must be paid, it’s the faerie way. But then, of course, I’m not really certain how to repay you. You played me a trick, and I owe you for that, but then it was a good trick, and it made me laugh, so you earned points there too, and I owe you again. Then there’s my cousin, Brandon, and I’ve owed him a trick for a long, long while, then you come along and pull a bigger trick on him than I ever pulled, a trick so big that all I could do was add to it. So you robbed me of my chance to play a grand trick on Brandon, and I owe you for that, but it was such a wonderful trick that I owe you again for just having pulled it off.” He grinned at the last, and I didn’t have the heart to tell him that was yesterday’s joke.

He shrugged and continued to grin, a little less nervous now that we, or at least I, had let up on the glare. “But credit where credit is

due. It was a lovely trick. And you've inspired me, and that's something worth more than gold to a faerie, no mistaking it. So I owe you again." He cocked his head the other way, mop-top brown hair flopping like rabbit ears. "Can you see the predicament?"

I nodded. "So you came to settle accounts."

"That, and possibly conspire with someone I admire. Us tricksters have got to stick together, and while I'd like to top what you did to Brandon, I thought both of us might come up with a better trick together than either of us might pull separately."

I nodded, exhausted. I'd asked for aid and assistance, and Hermes and St. Christopher both had sent it, even keeping to the Domino's Pizza promise of service in half an hour, which they didn't have to, so I had little cause for complaint. And while it isn't usually the wisest thing to trust a trickster, by the same token, it's even worse to spurn a faerie, and it wasn't as if I was likely to get any better offers at this hour in the morning.

Especially with the scarlet letters smeared across my butt, which Paddy Kearny had either not noticed or just not remarked upon.



And to be quite honest, the front passenger seat of his car looked very, very inviting, and no faerie glamour was needed to tempt me. "Alright. I think I can work that. It's a deal then."

"Great," Padraic said. "So, how's tricks, by the bye? You must have been up to a great one to be this far off the beaten path."

I smiled, pleased with myself in spite of myself. "Tricks have gone quite well, thank you."

He opened the door and I crawled inside, stowing my stuff in the back, all except for Mister Mistoffelees, who I placed on the dashboard for protection and privacy, and the lunch pail, which I held in my lap. "Tell me about it."

And I did.



Penny Dreadful™

A Mage: The Ascension® Novel in Eight Parts and an Epilogue

Part Eight

In which Penny falls down a rabbit hole, Mister Mistoffelees requests something for breakfast, and there is a wolf at the door. This followed by a number of shocking revelations, including the love of evil spirits, and Paddy's suggestion of a game of dress-up. After which there is an excursion to buy a hat for Penny, rings for Brandon, and a plate of veal anti-PETA. After which Penny takes her pets into the Labyrinth, Neville receives a rose, and there is an unexpected confrontation, forcing Penny to make matters perfectly clear while at the same time being less than truthful. After which Penny thanks Brandon for a dance, producing a great splash and the desired prize, followed by Jodi delighting in the pleasures of May, Melanie thinking the world is wonderful, and an honest compliment is paid, much to Penny's dismay. Then a matter of perfume and beauty secrets, a second journey into the Labyrinth, and the proper placement of decorations and party favors, after which Jodi demonstrates her prowess at cheerleading, Penny scribbles hasty notes, and Jodi demonstrates how to win a coffee maker. The appearance of the Prince in Purple, the importance of promises, and Penny snags a thread in her shawl, followed by a second unexpected arrival and even more shocking revelations. Then a journey further into the Labyrinth, the Crooked Mile, the Braid-Braid Road, and the Red Clue, Penny catches a nose, Toto gets away, and Melanie plays Ring-Around-the-Rosie, the Labyrinth coming full spiral, leading to the re-acquaintance of Madame Cleo and Norna. After which a bargain is struck, tokens are exchanged, and the play comes to a close.

Kevin Andrew Murphy



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Saturday, the 4th of May
Full Flower Moon
The Witching Hour

I awoke to find that Paddy had played me a trick, albeit a nice one—somehow my Victorian traveling gown and the fiendish corset had migrated onto a coat-hanger, and a pair of non-export white satin Sailor Moon pajamas had taken their place, while I was lying beneath a not-yet-vintage-but-nonetheless-hard-to-find *Watership Down* movie tie-in comforter.

Aside from that, well, I was in a room *somewhere*, as requested, with someone who'd taken good care of me, but apart from those two neatly fulfilled wishes, I hadn't the faintest idea where I was.

I took in the rest of the pooka's rabbit hole, which I had vague recollections of falling down, though the exact particulars were still muzzy with sleep and exhaustion, and the decor was distracting enough to keep me from thinking about it regardless: In one sense, the man's apartment was, in fact, *lovely*, as requested, or at least a perfect match to my tastes and the way I thought a room should be decorated—lots and lots of this and that, with vintage everything where possible—while on another level, it seemed to be a shrine to the archetype of the Hare as Trickster: tinted lithographs of Brer Rabbit from the original publication, animation cells from his incarnation in *Song of the South*, pencil sketches of Oswald Rabbit, several versions of both the White Rabbit and the March Hare,

Peter Rabbit and Benjamin Bunny alongside the three-faced goddess as personified by Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail, and of course more Bugs Bunny memorabilia than Warner Brothers probably ever licensed. Along with what looked to be the full product line of Cheery Chums and My Melody, Hello Kitty's little rabbit friends.

If I didn't know better, I'd think the man had a serious rabbit fetish. Which wasn't quite the case, or at least if it was, was a little bit more understandable.

As for the Rabbit himself, Padraic bounced about the kitchen on the other side of the studio apartment, dressed in brown knickerbockers, a red tartan waistcoat, and a pink dress shirt with a ribbon tie—an ensemble which would have just looked engagingly retro if it weren't patterned exactly off the costume of Uncle Wiggily, a copy of which was displayed in a place of honor atop the bookshelf.

Paddy continued to bounce around, tossing various ingredients into a bowl. "Morning, Penny. Whadayya havin'?" He ran an egg whisk through the contents. "I'm doing a tofu scramble. Just rabbit food here, I'm afraid, but hey, go figure."

I shook my head to clear the muzziness of sleep, lots of questions going through my mind, but then amid the clutter of rabbit memorabilia I saw the answer to the main one: My lunch pail, with the encapsulated demon, sat on the 1950s green Formica table between us, next to a leftover Easter basket filled with "lots of chocolates for me to eat" in the form of pastel-foiled Hershey's eggs, Mister Mistoffelees standing guard over both receptacles.

My familiar looked at me reproachfully. "Mistress, the rabbit doesn't have any proper food. Except the rabbit, that is." He looked at Paddy and licked his lips, and for all that Paddy was six feet tall and Mister Mistoffelees about ten pounds, my familiar had the same expression that he had when I made the mistake of taking him to Chuck E. Cheese's Pizza-Time Theater: One child's giant rat became another cat's all-you-can-eat buffet, and he had been most disappointed to discover that the Rat-in-the-Hat was just a poor student in a cheesy costume.

Which was not the case with Paddy Kearny, the Gay Freedom Day Bunny. “No, Mister Mistoffelees. It’s unacceptably rude to eat one’s host.”

My familiar switched his tail, as if considering whether he could jump the pooka right then and there, but finally said, “Yes, Mistress.”

Padraic glanced around, looking very rabbity. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like some soy milk? Or Rice Dream?”

My cat twitched his tail, glancing back at me.

“You could at least try, Mister Mistoffelees.”

“One shouldn’t eat things in Faerieland,” My cat looked around the apartment, “otherwise, one might never leave. Which could prove most unfortunate for the faerie....”

I glanced around the apartment. Unless Paddy had pulled some trick like the bag lady in *Labyrinth*, we were still in modern consensual reality, albeit San Francisco consensual reality. Which meant that most rules still applied, and it wasn’t likely that anyone was getting trapped anywhere for seven years and a day. Especially in an overstuffed studio apartment.

Assuming this even applied to a four-hundred-year-old talking cat, which, as I’ve said, I sincerely doubted. And which I suspect was also why my familiar was seriously considering eating our host.

I tried to appeal to reason, or at least faerie logic: “Mister Mistoffelees, remember—Hello Kitty doesn’t eat Chums and Melody, now does she?”

My familiar looked back at me. “Hello Kitty doesn’t have a mouth. If she did, she would have gobbled them up long ago. Along with the duck and the frog and the two little mice.”

I blinked. I had never considered this, but I realized that my familiar had just given the answer to the Zen riddle that had been perplexing the perky Goth community for years: Why does Hello Kitty have no mouth?

“Well, yes,” I allowed quickly, following the logic of Japanese merchandising to get on a different track as soon as possible, “but

Luna and Artemis haven't eaten Rini. And everyone calls her The Rabbit."

My familiar began washing his left paw. "That," he said, taking a decisive lick, "is only because they've made a pact with the Queen and they choose not to. If it were at all otherwise, the whiny one would have long since had her eyes scratched out." Mister Mistoffelees licked between his claws, keeping them bright and shining.

It was chilling to be able to follow my familiar's logic, even more so since I had a similar opinion of Sailor Moon's little pink-haired moon princess on occasion. "Well," I said at last, "we're trying to protect Melanie. And Paddy is family and is trying to help."

"Very well then, Mistress. If the rabbit amuses you..." He washed and inspected his right claws, then looked to Paddy. "Take care, lagomorph, that you do not grow tiresome. Otherwise I *will* eat you."

Paddy paused beating his tofu-scramble, mouth half-open, I think ready to give some witticism pointing out that he was a six-foot man while Mister Mistoffelees was merely a small black cat, but then stopped, as he no doubt realized that cats, while they seldom if ever give a straight answer, have never been known to lie.

"Um," Paddy said, retrieving his tongue which the cat most assuredly had got, "um-uh-well, I talked with Brandon, and he'll be over in a few minutes." He whisked the tofu scramble a few more times, flopping his mop-top hair the other way, and pointedly looking away from Mister Mistoffelees.

"Brandon?" I echoed.

Paddy shrugged, adding some olive oil to the skillet. "Family is family." He dumped the tofu mess in, allowing it to sizzle. "Take my advice and choose your friends carefully; you never get to choose your relatives."

I looked at him, putting two and two together and coming up with a couple of different sums. "Kate was your sister?"

Paddy hopped around, wielding a plastic spatula, obviously preferring Teflon to cold iron. "Cousin, actually." He stirred the mess, a heavy aroma of garlic wafting up, and I was very glad I was

not a vampire, regardless of whether Stoker was right. "But we were pretty close. *That*," he said definitively, whacking the edge of the skillet, "is just one of the reasons why Brandon deserves a few tricks."

A knock sounded on the door, and Paddy switched off the gas and dumped the scramble out onto a plate. "Speak of the Devil..." He set the skillet down, then bounced around the cluttered apartment until he came to the door. "Who *ixxz* it?" he called, leaning up against the door and striking an Anglo-Saxon attitude like the March Hare in *Through the Looking Glass*.

"It's me," growled a very familiar voice. "Let me in, Paddy."

"Or you'll huff and puff?" the pooka giggled, then undid the numerous latches anyway. "Come in. I won't be a pig about it."

Paddy opened the door, and Brandon stepped in, looking dangerous as per usual, but also just about as badly put through the wringer as I did. "Ooh," Paddy said, "muscle pants. That's a new look for you, Brandy-Boy. Nice, loose, loud, but they still show you off to best advantage...."

"Stuff it, Paddy," the werewolf said, causing his cousin to giggle. "Now where is it?"

He stormed in, Paddy giggling even louder, then the werewolf looked across the room to where I sat in bed, got up in Sailor Moon pajamas.

He glanced back to Paddy, who merely grinned in return. "No, I'm still gay, if that's what you're thinking."

Brandon growled. "What's the witch doing here? And where is it?"

I was obviously missing something in this exchange. "Where's what?"

The werewolf looked at me and seethed, though still managed to retain human form. But just barely. "My dick."

I glanced to his face, then to the rather conspicuous bulge down the right leg of his stretch pants, then back. "Unless I'm seriously mistaken, I think it's where you left it yesterday..."

Paddy continued to giggle, thumping one foot on the ground like Thumper from *Bambi* (who was the only famous rabbit not represented in the apartment's collection, at least so far as I'd noticed), until I gave him 'The Look.' "Paddy, what exactly *did* you tell your cousin to get him over here?"

The pooka tried to smother his giggles with his hands, but was not very successful. "Only— Only the truth. That I wouldn't have been mean enough to throw his *real* penis in a fudge-making machine. And that what he'd gotten yesterday was just an enchanted salami, and I had the real one here...."

I looked at Brandon Kearny. An enchanted salami. Right.

Someone once said that the biggest lies are composed in part of the truth, and this was no exception. "No, Brandon, I'm sorry. You've got the right one. Paddy was just making a very poor joke at your expense, and there's no enchanted salami, or kielbasa, or any other spellbound sausage product."

Paddy ogled Brandon's muscle pants. "There isn't? Could have fooled me...."

I sighed and stood up. There are some times when your instant karma comes to get you with obscene and horrific supernatural phenomena, like fountain pens squirting blood, or going hysterical in the old Aristotelian sense of the word. And then there are the moments when your sins are revisited via mundane yet no less horrific reminders.

At that particular moment, I felt as if I'd been cast into some lost Shakespearean comedy and forced to deal with the running bawdy joke: "*But lo, we have come to the crossroads, for see, that man is hung!*" "*By Mary, he is!*" "*Nay, 'twas by Penny, not Mary.*" "*Hung for pinching a penny?*" "*Nay, hung for being pinched by a Penny!*"

You get the general idea. But let me advise my fellow witches never to do spells like that unless you want to star in dirty jokes for the rest of your life.

I stood up and sighed. "Paddy, I won't tell you what a gentleman does, since you obviously don't care, but a true wit never goes for the obvious gag...."

Paddy glanced to Brandon's trousers. "Even if it's that obvious?"

I licked my lips, ready to say, "*Especially* if it's that obvious," but caught myself in time. I was tired, and I'd almost fallen for his setup, but you can't study manners and the comedy of same without being able to avoid some of the classic pitfalls.

Instead, I just left Paddy with his tactless end-line, and turned to his cousin. "I'm sorry, Brandon. Just another one of Paddy's tasteless jokes. I'm sure you're more familiar with them than I am." I shrugged and gave a grimace of commiseration. "But now that you're here, we don't have time for any of that."

With a witch's glare to both of them, I went and made certain the door was locked and the curtains were drawn, then took a moment to light a Bug's Bunny birthday candle sitting on the edge of the bookcase. Paddy seemed about to protest, but then it's obvious when someone's working a spell (at least if you have half a clue) and I finished the privacy charm without interruption. "There," I said, blowing the smoke off the match and setting it on the edge of the saucer, "that should do the trick."

That was probably the wrong turn of phrase to have used, since upon hearing it, Brandon, who has less of a clue than most of the supernatural set, turned to Paddy. "I've had enough of the tricks, Bunny Rabbit. And I don't know what you talked the witch into, or why she's here, but I'm not going to stick around for the ping-pong ball drop...." He pushed past Paddy and reached for the doorknob.

"What she is doing," said Mister Mistoffelees, his odd voice cutting across the apartment with brittle clarity, "is attempting to save your cousin's child. Something one would think a 'Protector of Gaia' would choose over growling at a silly rabbit."

Brandon froze, his fingers on the doorknob, then looked back at my familiar, an expression of pure horror dawning across his face as he realized what had just been said.

My familiar only yawned in return. "But then wolves are seldom noted for their common sense. You may leave if you wish; my Mistress is more than competent to solve this trouble on her own." Mister Mistoffelees then proceeded to look into a bell jar, inspecting

a highly collectible *Bunnykins* interpretation of Peter Rabbit's brother Benjamin as more worthy of interest than the werewolf.

Brandon looked stricken, taking his hand away from the knob as if it were booby-trapped, then he looked to Paddy, who simpered in return. "Well, if I'd told you the real reason, you wouldn't have believed me. And someone might have overheard...."

I nodded to the candle. "We can speak freely now. For as long as this burns."

"Which—" Brandon bit his lip, looking around. "Is it Melanie or Malory?"

"Melanie," I said softly. "She's in very serious danger. And we could use your help, if you care to give it."

If he currently he had a tail to tuck between his legs (apart from the reason for the muscle pants), Brandon Kearny would have done so. And even without one, he still gave the most hangdog expression I've ever seen on a human face. Paddy stepped aside for him, and with the ease of long familiarity, Brandon came and pulled out one of the kitchen chairs and sat down. At which point I pulled up a chair of my own and filled him in on the long and the short of it while Paddy finished making breakfast.

As I told the last of my tale, and Paddy dished up a large helping of tofu and stir-fried veggies for those who ate such things (which was limited to me and him), Brandon sat there, arms on the table, staring at my bestickered lunch pail which was held shut by nothing more than a Spottie Dottie padlock and a music advertisement for Hildegard Von Bingen. "You've trapped one of the Wyrms." "You've trapped one of the Wyrms."

"Actually one of the Baronets of the Outer Darkness," Mister Mistoffelees said from his perch atop the lunchbox. He licked a paw, giving his left ear another pass. "Charnas ranks somewhere above a Wyrms Lord, though below any of the True Princes. At least if you listen to the demon gossip."

My familiar's frank assessment of the situation made Brandon's jaw drop, since obviously he'd never considered that there could be anything nastier or more malignant than a Wyrms Lord, whatever that might be. And to find that I'd locked that Greater Evil in my

lunchbox (admittedly with a Turkish carpet, a rosary, and the aforementioned music stickers and toy padlock) was obviously more than he'd been prepared to deal with.

He looked to Paddy, now sitting backwards in a third of the kitchen chairs, idly munching garlic-buttered baby carrots. "We should call Cullen. He'll know what to do."

Paddy tossed back another carrot, his mop-top flipping like the ears of a lop-eared rabbit. "Cullen has more sense than you, Brandy-Boy, but even he couldn't resist howling this to every wolf in earshot. And has it ever occurred to you that other things than wolves can listen in?"

Brandon paused, no doubt realizing that, just as Jodi had spied on my phone call, Paddy had had his rabbit ears tuned to whatever frequency Brandon and his werewolf buddies had been using. "You've been spying on us...."

Paddy grinned, showing his bunny teeth, then using them to nibble a Chinese long bean. "Just keeping up on the family."

"You were kicked out of the family."

"Why? Because I'm a fairy, or because I'm a Faerie?" Paddy's laugh was high and bitter, and he violently skewered a chunk of fried tofu. "How's my dad, anyway? Still saying I'm possessed by the Urge Wyrms of Perversion? Or am I last week's news since Annie snuck out to get an abortion?"

"You're sick, Paddy. That's what you are."

"Oh yes, and condoms are of the Wyrms. Just ask the Pope!"

I watched in horrified silence, Brandon and Padraic Kearny's poisoned banter one of those fascinating, gruesome things you feel compelled to watch, like traffic accidents, or the O.J. Simpson trial. And like the O.J. trial it was hard to follow all of it.

"Oh yes," Paddy said a minute or two later, waving a fork with a piece of garlicked zucchini, "your Kinfolk are just fine so long as they're breeding like bunnies. But if they *are* bunnies, or do anything aside from breeding, then it's 'Of the Wyrms!'" He popped the zucchini in his mouth and chewed. "We're too stupid to think up anything on our own."

And I thought I had a dysfunctional family. But as I silently ate my own portion of the tofu and mixed primavera, watching the Kearnys go at it, I came to realize that the little spats between my brothers and sisters were nothing compared to the obvious longstanding problems in the Kearny clan.

Brandon raised his hands, fingers curved into claws, the classic melodrama pose of anguish and frustration—with the added touch of having his nails just a little too pointed for standard humanity. “Can’t you see? It’s *unnatural*.”

Paddy waved a suggestively crisp asparagus spear. “And having sex with someone you don’t like is?”

Then again, I’m the only witch in my family. Excepting, perhaps, Great-Aunt Eudora, and she’d died in Madagascar when I was six, so it wasn’t as if I had much competition in the supernatural department.

“But I have to eat meat, Paddy! It’s just the way I am!”

“But when I’m just the way I am, it’s ‘of the Wym,’ right? How many acres of rain forest were torched to feed your burger habit this week, Brandon? Twenty? Fifty?”

To say that Paddy and Brandon had a long history would be the understatement of the century, and I could hardly believe that it was only a couple of days before that I’d stuck my witchy nose in and been responsible for a scene which culminated in Paddy tossing Brandon’s manhood into a chocolate-conching machine.

“Shut up, Paddy! Shut up!” Brandon put his hands over his ears, trying to block out the latest dogma-crushing argument, and while I’m no professional, he looked as if he were badly in need of psychotherapy, which, when you’re a werewolf, is a bit harder to find than it might be otherwise.

And as matters stood, Paddy and I were the closest thing he was going to get to an encounter group. Yet much as I felt the urge to play counselor and have him and his cousin continue to talk over their differences (albeit in a slightly more rational manner), we unfortunately had the more pressing trouble of extricating Melanie from an

immanent demonic sacrifice. Even if I had already made certain that the demon wouldn't make it to the party.

"Guys?" I said, trying to get their attention, and finally having to wave a fork through their line of vision. "Guys? I know it doesn't have much to do with gay rights and rain forest devastation, but you remember Melanie, don't you? She needs you right now, and it's not going to help her any for you two to keep being bitches."

The last word of course would have different meanings for a fairy and a werewolf, but the end result was the same, and I wasn't about to insult my familiar by telling them to stop their cat-fight.

Brandon looked over, and he was lucky he wasn't a woman, otherwise he would have had mascara all down his face, waterproof or no. "What— What are we going to do?"

I paused, taken aback for a moment. It had been fascinating and instructive to watch their argument, but more than that, it had also given me a break from thinking, and now I was suddenly put on the spot. "Um, well, I guess we're going to rescue her."

"Where is she?" Padraic asked.

It was a perfectly reasonable question, completely rational, in fact, but apart from the pat answer of "with Jodi," I really didn't know what else to say.

I was saved from having to confess this, however, by a loud and resounding *THUD!* that shuddered through the apartment. All of us were knocked into jitters by this, excepting Mister Mistoffelees, who looked up from his comfy perch atop the lunchbox, twitched his ears, then settled back down to sleep.

I glanced back in the direction he had looked, and saw that my pink carryall bag, which Paddy must have placed in the one—requested—enormous chair when we'd come in that morning, had slid down over the course of the next several hours, until it had chosen that precise moment to slip the last bit and disgorge its contents across the floor.

Of course, when you're a witch, you learn that nothing happens by sheer coincidence, even if there is a completely rational explanation. Among the items that had spilled forth was my Book of

Shadows (which you're currently reading), the last entry of which Thing—I mean Deiter—had finished in the car, and which had caused the large *THUD!* as it hit the floor and fell open.

I set my fork down on the edge of the plate (the cleaning of which had revealed the triptych of Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cottontail) and went over to where my Kiki bag had spilled. Both Deiter and I had neglected to lock the bands back into place around my Book of Shadows, or even to wrap it in the shawl, allowing it to fall open, but regardless, I picked it up and looked at the page, noting the beautiful Gothic script and a margin illumination of what could only be Jodi in her *Bimbo Arisen from the Waves* outfit. I then read a passage of text:

I smiled the evilest Wednesday Addams' smile I could. "I suppose I'll figure it out. Where will you be conducting the rite?"

I skimmed the rest of the page, but as I remembered, and as Deiter had penned, Not-So-Goody Goody Blake hadn't said exactly *where* she'd be conducting her Satanic 'Welcome Home!' party, other than the fact that I could ask just any old evil spirit and they'd be able to tell me the way.

Then again, the old biddy had given the charm for the eggshell spell as her parting line, and while it had taken the unclouded eyes of youth, or at least of Malory, to figure it out, I had an inkling that she may have given slightly more accurate directions to the party in her closing address as well. Trust me, but witches are like this, the old *Iff thou art clever enuff to discern my hidden meanynge, then thou art worthy of the wisdom of thy quest*. Yadayadayada, yackety-schmackety, basic metaphysical wankage.

I bet Jodi was really disappointed they canceled *Batman* back in the sixties. She would have made a great guest villain.

I turned to my two Boy Wonders and said, "What do you two think of this? 'I love evil spirits, don't you, Sister Penelope? *They* know. The dark spirits have *always* known. All you need to do is call them and they'll take you there....'"

“‘Isle of Evil Spirits?’” Paddy echoed, the same vowels and consonants as I’d used, but the accents differently placed. “I’ve heard of the *Isle of Lost Children*, but who’s the beach-blanket Satanist?”

“No,” Brandon said, “the Isle of Evil Spirits. It’s right here. *Alcatraz*...”

I paused as the realization hit me. Yes, ‘The Isle of Evil Spirits’ is one of the other names for The Rock, even if ‘Alcatraz’ itself translates as nothing more poetic than ‘Pelican Island.’ I just hadn’t heard mention of it since elementary school, where they give you all the basic California history you can stomach, but the Ohlone tribes, who were here before the Spaniards and their quaint little Mission system, gave the place a wide berth, and not just because of the shark-infested waters. And in modern days all I can say is that most psychics and sensitives mark the tour of the old prison as “Let’s not and say we didn’t” on their list of ‘Touristy things to do in San Francisco.’

I was about to glance back to the page, to see if I could glean any more info from my previous entry, when the book fell shut. Nothing dramatic, no snapping pages like the Book of Shadows in *Warlock*, none of the showy ‘haunted book’ shtick, but there was a subtle shift of weight in my arms, and I knew I hadn’t tipped the pages the last extra bit.

With that, the bands that went round the binding boards slipped back into place, the old creases in the leather resuming their habitual folds, and the tabs almost fit themselves into the jeweled lock in the center.

I tucked them in the rest of the way, fingers just a wee bit shaky, then out of habit reached for the gold key on its diamond chain, struck for a moment by the symbolism. The Golden Key, the quintessential symbol of the Key to the Arts and Sciences and the understanding thereof.

However, I also owned another Key, of similar age, and possibly even greater magick, and I went and retrieved the Elector of Saxony’s Nutmeg from my dress of the night before, still where I’d

left it in the role of watch fob for *Felix the Cat*. It should have been awkward to work one-handed, but the Elector's Silver Key assumed its second form almost as quickly as the puzzle boxes in *Hellraiser*. Which I hoped wasn't a prophetic simile, but after comparing Key to Key, I saw that they matched almost exactly, both the same size, both with the same Tau-shaped cut incised into the tooth, different only for metal and for trivial variations in the design. And with the long experience of a girl who's learned which house keys work as passkeys to which rooms in a school, I could tell that the Silver Key could be fit into any lock designed for the Golden Key and vice versa, and that only the most sensitive of mechanisms would be able to tell the difference.

The Silver Key, in the lore of Magick, is reputed to be the Key to Spirits and the Spirit World, and I placed it in the lock and turned it.

No *kerbangs*, no fireworks, but my sixth sense could tell that with that action some ritual had been completed, some wheel had been set into motion, and I was glad that neither Brandon nor Paddy dared to ask me what had just transpired, since I really didn't want to admit that I was running on instinct and didn't really know *why* I was doing what I was doing, other than the fact that locking something with a silver key is a traditional folk charm for binding a spirit, and at the moment, I had more familiars than I could deal with.

Having my diary flap around the room as well, whether or not it was an actual witch's Book of Shadows, was just a little more than I wanted to deal with, thanks but no. I also wondered whether Jodi Blake had the same trouble with *her* first diary, or whether she'd just shrugged and taken it as a sign that she should go out and have sex and sacrifice a few more peasants, not necessarily in that order.

But on the subject of sacrificed peasants, Deiter was also lying on the old green shag carpet, looking like the Mummy's Hand after the cat played with it a bit (which may have happened while I was asleep for all I know, since it's an exercise in frustration to keep complete tabs on Mister Mistoffelees), and I picked my Hand of Glory up and

dusted him off. I then glanced over to the privacy charm on the bookcase.

Over the course of breakfast and the cousins' argument, Bugs Bunny had melted down to his navel, and there wasn't going to be much privacy without him. I glanced back to Paddy. "Got any more?"

The pooka looked extremely rabbit-y in the A.A. Milne sense, even more so than Brent, who was a chronic worrier. "Only—Only the Peter Rabbit. But it's very collectible...."

Of course, here I was holding a tome bound with gold and jewels, looking like an extra from a Dulac illustration if it weren't for the Sailor Moon pajamas and the mummified hand. "I'll get you another one."

I looked where Paddy had glanced and located a large white votive at the end of the bookcase, still wrapped in cellophane with the Hallmark sticker over Beatrix Potter vignettes. Paddy seemed about to protest, but was silenced by a glare from Brandon. I put the Book and Hand back into my satchel, then unwrapped the votive and finished the extension of the privacy charm by passing the flame from the pelvis of Bugs to the Peter Rabbit devotional.

"There," I said, snuffing Bugs' spinal cord, "that should last us." Or at least I hoped it would. I'm a Goth, and a shortage of candles is a problem you seldom have, unless you're severely broke.

"Last us how long?" Brandon wanted to know. "It's already after four. When do we rescue Melanie?"

I paused. This, of course, was a very good question. With the aid of my own Book of Shadows—and there was another concept that would take getting used to—we'd guessed the *where*, and it was a safe bet that midnight was to be the moment of the actual festivities, but beyond that, well...

I tried to think like Jodi for a moment, and after considering sex and murder and the amusing variations thereof, I realized that she had probably planned for me to divine the charm to the eggshell spell, then get in the boat and say, "I love evil spirits!" the pun and the gypsy magick propelling me to the rendezvous point at Alcatraz.

Then, upon my arrival, she could gloat for minute, welcome me, then get me or my proxy ready to take over her spot on her contract with Lord Charnas. With uncertain bit being that if I chickened out, or was too stupid to get there, or just decided not to bother, she'd just give Melanie to Charnas and leave it at that.

Of course, dearest Professor Charm was neatly locked in a lunch pail under a Turkish carpet, a rosary, and the watchful eyes of Spottie Dottie, so we didn't have to worry about *that* particular problem, though there was still the trouble of rescuing Melanie from the witch. Who would probably figure out something equally unpleasant to do with her if her good buddy Lord Charnas didn't show up as planned.

"The answer's simple," Paddy said then, derailing my train of thought, "we don't."

"We don't what?" I asked.

Paddy stood up, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "We don't rescue Melanie. We let the old witch give her to the demon."

Brandon's jaw dropped even lower than mine. "You're sick, Paddy," he said at last. "Don't even joke about something like that."

"I'm not joking," Paddy said. "I'm perfectly serious." He grinned, bouncing more. "Do you want to be the demon, or should I?"

My jaw dropped to match Brandon's as I figured out what he was talking about. "You're going to impersonate Lord Charnas."

"Bingo!" Paddy cried. "Prize goes to the witch in the back. One hundred percent correct."

Brandon shook his head. "Impossible. That old hag's a sorceress. She'd see through your tricks in an instant."

I held up one finger in exception. "No. Paddy's fooled her once before. And she's vain. She wouldn't dare give him the hairy eyeball; she's too afraid of seeing through her own illusions."

"Besides which," Mister Mistoffelees added, "Lord Charnas is a demon. Mortals are overly impressed by the true seemings of such spirits, and Mistress Jodilyn wouldn't dare look at him with the Eyes of Truth, for fear of groveling at his feet." He licked his paw and

washed his right ear, considering. "She did that once before, and was less than happy with the outcome; she despises being forced to worship anyone. Even if she should." He gave his ear another pass. "I'm probably well rid of her."

Paddy looked to his cousin. "You heard the kitty, Wolf Man. The old bitch is a Top. So she isn't going to dare give me—I mean her demonic Master—too close of a look, or else back on the Bottom she goes, and she doesn't want that!" So saying, he unwrapped a chocolate egg and popped it in his mouth, chewing as an underscore.

I nodded in agreement, Paddy having got Jodi's number to the last decimal place, and Brandon looked frightened. Rather like Alice after she began to realize she'd stepped into the Mad Tea Party. "Couldn't we just kill her?" he asked plaintively.

"No," I responded, then before he could protest, added, "not that there'd be any love lost if someone did. It's just that Jodi Blake did get *something* from her pact with the demon. Namely, immortality."

"Second-rate demonic immortality," Mister Mistoffelees corrected. "She still ages, and Lord Charnas is scheduled to take her at midnight anyway."

Brandon shrugged, as if wondering what the big deal was. "So? Vampires are immortal, but you can still kill them. You just take the head off."

Mister Mistoffelees gave him a look he reserved solely for morons, idiots, and now werewolves. "I believe I distinctly said 'second-rate immortality.' Not third-rate." He turned away, giving his attention to an interesting spot of Formica. "Mistress, if you insist on bringing the wolf with us, I request you bring a leash. He's even more annoying than the rabbit."

"Of course, Mister Mistoffelees," I quickly promised.

Paddy grinned at his cousin and bounced. "'Kill the woman! Kill the woman!' What a great philosophy! Have you asked the Earth Mother what she thinks of that?"

Under simultaneous attack from three fronts, Brandon had no choice but to surrender. "What am I supposed to do?" he whined, holding up his hands in a gesture of helpless submission. It was

probably a good thing he wasn't in wolf form; if he had been, I think he would have rolled on his back and peed on himself. And we would have never heard the end of that from Paddy.

Thinking like Jodi, or at least like Jodi's protégée, I looked to the werewolf and grinned my vilest grin. "Oh, that's easy. You're going to take *my* place on the contract."

Brandon goggled. "What?"

"Well," I said, waving to either side like the Cheshire cat, "it should seem fairly obvious. Why should I sacrifice myself to a Demon Prince when I've got someone else by the short-and-curlies? And who better to give over than a good, honorable, noble Protector of Gaia? Who, I might add, is so despondent and wishes so much to atone for his past crimes that he would willingly sacrifice himself to save an innocent from the Fires of Hell?"

I began to giggle like Madame Mimm, and Paddy and I spontaneously high-fived over the table, the culmination of the plan occurring to each of us at once.

Paddy giggled. "Nobody easier to trick than a trickster. I should know."

I grinned back. "I think this will work."

Brandon looked at both of us. "You're mad."

"We're all mad here," Paddy quoted back. "I'm mad. You're mad."

I leered at him. "You must be, or you wouldn't have come here."

Poor Brandon was traumatized, but then, such is the fate of the traditional and hidebound when faced with the weird and unconventional. He seemed to have no experience with tactics beyond the outright frontal assault, but after seeing what that had netted him after confronting just one junior grade witch, he realized that calling in the lycanthropic cavalry to deal with the grandmother of all demon sorceresses and her Hell-spawned (if second-rate) immortality would be somewhat less than useful. In all likelihood it would leave all his friends dead or worse, Jodi annoyed at best, and still not have Melanie rescued.

Which left it to us tricksters to plan the event.

Now came the question of ‘What does one wear to meet a Demon Prince?’ Never mind the fact that *Señora* Duarte and I had already answered that question the day before—the traveling gown was an excellent choice for the actual conjuration of demons—but as for going to Alcatraz to be a spectator at someone else’s demon conjuration, well, that required a different outfit. Specifically something without a corset and granny boots so I could run if something didn’t go to plan.

There was also the matter of the bloodstain, from where I’d sat down in my conjuration circle. For all that it was dried blood on black taffeta, it distinctly read, ‘IRNI,’ now that it was somewhere where I could see it. And whatever her failings might be, I didn’t think I could convince Jodi that this was just the new fashion statement among modern young Satanists.

Paddy’s outfit was simple. With just a hop, skip, and a jump, he somehow transformed into an apparently ordinary large brown hare. Of course, my sixth sense told me he was something more, but since hares and rabbits rank only behind cats and toads as a witch’s familiar of choice (tied for third with ravens and owls), it seemed perfectly appropriate for me to have a rabbit to pull out of my hat, especially considering my talent of late in collecting familiars.

Cousin Paddy went into the Kiki bag, alongside Mister Mistoffelees. And while I don’t speak rabbit, I could tell that he was minding his P’s and Q’s now that he was down on my familiar’s level, and didn’t protest as I borrowed one of his sweat suits with which to go out shopping.

The hat I chose was a straw sun bonnet, with the price tag still attached, Minnie Pearl style. The dress was a black calico and white lace Gunny Sax recreation, of the sort that was oh-so-very popular in the early eighties, and thus very easy to locate in thrift stores, especially since the factory outlet was in San Francisco.

The bag, of course, was my lunch pail with the demon inside.

I’m sure you’ve probably never done anything similar, but if you do manage to lock an ancient evil in your lunchbox, then you come

to realize you have a problem. What do you do with the damned thing?

I mean, honestly, it was all very well and good to have trapped a Demon Prince. I could pat myself on the back and congratulate myself for my cleverness all I wanted, but that didn't change the fact that I'd gotten what I'd wished for, a demon in a box, but now that I had it, just how was I going to dispose of it?

King Solomon's approach had just been to toss it into the ocean. Unfortunately, my lunch pail was not so rust-proof as the gold and lead-lined vessel he'd used, if the legends are to be believed, and even if I encased the sucker in Lucite with one of those 'Make Your Own Paperweight' kits they sell down on Geary, it didn't change the fact that King Solomon's little ploy had only kept the jug safe for a few hundred years, after which point some poor fisherman pulled it up, popped the cork, then had a starring role in 'The Tale of the Fisherman and the Genie' (though you probably have a copy of the Arabian Nights anyway, so I won't bore you with the rest of the story).

Then there was the Church. According to history, the Church is supposed to be pretty good at dealing with demons and devils, if just because Holy Ground is very useful for keeping bottled nasties from causing trouble. But if you believe those same historical accounts, no less than five Popes are thought to have sold their souls to the Devil (which one in particular I'm not sure), and while John Paul II seems a *little* bit better than that, he also thinks condoms are a sin against God, so I don't think he's completely up on the modern age. Plus, while I certainly believe in the Devil (or at least the one I'd locked in my lunchbox), I could just imagine the papal audience: "Begging Your pardon, Your Holiness, but this lapsed-Catholic Goth girl from the United States requests divine intercession. She thinks she has a major demon inside her lunch pail, bound with a rug, a toy padlock, and one of those souvenir rosaries you bless by the truckload. Would you like to see her?"

Yes, right, like that was really going to happen.

Then there was Brandon's suggestion, which was good for all of thirty seconds and an evil laugh. According to our pet werewolf, his folk had sacred caerns and mystics and all sorts of warriors ready to put such a major bit of nastiness safely under lock and key. Which would be fine and dandy, except, as Paddy and Mister Mistoffelees both pointed out, werewolves like to brag to all and sundry about what a boffo job they do of Squishing the Wurm. Which meant that given a week's time, every Satanist from here to Tahiti would know which Werewolves' Graveyard was holding Charnas, the Lord of Nasty Evil Fun, and be able to send a flock of black-robed cannon fodder to bust him out.

And I couldn't exactly just kick it under the bed and forget about it. As folktales and literature make perfectly clear, some Pandora always has the habit of finding such things and feeling the urge to turn the Jack-in-the-box crank. Then, just as soon as you can play 'Pop Goes the Weasel,' I'd have an irate Demon Prince to deal with. I'm sorry, thank you, no.

Which meant I simply *had* to lug the sucker with me and guard it, making me scream things at shop clerks like "No! No! My *Precious!*" whenever they tried to take it and put it behind the counter in one of the 'Anything big enough to shoplift with' cubbyholes.

Okay, well, maybe I didn't do the whole Gollum trip, but that was only because Mister Mistoffelees is almost as adept at having people not notice my purse as he is at having them not notice him.

Brandon, both to keep my latest promise to Mister Mistoffelees and to gain marks in Jodi's black book—after all, this was the man I was going to be giving to the demon in my place, which would be in place of Melanie, which would be in place of Jodi and her extensive karmic credit-card debt—I dressed up in slave gear. That's right, studded collar, harness, harem pants, and the stipulated long black leash, *a la* Soft Cell's 'Sex Dwarf.'

We didn't have the gold Rolls or the dumb chauffeur, but this is the nineties anyway, so we made do with the next best thing and got Brandon every piercing known to man, or at least that we could

gather with his VISA card and a circuit of the Haight and the Castro. All in gold, of course, never silver, since otherwise they would have hurt and been a bit more permanent than our poor long-suffering werewolf would have liked.

Did I mention instant karma? Well, I had a feeling this was a case of Brandon getting his, all of his phobias and petty prejudices and bigotries coming to get him at once, in the form of leatherboys with piercing tools, which, I think, was far worse on the whole than even the children with staple gun and piercing magazine I threatened the day before.

Of course all this was, as I said, just killing time before the main event, as well as putting on a show for Jodi's benefit. I was certain, classic villainess that she is, that when she got bored, she'd look in with her crystal ball or magick mirror or whatever Wicked Queen affectation struck her fancy at the moment, and this being the case, I made a great show of gift-wrapping my intended gift for Lord Charnas—gold nipple rings, steel tongue studs, weights and barbells to stretch things that didn't need stretching in the slightest, et cetera. I'm sure you get the general idea, but if not, just pick up a few fetish magazines and you should be able to piece it together.

By the time we were done, Brandon would need twenty minutes, plus assistance, to be able to pass through an airport metal detector. While I, for my part, put at least one of my worries to rest by buying myself a couple pairs of handcuffs and various lengths of chain, which I used to wrap my lunch pail Jacob Marley style then lock it to my wrist, though with the pierced and accessorized boy-toy on the leash in my other hand, I could pass this off as nothing more than a James Bond affectation.

At which point it was after eight and night had fallen. We took a cab to North Beach, where we had dinner at the *Ristorante Volare*, where they play loud Italian pop music, not to mention having waiters who sing 'Volare,' and more importantly serve such wonderfully politically incorrect delicacies as raw veal. And while I've heard of people not liking their veggies, Brandon Kearny was

actually quite serious about this, even picking the capers off of his plate of *veal anti-PETA* or whatever the dish is called.

Sitting at one of the tables on the sidewalk, I also had a lovely time as people stopped to admire my pets, asking to pet the bunny nibbling the salad or the kitty licking the cream off the *tira misu* or the wolf-boy eating the platter of veal tartar doggie style, since I'd cuffed his hands to one of the rings set below his beltline, forcing him to push the capers off with his nose.

After all, I'd seen Sasha do roughly the same sort of things with her boyfriend, and while domination and discipline isn't my bag, it's easy enough to improvise. Any girl with a younger brother will know what I'm talking about.

As for Brandon, well, if it had been Baron in the same position, he probably would have enjoyed it, though then it wouldn't have had the same sadistic charm of saying "Eat, Dog-Boy!" as I shoved twenty dollar gourmet appetizers under his nose. He bristled a bit at this treatment, possibly because the full moon had risen, but I only did Sasha's trick and twisted his nose ring until he opened his mouth so I could stuff food in. "Good doggie! Now beg!"

We had no less than three tourists come by and request to take pictures, but even I am not that sadistic. If we survived this evening, the last thing Brandon would want flying around were photographs of him done up as a someone's fetish dream, so I merely refused, passing this off as the affectation of a rich-bitch dominatrix who didn't want to share.

I was sure that Jodi would approve, and hoped she was watching—*Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the biggest bitch of all?*—though honestly, I was only aiming for first runner up. The last thing I needed was Jodi thinking I was out to steal her crown as pinup girl for the Forces of Darkness. After all, it was her vanity I was counting on, and I figured she wouldn't mind having an Evil Princess to flatter her ego just so long as I didn't threaten to upstage her Wicked Queen act.

With this happy thought in mind, we arrived at *Labyrinth*, or, more mundanely, the Maritime Hall, at the corner of First and

Harrison. With the portholes and rope and nautical paint, it looks like exactly what it is, a navy dance hall, or at best a set for *South Pacific*, but with the right lighting and music, it becomes a perfectly respectable Goth club each Friday.

We entered and flashed our ID, no line this early, then I poked Brandon with the teaser-size complimentary flogger they'd given me at one of the piercing boutiques for having "Such a cute pet!" until he paid my cover. No woman should have to go dutch, and especially not a dominatrix. But I just rolled my eyes, tugged his leash, and paraded down the stairs past the tables selling spikewear and magazines and *Gargoyle Bead's* many trays of silver baubles, the mere sight of which seemed to make Brandon edgy. I just pulled him beyond them, noting the stares we were getting, and on one level appreciating them, since while I like to make an entrance, I'd never before done it using a human being as a fashion accessory.

Not that I'm unfamiliar with the concept, mind you. I know it's done all the time, in circles far more respectable than the Goth scene, but it's just that I usually don't accessorize myself with anything apart from me, or at most my cat. Call me independent, but I don't think I need more than an antique dress and a splash of jewelry to make me look like me.

But with Brandon on the leash on one hand, the handcuffed lunchbox on the other, Mister Mistoffelees on my shoulder, the hare peeping out of my satchel, and the price-tagged hat on my head as full Minnie Pearl regalia, I'd managed to summon up the essence of *The Dead Milkmen's* 'Punk Rock Girl,' which as Fate, or at least Lynx the deejay would have it, came on the minute I entered the main dance hall.

Neville, thank all the Gods, was on the far side of the room, at his customary darkened end of the bar. And I'll admit, I was taking a risk being here, both in dragging my accessorized werewolf and the Demon-in-the-Box with me, but it would be far more of a risk not to have come.

Let me put it bluntly. Just because I didn't want Brandon calling in his werewolf buddies—or really, calling the wolves early and

thereby ruining the covert operation—didn't mean that I wasn't going to call in my own special forces. Trouble was that I couldn't trust the telephone—even Brent's MIB-line still connected to a regular phone on the other end—and since Jodi knew who at least a few of my friends were, running to them would be a sure-fire way to let on that I wasn't the nasty little junior-grade demon sorceress she thought I was.

Of course, Paddy and Brandon Kearny were not my first choices as partners for a mission like this either, except for the fact that Fate, the gods, St. Christopher, and my hitchhiking spell combined had dropped them in my lap, and one of the rules of serendipity is that good fortune is where you find it and windfalls are what you make of them. And if you get a gift from the gods, you smile, say thank you, and accept it, even if you don't like it and it doesn't match anything you have. Paddy and Brandon may have been a crazy rabbit and a pack-minded wolf (and why sheep have the bigger reputation for being blind followers is beyond me), but they were what I had to work with, and turning them loose to cause trouble on their own would have been less than prudent.

Softly, softly catch a monkey, as they say. And when you're trying to catch a monkey, the last thing you want are the amateur monkey catchers coming in and frightening the little simian off.

Of course, Jodi wasn't a monkey, she was more like a crotchety old poisonous snake, but if you've seen enough *Wild Kingdom*, you know how useless dogs are around those, or any other venomous creature. Generally you need to keep them leashed and muzzled for their own safety.

However, to extend the metaphor, if I was going to play Marlin Perkins, I'd prefer to have an extra set of snake-wranglers off camera, just in case something didn't go to plan. Which, if you've seen any of the *Wild Kingdom* outtakes, occurred more often than not.

Finding my fellow Hollowers, and letting them know that something was up, if not exactly what, would at least guarantee us a cavalry if we needed it—especially with the alarm cord I'd pulled with my Udjat Eye that morning—and while I hadn't set forth

sentry duty for the clubs, I was very glad that Neville had elected to take *Labyrinth*.

The only new addition to his usual black turtleneck ensemble was a pair of smoked blind man's glasses, which he pushed down for a moment to take us in. "Pleasant evening, Penny, Gentlemen...." He looked quickly and pointedly to Brandon, then Mister Mistoffelees, then the hare that was Padraic Kearny. "I trust that matters have resolved themselves?" He moved his hand, idly brushing the Indigo Eye he wore as a medallion and flashing the matching seal upon his ring, a calculatedly careless gesture to let me know that he, at least, had received my signal. "A moment—"

He held up his hand as a man came by, tall, pale, with long black-dyed hair and the penchant for the black pirate shirts you see a lot of in the Goth scene. "Mr. Sinclair," the man whispered quickly, "a token." He extended a red rose, twined with rosemary, for remembrance.

Neville accepted the favor, then extended his seal ring to be kissed. The man did, then looked up, blurting, "Victor Moray, of Seattle. If you have need of any dentis—"

Neville withdrew his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Moray, but no. You are acknowledged. That is sufficient."

Victor, of Seattle and the pirate shirt, beat a hasty retreat, and Neville made the faintest of gestures towards him with the twined flowers. "That one," he said absently, "still lives. Shoddy."

Neville set the rose and rosemary aside with a pile of others upon the bar, then his gaze fell upon the chain-wrapped lunch pail in my hand. He looked for a moment to Spottie Dottie, then to the face of Hildegard von Bingen, then back to me, and I knew that he *knew*.

Nothing more needed to be said, which was fortunate, since the next moment more was said: "Penny!" followed by my "Alexander?" followed by a chorus of "You!?"

It is said that the Fates conspire against people, and it's also said that there are only forty-eight real people in the world, and you know forty-two of them. But the simple fact was, just as I'd come to

Labyrinth seeking to meet Neville, Alexander had obviously come to the same hoping to find me.

After all, the list of the Hollower clubs is now an open secret among the City's walking dead, and the last I'd seen him, he'd been frantic with worry over his kidnapped daughter, just before passing out onto the floor of my bedroom due to a case of vampiric narcolepsy. And when he'd woke up the next night, I hadn't been there to give him any more reassurances, my excuse being that I was just a bit busy what with conjuring a demon and locking it in my lunch pail.

Of course, I should have thought to give Alexander a call at sunset, or even leave a message with *Señora* Duarte, except such consideration didn't fit into the bitch-princess persona I was playing up for Jodi's benefit, plus there was also the fact that he still had neglected to give me his private phone number.

Not that it seemed to matter at the moment. "You!" Brandon bellowed again, getting just a little bit bigger and hairier even though his recent piercings did not, gouging into his flesh.

"Down boy!" I cried, jerking his leash, and when that didn't work, I took my Udjat Eye, which I'd looped around the back of my hand as a dandle, and pressed the silver bulla against his right nipple.

The pain registered immediately, the Eye not being much silver, but it was flat, and magickal, and I was branding his tit with it. "Down!" I ordered, then, nearly doing a chin-up on his collar, I whispered in his ear, "Down! Or I'll turn every last one of those rings to silver!"

Now, I don't really possess the secret of the alchemists, having never bothered to puzzle out the mysteries of the Golden Pear (which was going up for auction anyway), but Brandon Kearny didn't know that, and the threat worked like a charm. He subsided to his usual height (still considerably taller than Alexander or me) and I don't know, maybe I was getting into the dominatrix persona, or maybe I was in a take-charge mood, but I think the pure fact of the matter is that I was playing a very dangerous game that evening

and I didn't have time for anything that was not in the script. "Gentleman, let's not make a scene. We're taking this in the *back*."

"Neville," I said with a nod to the leader of our merry band as I dragged Brandon Kearny towards the double doors at the rear of the club. Luckily Alexander is enough of a gentleman that he held open one of the doors for us, or maybe it was just that my silver bauble was stinking with the smell of burnt werewolf. Whatever, we made our way into the aft portion of the Maritime Hall.

The back passageways in that building are white and quiet and eye-itchingly brilliant, at least after the darkness of the dance floor, though fit well enough into the *Labyrinth* theme, twisting around to nowhere in particular with multiple dead-ends and portholes that look out into blackness. We made our way round to a quiet cul-de-sac, then I looked to Alexander, keeping Brandon on a short leash.

"Listen," I said, "this is the way it is: Jodi's going to meet with a demon tonight, and she's going to want to give him someone besides herself. Right now she has Melanie. She says she'll take me in her place, but, she says, if I can convince someone else of magickal blood to sacrifice themselves instead, that'll work just as well. So I figure a werewolf should do just fine."

Now, I'm sure that Alexander expected to hear all sorts of things, but this sort of coldhearted ruthless bitchiness was probably not one of them. However, I had the distinct feeling of being on stage at the moment, especially since we were standing right in front of one of the black empty portholes, and if anything made a good other side for a Wicked Queen's magick mirror, then that certainly did.

Alexander looked to Brandon, who stood there, mute, not just from the tongue stud (which really doesn't prevent you from speaking), but I'm guessing also from the fact that the last time they'd met, he hadn't looked like he'd been tagged by every ecologist on the West Coast. "You're— You're going in Melanie's place?"

I jerked the werewolf's collar before he could say something stupid, possibly blowing our act with Jodi, who my sixth sense told me was looking in right now, probably cackling her decrepit ass off. "That's right," I said. "Dog-Boy here was so mortified about killing

your wife, and trying to kill you, that I convinced him that the only way he can atone for his crimes is to martyr himself to save your daughter.” I smiled sweetly, adding the extra punch: “And if he doesn’t, I’ll make his dick fall off.”

I paused for dramatic effect, shocked by how evil I could make myself sound if I really needed to, then gave a Junior Evil Princess version of Jodi’s Glinda laugh. “He has a choice between regaining his honor, or living the rest of his life as a dickless coward. Simple enough, isn’t it?”

Alexander paused, looking at me, and I think realizing that the colors of my aura didn’t match the cold and bitchy things I was saying. “But—”

“But what?” I said before he could blow our cover, since he obviously hadn’t realized we were on stage. “But you thought I was a nice girl? Listen, Alexander, sorry to shatter your illusions, but let me put it to you straight: I’m in this for the kicks. You’re a nice guy, your family’s amusing, *Señora* Duarte’s an old bat, but hey, nobody’s perfect, and it’s fun to play with her head anyway. I took the job because it sounded like fun, nothing more, and I’ll get your daughter back because that’s what we witches do. It’s a matter of professional pride. Nobody takes what’s ours, or what we’re taking care of. We don’t like it.

“This guy,” I gave the leash a jerk, “is a dick. A holier-than-thou dick, and a big dick at that. And if I want to get your kid back, then it’s either him, or me, and I choose him. And if the demon doesn’t want a werewolf, well then, I suppose it’ll be Melanie, or Jodi if the demon doesn’t want her, ‘cause I’ll tell you one thing, it ain’t gonna be me.” I laughed again. “Who knows? Maybe you’ll see all of us coming back later. Might happen. You never know what the demon’s gonna want.” I followed this with a grimace of condescension and pity and a dismissive flick of my fingers, which would have really been helped by Jodi’s dragon lady nails, but oh well. “And if you’re thinking of doing the noble sacrifice trip yourself, don’t bother. Vampires are a dime a dozen, and I’m sure Lord Charnas has all the corpses he can stuff in his closet already.”

Alexander was dumbfounded, and I hoped he would stay that way, so I added, "Listen. Just you wait till I come back with your little girl, all happy and in tears at the same time, glad to be alive, glad to have you back. And happy to have her nice, sweet nanny who rescued her. Then if you decide you don't want me around, well then, you just tell that to her..." I reached out then, taking hold of his latest silk tie, then pulled him towards me and kissed him on the forehead.

"Later, Alexander," I said, releasing him to stagger back, then tugged on Brandon's leash. "Come on, Wolf-Boy. We've got a soul to sell and a little girl to save..."

If someone doesn't give me an Emmy for that performance, there's no justice in the universe. But then again, the judging committee consisted of Jodi, and while I'd probably get a nomination, she'd give the award to herself.

Bitch.

I popped the handcuffs off Brandon and took a moment to loop then through the handles of the double doors, then lock them. Alexander was pushing on them a moment later, staring at me through the little window.

"Don't interfere with me, daddy," I said. "Don't *ever* get in my way. Toodles..."

I tugged on Brandon's leash, hotfooting it out of there as fast as I could while still doing a smug and sexy villainess walk. Which is difficult when you're wearing flats (stiletto heels or bitch boots are sort of expected), but then I'd chosen to go for comfort and speed, since I still didn't know quite what to expect for the terrain.

The time, however, was getting on, just a little after ten, and while a cab would have been convenient, and a limo would have been classy, the bus is what we got. St. Christopher and Hermes had already done fine by me, and I wasn't going to hold out for style.

Luckily the Muni gets all types, and while a girl in a Minnie Pearl outfit fully accessorized with her pets (and a handcuffed lunchbox) might cause some comment, it wouldn't do that until everyone got home, and even then only as general amusement.

Which meant that we got down to the docks unmolested, though I don't think anyone would have tried anything. As I said, I'd taken the handcuffs off Brandon, it was a full moon, and he was more than a little bit annoyed, if just because of the Eye of Horus freshly branded onto his right nipple.

Unlike Pier 39 and Fort Mason, the docks near Harrison Street are the actual shipping district, with warehouses and suchlike, though luckily you can still sneak around and get to the rocks below. Not much of a beach, just piles of granite boulders, which I think were originally ships' ballast, tumbling all the way down to the shoreline, which was being pounded quite nicely, what the full moon and the rising tide.

And I was planning to sail to Alcatraz in an eggshell.

Well, there's the amount of hope in a mustard seed, then there's the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin, but I think of an equal or far greater number is the measure of cocksurety that's in the head of a brash young witch, especially when she gets desperate. And while it may have been possible to charter a sailboat from the yacht harbor, or to have taken one of the tours and just stayed behind, Alcatraz is still a pretty big place, and I had no idea where Jodi might be conducting her rite.

Which left magick.

I took out my little padded silk box, late of the Tai Chi balls, and opened it up. Inside was the eggshell. Nothing more, nothing less, with little smears of yolk around the rim where Malory had been somewhat less than neat.

I stepped down to as near to the waterline as I could safely get and dropped the eggshell into a small hollow between two rocks. It landed on the surface of the water, bobbing up and down with the tide, like a little white boat, almost merging with the reflection of the moon upon the water.

Of course that, by its lonesome, was not very magickal, and also would not do us particularly much good. I looked around, but we were out of sight of everyone save helicopters, and there weren't any of them overhead. Plus the fog was beginning to roll in.

Now, of course, I was supposed to spin three times widdershins, but with a cat, a rabbit, a lunch pail, and a satchel of miscellaneous goods (including a large folio bound with gold and jewels), I was not going to do that any way but awkwardly, especially standing on slippery rocks.

I turned to Brandon. "Do you dance?"

This question, especially from the witch who'd tormented him over the course of the past few days, culminating in branding his nipple with a silver ornament, obviously took him out of left field. But, as with all such things, it also prompted him to honesty. "Quite well."

Well, I wasn't asking for humility. I hooked one arm around his neck, and he picked me up on instinct. "Spin me," I said. "Three times. Counterclockwise."

Brandon was right. He did dance quite well. Or at least he managed three elegant spins atop some tumbled algae-slimed boulders before setting me down and bowing, ballroom-style.

"*Paraka*," I said, bowing back, and the next second a wave came up and swamped us.

It was only by holding on to each other and scrabbling for purchase that we kept from falling down, and Mister Mistoffelees yowled in protest. But when I looked around, past the saltwater sluicing from my sun hat, I saw that the eggshell had been washed away. But in its place was a pretty white Sunfish, one of those cute little sailboats children use for sailing on small lakes, and which had obviously slipped its mooring line and drifted here.

Remember, as I said, reality doesn't like magick, or at least magick which violates the laws of coincidence. I'd been hoping for a *Cinderella* effect with sparkles and mist and spun moonlight, coalescing into one of those beautiful white swan boats like they had in *The Light Princess*, but the plain fact of the matter is that such things are outside the realm of probability for the docks of San Francisco, and likewise with Jodi's Venusian half shell. Even in fairytales and dreams.

Small boats which slip their mooring lines, however, are a common occurrence, even if there was no such craft as a Sunfish with *La Lunita* (Spanish for ‘The Little Moon’) painted—in egg-yolk yellow—on the stern anywhere in the harbor master’s registry.

“Grab the line, quick!”

Brandon hopped to, and I was glad I’d taken the handcuffs off, regardless of what Jodi thought. Then again, a handy slave is a useful slave, and I didn’t need to humiliate Brandon at the moment, I needed him to give me a hand down into the boat, which he did, jumping in himself a moment later.

Unfortunately, my experience with sailing is limited to Girl Scout Camp when I was ten, and I didn’t quite make my merit badge. However, I had made my witchcraft merit badge for both Girl Scouts and the Junior Princesses of Evil, and I knew the words to say: “I love evil spirits, don’t you?”

With that, the proverbial ill wind sprang up, but it blew us some good, or at least pushed us out into the fog and moved us along at a fair clip. Though I had no idea where we were going, except in the academic sense.

If you’ve ever been around the Bay, then you know that the cry of the foghorn and the ringing of the buoys are two of the most mournful sounds you will ever hear. And I must admit, going through that fog, able to see nothing apart from the boat around us and the misty moon overhead, has to be one of the most chilling experiences of my life. And not just because we got soaked with saltwater before we went in.

I slipped Madame Cleo’s shawl out of my satchel, the quilted bag hopefully enough to protect my Book of Shadows, and wrapped it around my shoulders against the chill. I wished I could have offered it to Brandon, since he was obviously freezing—and I’d never thought to see a werewolf with gooseflesh—but the spirits pushing the boat would no doubt tell all to Jodi, so we couldn’t risk it. Not that it would have done him much good anyway; the lace was webbed with openwork, and the crystal spiders felt like so many raindrops in the mist.

Mister Mistoffelees wound his way out of my satchel, looking around, faintly disgruntled, then padded towards the prow, taking up a perch on the bowsprit and looking ahead. Paddy only glanced out of the bag, quivered his whiskers, then hid back inside.

I wondered for a moment if I should wake Deiter, lighting him as a sort of unholy lantern, but what with the leash and the lunch pail, I didn't have a spare hand to hold him. And besides that, I already saw shapes in the fog around me, figures, and I didn't want to bring them into any sharper resolution with the light of a Hand of Glory. I also began to understand why Peter is always so depressed; the world of the dead is not a happy one, and restless shades are neither sweet nor pleasant as a rule. And there was dark magick on the Bay that night, and what I saw moving in the fog was nothing I wanted to lure any closer with a candleflame, stuff to spawn unpleasant dreams for a lifetime.

A whisper of fog curled by, and once it passed, the sail was a tattered shroud. Another lick drifted across, and the gunwale under my fingers took on the texture of feathers of carved bone. Then we moved into a wall of mist, and once we emerged, the eggshell vessel had taken on the form of one of the fanciful swan boats from *The Light Princess*, if such a boat had been made by taxidermizing a giant swan, then been left out for the moths.

Bones showed through in places, little dull patches and holes, and Mister Mistoffelees perched atop the head, the neck below him half-skeletal on one side. And it was in this state that we drifted into the harbor, a hundred corpse candles floating in the air around us, suffusing the fog with their unholy radiance and the ghostly clank of chains.

Jodi stood upon the quay, and there was no mistaking her, for all that she wore a new face and a different form. Her hair now appeared Titian red, braided round in a crown woven with yellow lilies and foxgloves ('Falsehood' and 'Insincerity' in the Language of Flowers, and very obvious backup for her latest cloak of glamour), her pouting lips were scarlet as poppies to match her dragon lady nails (which seem to be her one constant, regardless of the form she

chooses), and while I can't place the exact portrait, I think she modeled her latest Seeming after something by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, now standing tall and regal and oh-so-very-lush and seductive. Either that, or she'd stolen Julie Andrews' Guinevere costume from *Camelot*, dressed not only to go a-maying, but with herself got up as the Queen of May, in a trumpet-sleeved gown brocaded with a thousand spring flowers and a lace-fronted bodice so buxom she could have hidden small children in her cleavage, or at least one.

Melanie, however, was behind her, dressed in a girl's version of the same dress. And I could tell from her beatific expression that she was bespelled and ensorcelled and several things else besides, seeing something other than the fog-shrouded harbor with the corpse lights floating in the mist and hearing something different from the mournful whispers of the dead.

Jodi laughed as my personal interpretation of the eggshell charm hove into view, moth-eaten and tattered to match the sepulchral air of the place. "How delightful, Sister Penelope. What a marvelous conceit. You are an asset to our ancient Sisterhood."

"Thank you, Queen Jodilyn, but I fear you praise me too highly," I said, both acknowledging her Queen of May get-up and hoping to stroke her considerable ego. The boat came to rest as I said this, drifting against the dock with the silence of swan's-down, and I released Brandon's leash. "Don't just stand there, slave! See to the lines, then help me alight."

Brandon did, clumsy as he no doubt struggled with his upbringing and instincts, which I'm certain were urging him to rip Jodi's head off right then and there, and damn the consequences. But in spite this, he just jumped up to the dock and began to secure the mooring lines while Jodi laughed and watched. "Oh, little Sister, you're far too cruel. You'll learn that a light lash can be just as effective as a strong one, and that carrots can be of as much use as sticks. And with a man as delicious as this one..."

She moved up beside Brandon, flirtatious, and while I'm usually not into that trip, I was awed by her prowess, as she first tossed her

head with her crown of poisonous flowers, then let the motion to carry through and distract him with the sway of her magnificent breasts (illusory though they were), then, while he was looking at her heaving bosom, which could have served as inspiration to a hundred centerfolds and twice that many Regency covers, snaked her arm around his waist and down his pants, drawing him to herself as he flinched away from the touch and copping a long and luxuriant feel. “Oh my, yes...”

Brandon’s carrot or stick was out the top of his pants in a moment, literally with bells on, and I was afraid for a second she was going to give him a blowjob right then and there.

But then again, Jodilyn Blake is the Mother of All Cockteases, and she didn’t earn her title of Bimbo Yaga for not knowing how to turn a trick. Instead, she just gave one of the little bells a teasing flick of her nails, brushing the rest with the lightest possible caress, then spun away, giggling. “If you do a particularly pleasing job, slave, then perhaps we may do more... if your Mistress will permit it.”

She gave me a look that told me I’d better permit it, unless I wanted to get bucked out of the Junior Princesses of Evil, but only said, “You see, Sister Penelope, how it is done?”

I looked to Brandon, struggling between his common sense, sense of common decency, and the promptings of his not only traitorous, but highly magnified and recently studded, belled, and beringed organ. It would be an understatement to say that his face was a study in the various sorts of angst and moral anguish, but I only turned back to Jodi and said, “Why yes, Queen Jodilyn. Your lesson is most... instructive.”

Jodi joined me for a light and evil girlish laugh at Brandon’s expense. “I can teach you much, Sister Penelope,” she said once we’d regained our composure, then she extended a long-nailed hand to help me alight from the boat.

I would have much rather grabbed that hand and pulled her face-first into the gunwale, something that would literally have been as easy as falling off a log, especially if she were really as top-heavy as she appeared, but as Brandon and Mister Mistoffelees both knew,

there was such a thing as delayed gratification, not to mention realistic expectations and priorities, and I knew Jodi had bought protection from Death, so the most smacking her face into the side of the boat would do was piss her off. "I'm sure you could, Queen Jodilyn." I accepted the touch of her fingertips, wishing I still had my gloves, and stepped up the little ridged gangplank to the dock. At which point Mister Mistoffelees sprang to my shoulder, taking up his customary perch and curling a possessive tail around my neck.

Jodi's lip quirked, like she'd just bitten into something rotten, but was in the middle of a fancy restaurant, so couldn't make a face, only hope for a moment where she could turn away and surreptitiously spit it out into her napkin. But then what was past was past, and I could tell she was having more fun being gracious and getting off on having lured me to the Dark Side of the Force than she would have just being a bitch. "Call me Jodi. All my friends do."

All one of them, she meant. Everyone else called her things too unmentionable for print. "My friends call me Penny," I responded, "and you already know Mister Mistoffelees." I gestured to my cat, with just the bare trace of bitchiness needed for a junior-grade demon sorceress. "And this is Sacke'n Sugar, my latest companion." I waved to the frightened hare looking out of my shoulder bag, giving Paddy the classic witches' name for a rabbit familiar. Then, before Jodi could look at him too closely, I stepped over to Brandon and leaned coyly up against him. "And this, of course, is Brandon, though I've decided to call him Dog Boy. And this is his little friend Toto."

I reached out and rang the same bell Jodi had, trying to use the same gesture, and she laughed. "Not so little, Penny dearest. It's a wonderful effect you've achieved, and you *must* tell me more of the spells you used."

You know, one of the troubles with lies is that no matter how unlikely you think it when you tell them, they tend to get found out at the most inconvenient times. Like Brandon suddenly realizing that it was not in fact Jodi who'd thrown the "Magic wand, make my monster grow!" spell on his pride and joy.

I just simpered, and, not knowing what else to do, rang the bell again. *Ding!* “Well, a girl has to have her secrets...” *Ding! Ding!*

Jodi looked at me. “Not if she wishes to learn greater ones.”

Not only could you have cut the tension with a knife, but you could also divide it into sections: *sexual, social, political, personal* and I don’t know what else. And Brandon, beneath my fingers, began to grow, jiggling and jingling with rage.

I stepped away, giggling nervously, and this wasn’t an act. “Oh dear,” I said, coquettish, “I think we’ve annoyed him.”

Jodi laughed. “We certainly have. And my, doesn’t he look the young giant!”

“*Pity I shall have to be giving him to Lord Charnas,*” I added, both to remind Brandon of where he was and to cue Jodi to why I’d really come here. “But, if that’s the only way I’ll be saving Melanie, then I suppose I must.”

“Oh must you?” Jodi asked, and I swear, I felt as if I’d stepped into an X-rated version of a British school girl’s novel. “He’d be ever so much more fun.”

I sighed. “I know, but it’s—”

“—a matter of professional pride,” Jodi finished for me. “Believe me, I understand. A girl has her reputation to look after.” She looked wistfully off into the mist, which I think was lit by the souls of the damned, or at least the dead prisoners of Alcatraz, which came to pretty much the same thing. “I don’t suppose I might convince *you* to take my place on the contract with Lord Charnas? I’ll admit, I looked in on you earlier, and while you’re quite right, a werewolf should do nicely, if you were to see your way free... Well, then we could have our cake and eat it too.” She looked meaningfully towards Brandon, or should I say, Toto.

I shrugged my left shoulder, not wanting to disturb Mister Mistoffelees. “I’m sorry, Jodi, but it was you yourself who pointed out that there are plenty of fish in the sea, and that they’re easy enough to catch if you have the right bait. Or hook.” I flexed the fingers of my free hand for emphasis, and was again reminded why Jodi favored dragon lady nails; they really would help with some of the bitchy

gestures you need to be a proper evil sorceress. “We can always find another, and I know the spells,” I pointed one plainly manicured finger at Brandon, or really at a portion of him, and gave him a significantly look, “and the *threats*, to get us what we want.”

Brandon subsided in more ways than one and Jodi laughed again. “Oh, I see that you do. But what of the Joys of Lord Charnas?”

The Joys of Lord Charnas were locked along with him inside my lunch pail, but I wasn’t telling *that* to Jodi. “As for Lord Charnas, well, you haven’t even introduced us. I’d hardly think to take such a momentous step with a gentleman I hardly knew. And even if I were to consider it, there’d be so many things to plan—the dress, the bouquet, the reception, the guest list....”

I’d managed to shock Jodi with my audacity, and I didn’t know if that was good. “You’d submit yourself as a bride?”

“Nothing less,” I said, “I know my worth. And I wouldn’t do it without a heavy-duty prenuptial agreement, governed under the laws of the State of California. Specifically the fifty-fifty property clause in the case of divorce.”

“Clever girl!” Jodi commended me. “There are Sisters who could profit from your ideas.” Not the least witch of which being herself several centuries ago, but she wasn’t about to admit *that*. “But I’d advise you not to be quite so forward with Lord Charnas.”

I thought back to my meeting the night before with the demon in my lunch pail. “I’m certain if we were to meet that I would hardly say a word.”

“Clever girl,” she said again, just as I made my way over next to Melanie.

“Oh Penny, isn’t it wonderful?” she cried. “Look!” She pointed off into the fog.

I looked, at the ancient witch done over as the May Queen, the werewolf piercing victim, and the floating mist filled with the candles of lost souls. “Wonderful” was hardly the word that sprang to mind.

Jodi came up beside me, stroking Melanie’s hair in an idle, possessive way. “A very strong-willed child, this one. In the end I

merely threw the glamour of rose-colored glasses upon her. We can do or say whatever we like, and to her it will seem as pure and wholesome as mother's milk."

"Milk?" Melanie echoed. "Why yes, please."

Jodi pantomimed pouring a glass of milk, then handed it to Melanie, who began to drink from the nonexistent glass as if she were a member of the Mummenshanz mime troupe. Then she paused for a moment, taking the glass down and remembering to say, "Thank you, mama."

Jodi stroked her hair again. "You're entirely unwelcome, you horrid child. I will be glad to be rid of you."

Melanie only smiled, drinking her nonexistent milk, and Jodi threw her hands in the air and rolled her eyes, enraptured with her own cleverness. "You see? It's a lovely effect. So very useful and pretty, and it saves you no end of trouble. You should try it. And while you *do* have your natural youth and beauty, and those are pearls beyond price, really, you should learn to do a little bit more with yourself. Especially if you're going to go into the presence of one so high as Lord Charnas. But allow me..."

So saying, she reached down into her cleavage and produced—no, not a child, or for that matter, a rabbit—but a green glass vial on a silk cord which I hadn't noticed against the collar of her gown. It was painted with gold and figures of a man and a woman in antique clothes, and I placed it almost immediately: a scent bottle, an heirloom piece probably two hundred year old if it was a day, one of the ones made by the Chinese for trade to Europe, usually given to ladies of the eighteenth century as a keepsake.

Jodi unscrewed the gilded cap, then twisted the stopper, lifting out the glass applicator and touching herself once behind each ear. A bouquet of scents rose up, bittersweet and herbal, too complex to pick out any one individual note, like the smell you encounter when you walk into a particularly good *botanica*, sweet and pungent and refreshing all at the same time.

She poured a measure of the scented oil onto her breasts, and while I know they were illusory, they certainly *looked* real, the

honeyed liquid oozing down between them. But she only replaced the stopper and cap, then tucked the scent bottle back into her décolletage, returning with a magick wand. Not a faerie wand, with a star at the tip (and now wouldn't *that* be awkward to pull out of your bodice), nor a stage magician's ivory-capped ebony cane, but a long, thin hazel twig, carved with runes, which she slowly and luxuriantly rotated as she brought it out from between her breasts, twisting it such that each groove and line was coated with the scented oil. A witch's wand, and once she had it free, she stepped back and waved it over me, intoning in a musical lilt: "Vervain, purslane, white cherry... foxglove, foxtail, betony... crown of laurel, branch of coral... lily, gilly, gooseberry!"

It's not as silly as it sounds, and certainly not as innocent. The perfume washed over me, as enchanting as the Green Witch's incense from the finale of *The Silver Chair* (before the Marshwiggles ruined it, that is), and I could sense the spell woven between the notes of Jodi's signature fragrance. And as I've said before (and been reminded quite painfully by Blackrose) there are hidden meanings to flowers, a symbolic language as well as a code of magical properties, and while I didn't have my copy of Kate Greenaway handy to parse out the more obscure ones, I knew that laurel meant 'Glory,' vervain meant 'Witchcraft,' and white cherry blossoms stood for 'Deception.' And as I've already noted, foxgloves and yellow lilies signify 'Insincerity' and 'Falsehood'—just the sort of things you need to work a glamour, and while on one level I'd expected something between the ball gown conjuration from *Cinderella* and the seductive black dress from *Legend*, Jodi only finished the spell by passing her wand along my jaw line on one side and then the other, turning my head this way and that, and anointing my neck with just the barest trace of her scented oil.

There was a slight shimmer, like a picture coming into focus, then while nothing truly obvious changed, my dress now looked new and expertly tailored, my hands displayed an impeccable manicure, and while I didn't have a mirror handy, I knew that if I looked into one I'd see the vision of loveliness from the Gate of

Ivory. With the slight difference of wearing a fashion plate rendition of the lace-tipped black calico dress, instead of the pinup version of my nightgown.

Then again, makeup is nothing more than deception and artifice, and not to be seduced by Jodi or anything, but I think she's right on this one point: If a woman's going to use blush and shadow, then she might as well use smoke and mirrors, or at least make use of her charms and appear as glamorous as she wants to.

"There," Jodi said, waving her wand, "just lovely," though her body language added, as she slipped the long slim stick back down her bodice, wriggling with pleasure and satisfaction, "though not so lovely as me!"

Then again, Vanity is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, and while I'd always thought of it as a bit of a lightweight compared to some of the others, I could now see the damage it was capable of.

"Come along now, dear," Jodi said, grabbing Melanie's hand, "we mustn't keep Lord Charnas waiting! And Penny, make sure to bring your present!"

Melanie laughed, probably thinking we were going to a birthday party, while I just grabbed Brandon's leash and hurried to catch up, stifling an urge to tell Jodi not to worry about Lord Charnas being punctual. He'd been at least five minutes late the night before, and he was guaranteed to be at least that late this evening, if not miss his appointment altogether.

Then again, it's not as if he *wasn't* going to make it, at least in one sense, since I had the lunch pail firmly grasped not to mention handcuffed to my right hand.

Jodi had murdered the night watchman, or park ranger, or whoever the poor slob was. His blood was everywhere, his head was separated from his body, and if I hadn't already seen such things (admittedly when I'd broken into Jodi's house), I probably would have been sick. However, a lady rises to the occasion, and if that means keeping her stomach from rising, well then, so be it.

"Why look, Melanie!" Jodi cried. "A soccer ball!"

I did turn away at this. Melanie may have had the rose-colored glasses, but I certainly didn't, and I didn't want to watch as she punted the guy's head into the bushes. Brandon, however, did look, and as I've pointed out, he has far less of a tolerance for evil than I do. I was suddenly dragged forward by his leash, almost pitching onto my face, but saved myself by reaching out and grabbing hold of something... far more substantial... and far more rudely than Jodi had. "No, Dog-Boy!" I snarled, digging my nails in. "We don't have time to play *fetch*!"

Brandon was abruptly reminded, and Jodi just laughed as I regained my balance and let go. I tugged the werewolf's leash and pulled him after me, stepping into the doorway of the prison. Jodi reached into her décolletage, which seemed to be her answer to my bag of tricks, and produced a box of matches. "I don't suppose you've brought Sinestro with you, have you, Sister Penny?" She struck one, and it glowed with a cold blue flame. "I'll relinquish him to your keeping, since you honestly seem to have a way with familiars, but truth to tell, he's very useful for such undertakings, and I'd prefer to have my hands free."

"But of course." I reached into my satchel and took out the pot of flying salve. "Hold this," I said to Brandon, then opened it and took out Deiter, wiping him off on the inner rim.

"My flying ointment?" Jodi inquired, uncertain.

"Yes," I replied, "he's soaking in it."

The match she was holding had not burned down in the slightest, though flared as she raised her eyebrows. "You'd waste such a precious formula as mere lamp oil?"

Well yes, as a matter of fact I would, since I considered that a better option than killing people like the poor guy not three feet behind us. Unfortunately, I couldn't tell Jodi that without giving her the clues to figure out that I might not be obtaining my bottles of innocent babies' blood by the usual method either.

"Not waste," I said as I held up the Hand of Glory. "Just watch..." I touched Deiter's fingers to the match in hers, one by one, waking him as I intoned the invocation: "Hand of Glory, Hand of Glory, let

those who are awake stay awake! Let those who are asleep stay asleep! And think wonderful thoughts!"

So saying, I held the mummified Hand aloft, shining in the air with unholy radiance, then pulled my own hand away.

I held my breath for a split heartbeat, then let out a mental sigh of relief. It had work. Deiter was hanging in the air like the star from the top of Anton La Vay's Christmas tree, wiggling his fingers in surprise. However, I didn't have time to congratulate myself on my cleverness. I only turned to Jodi and said, "After all, flying salve only needs to be applied to the wrists. There's no law stating that the wrist *must* be attached to an arm. And it *does* leave one's hands free."

Jodi merely watched with a sour expression as her former Hand of Glory swooped through the air, spinning cartwheels and flying in a figure eight in joy at his newfound freedom, like what would happen if you let a mime have too much fun with a flaming glove and a black body stocking. At last she looked away, probably realizing that if she pursed her lips any more, they'd become as nonexistent as Hello Kitty's. "Clever girl!" She reached out and pinched my cheek, hard. "I believe I will profit from your audacity."

What she really meant was *Bitch! Why didn't I think of that?* But necessity is the Mother of Invention, and I only came up with the idea since I couldn't exactly tell her that I considered her flying salve to be all but useless, if just because I could think of better things to do with my Friday nights than float through the air stoned, naked, and greased-up with baby fat. But I only rubbed my cheek where she'd pinched it and said, "Thank you, Queen Jodilyn."

"Call me Jodi." *Fucking presumptuous little bitch!*

I was really getting into the hang of the Junior Princesses of Evil. All in all, it seemed a lot like Girl Scouts, except for the magick and extra blood, or like the little bits of sniping Blackrose and I enjoy across the floor of the dance clubs, only less friendly.

Jodi turned on her stiletto heel, eager to get on to the demon summoning where she could really shine, rather than deal with the young whippersnapper who was getting her former familiars to do tricks she'd *never* gotten them to do. Melanie ran after and I

followed, grabbing Brandon's leash and gesturing for Deiter to fly on ahead.

I have never actually been on the tour of Alcatraz, which in some ways is my proof of being a native San Franciscan, and another of being at least somewhat psychic, since I didn't want to deal with the bad vibes. But as Jodi took us down the halls, Deiter lighting the way, I was getting an extreme case of the creeps.

Jodi turned left, and then left again, and Brandon shivered. "The Black Spiral," he whispered. "The Dark Labyrinth..."

"Come on!" I hissed, since while I knew enough of what he was talking about to be chilled by his realization, I was also not all that overly impressed or surprised. After all, Jodilyn Blake is a sorceress of the left-hand path if there ever was one, and it seemed rather standard operating procedure for her to be leading us widdershins through the gates and corridors of a rotting prison, sometimes through shortcuts which shouldn't even be there.

It was also not surprising once we got there to find which chamber she'd selected for her *Welcome, Lord Charnas!* demon-conjuring party. There was an electric chair which had no doubt sent any number of people to Hell, and had probably spilled, or at least fried, its share of innocent blood as well, given the history of the American justice system. And if there was ever an appropriate seat for the guest of honor, well, that was it.

Assuming, of course, that the guest of honor was not still locked in my lunchbox.

After giving Paddy a glimpse of the chamber, I dropped the hare just outside the door, along with my pocket watch, though disguised this as just slipping my bag off of my shoulder so I could wait politely while Jodi did whatever ritual she needed to do. And luckily there were other chairs aside from the one with the electric hookups so I could sit down and watch.

Brandon was freaking out. After all, here was this demon sorceress, skipping around one of the world's most infamous death chambers, adding a splotch of blood here, a torn-out heart there, and while in the academic sense I knew where she'd gotten the body

parts, I could only assume she had a giant Hefty bag stuck down her cleavage for just such a purpose.

But regardless, the chamber was limned in Hellish light from my floating Hand of Glory, the shadows were twisting into all sorts of grotesque patterns, and Jodi's perfume was so strong in the enclosed space that you could hardly breathe for fear of coming even more deeply under her spell. Plus here was Melanie, standing in the middle of it all, wide-eyed with wonder as if it were her first trip to Disneyland and I'd taken her into the Enchanted Tiki Room.

Then again, for all I know, that's what she was seeing.

"Sit down, Melanie," I said gently, reaching for her. "The show's about to start."

"Okay, Penny." She sat down next to me with all the joy of being taken to the circus for the first time. "Are we really going to see Mickey Mouse?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Depending on what Jodi summons Lord Charnas as, but I don't think so." I squeezed her hand, more to give myself a bit of warmth and reassurance than to give her any, and held Lord Charnas and his handcuffed and chained lunchbox primly in my lap, the way you hold your pocketbook in a crowded church.

Once the guts and entrails were at last arranged to her taste, intestines looped like bunting from the corners of the observation windows, Jodi climbed up atop the electric chair and raised her hands in supplication, dragon lady nails dripping blood as an unholy whispering began in the corners of the room. And I swear, if the pancreas dangling from the single bare light fixture had started the Tiki Room song, I think I would have gone nuts then and there. But Jodi only smiled and said, "My dearest friends and valued allies, hush.... We are gathered to celebrate this midnight, a night three times sacred—the conjunction of ancient Roodmas, when the Savior was put to death; the first Friday of Beltane, when Lust is set free; and the Moon of Full Flower, when Passions are at their height. We rejoice at this convergence and hold grand and private Sabbat, for this sacred night, in this place of blood where the veil between worlds wears thin, one of the Dark Lords and Masters, one of Those

who were old when this world was naught more than a twinkle in the Watchmaker's Eye, shall journey from the Outer Darkness to favor us with His presence, this visit a gift promised to us by ancient compact...."

Translation: A demon was going to show up whether we wanted him to or not, because the old bat had signed in blood half a millennium ago, and there was nothing we could do about it. Apart from, perhaps, summoning him the night before and locking him in our lunch pail.

Jodi, oblivious to this, made use of the chair as if she were starring at a high-class strip joint, clutching the top, showing off her fishnets and garter belts, and flipping around to every possible provocative angle and position she could so as to display as much flesh as physically possible short of popping out of her dress. Though if she expected me to stuff money in her G-string, I'm sorry, thank you, no. "This chamber" <clutch breasts and heave bosom> "we do consecrate to" <swing head and hair in a circle> "and make welcome" <flip upside-down your throne like Cassiopeia, do the splits, and prove that demon sorceresses don't wear panties> "Lord Charnas," <an X-rated interpretation of one of the dance calls from 'The Hokey-Pokey'> "the Duke of Mockery," <I'm told the infamous Honeysuckle Divine could do the next trick, but apart from her and Jodilyn Blake, I don't know of any woman who could, let alone would want to> "the Prince of Perversity," <I will not repeat Jodi's next stunt, except to say that I hope it was only ventriloquism> "the Master of Foul Amusements..."

I won't even go on to describe Jodi's subsequent tricks and contortions, except to say that when I'd first called her a Satanic cheerleader, I hadn't meant it literally. But as she did her own version of "Give me a C!" I felt the response as the lunchbox beneath my hands began to vibrate, chains rattling with each name and letter.

A chill went down my spine, and it had nothing to do with the dropping temperature of the room. Demons, like 1-900 operators, gain power when you call upon them—and like the phone company,

they don't care whether or not you really meant to reach who you did. You pay the price regardless, and this is where you get all those euphemistic terms like "The Evil One" and "He Who Must Not Be Named." If you call Them by anything more specific, They can take it as an invitation to appear—*Speak of the Devil and there He is*—and at that moment, Jodi was doing an entire cheerleader routine in one particular devil's honor.

Names have power, and so do words, and occasions like this are precisely why the common wisdom is that when you trap a demon, you should keep him on holy ground. Otherwise Hell's own pom-pom girls might just wake him up from nappie time and give him the power he needs to escape.

Singing hosannas and saying the Lord's Prayer, while also the common wisdom, is not appropriate when impersonating a junior-league demon sorceress who's supposed to be sitting there attentive and evil while the Witch Queen shows her how we welcomed demons in the old days. But when the lunch pail in your hands is threatening to jiggle itself to pieces, regardless of whether there's a rosary and a spell-woven Turkish accent rug inside, you really have to do something.

I consulted my hymnal.

Well, not precisely. What I chose to do was take out the *Lesser Key of Solomon* and my *Mont Blanc* and start copying protective sigils and the Names of God directly onto the surface of my lunchbox, and believe-you-me, I was not complaining at the moment that my fountain pen was continuing to impersonate the Vial of Hastings and drip holy blood. *INRI. Elohim. Seraphim. JHVH. Tetragrammaton.* The words and sigils bled across the metal, one holy name after another, and the quaking stopped as the magick took hold, for all that my right hand was still handcuffed to the damned box.

Then I also noticed why the quaking had stopped: Jodi lounged back in the electric chair, having paused in her recitation of the Names and Titles of Lord Charnas. "What are you doing, Sister Penelope?" Her voice was cold and brittle and echoed in the room, the only other sound being the *drip-drip-drip* of blood and fluid from

one of the intestines. And she looked at me, her eyes pale green in the light.

"Just... taking notes," I said feebly, doing my best to hide the text of the book I was consulting.

"Please, Sister Penelope," she said, smug in her superiority, "do not lie. At least not to me. Now, tell me, what are you really doing?"

Her eyes narrowed, and in the green fire of that witchy gaze, I knew she would know if I told anything other than the truth. "Just—" I said, then glanced to the page which just happened to show the Seal of Solomon. "Just penning protections," I said quickly, then just as quickly traced it in blood. I tore the seal out of the paperback, affixing it over the price tag of my Minnie Pearl hat. "I'm afraid for my soul should Lord—should the Dark Lord appear."

The scrap of paper twirled from the string, hypnotic and incredibly distracting in the corner of my range of vision, and Jodi looked to it. "The Seal of Solomon," she noted coolly, "written in the blood of a Holy Innocent, and placed," She glanced to the brim of my hat, "upon a perfect unbroken circle, woven from nothing less than straw, the symbol of Union. Oh my yes, Sister Penelope. You are clever."

I glanced to the brim of my hat as well. The symbolism of straw and circles had not been something I'd been thinking of when I'd picked it out, but then again, a witch operates on instinct, and I was hardly going to complain about wearing a circle of protection pinned to my head. Especially if it kept Jodi Blake distracted, particularly from the fact that I was also using my pen to add several metaphysical *Stay in, damn you!*s to the outside of my lunch pail.

Thankfully—oh so thankfully—Jodi Blake is one of those people who, once she thinks she knows the answer, goes right back to whatever she was doing, certain of herself, and doesn't pay any more attention. Rather like Blackrose, but at that moment, I'd have been willing to forgive my long-term rival anything just to get out of there.

"Now watch and see how it's done, dearest Penelope," Jodi said, kicking back in the chair, spike-heeled fetish shoes twining with

each other as she performed what had to be a tantric yoga position and pantomimed along with each phrase of her invocation: "Oh Lord Charnas, Master of the Inner Darkness and the Depths of Depravity, the Far Reaches of..."

Melanie giggled beside me, while I merely watched in appalled fascination. If we survived this, I'd have to remember the glamour of rose-colored glasses. If there were ever a spell that belonged in the arsenal of the Magickal Nannies Guild, this was it, and I knew with a trick like that, I could take kids to live sex shows and have them think it was Punch and Judy. Not that I had any business taking kids to live sex shows, mind you, but in my line of work, these things had a habit of just sort of happening, and it would be much nicer to have kids telling their parents that we spent a pleasant afternoon at the zoo instead of admitting the truth and saying that we spent the day caught in a protest rally staged by the B and D community.

Speaking of which I suddenly had my arm nearly pulled out of its socket as Brandon Kearny finally exceeded his evil tolerance for the day. Or at least that's the best explanation I have for why our pet werewolf suddenly grew a couple feet taller and I had my butt unceremoniously yanked out of the chair, the ribbon of my Udjat Eye somehow tangled with the leash such that I couldn't let go. "Brandon, sit down!" I jerked the leash, struggling to put my heels back on the floor. "Sit down! *Sit down!* Unless you want your willie to fall off, and then I'll give the demon you and Melanie both!"

Jodi laughed from her latest compromising position atop the throne. "Oh, Penelope dearest, please, let me show you how it's done...." Glad for a chance to upstage me, especially since my little 'Look, I can make my Hand of Glory fly!' stunt and the recent '(Tee-hee!) Don't I have a pretty hat?' Jodi disengaged her fetish pumps from whatever she was doing with them and sashayed over to where I dangled from Brandon's neck, skirts lifted for no other reason than to display a bit of ankle and give an even more seductive sway to her walk. Tsking lightly, she loosed the ribbon, dropping me abruptly back into my seat, then tossed the Eye into my lap behind the lunch pail containing her Lord and Master Charnas. Oblivious to this fact,

she only took the leash from my hand, then used Brandon's outlandish height to her advantage and displayed her bosom, which was a rival for Mae West and Dolly Parton both.

Now, honestly, it takes more than a nice pair of tits to calm a snarling werewolf, but Jodi had anointed hers with eleven secret herbs and spices, and, well, suffice it to say, she did chicken right, or at least knew how to make breasts appear plump, firm, tender, juicy, tantalizing and tasty. Brandon did not give a wolf whistle, but he still succumbed to her charms, or fell under her spell, or however you want to put it, Jodi Blake going on to demonstrate that aside from her fluency in the Language of Flowers, she is a master of many tongues, not the least of which being the Language of Love, or at least the positions of Tantric yoga. Quite enough to give lessons in fact. Which she proceeded to do.

And just the same as you can use flowers and their symbolic properties to bewitch a man, I suddenly realized you could also use certain... positions... to do the same. I'd never studied *The Classic of the Plain Lady* that closely, but obviously Jodi had, and if I'd thought I had Brandon Kearny right where I wanted him, well, trust me, I had nothing on Jodilyn Blake, who's a braver woman than I am, Gunga Din, or at very least a kinkier one than I'll ever be. I don't even know what the position is called—*Naughty Monkey Swings from the Banyan Tree* or perhaps *General Tsao's Tasty Trick*—but all I can say is that it involves the Honeysuckle Divine maneuver, finger rings and nipple rings, and I think it must be the fabled position you have to produce photographs of before the Tantric Masters will send you your *Kama Sutra* coffee maker.

"Don't you love Punch and Judy?" I suggested to Melanie, who was watching the live sex act with innocent fascination. I retrieved my Udjat Eye and clutched it like a luck piece, a frantic handhold on sanity in the given situation. "Look out for the Crocodile!"

Melanie laughed, and it was in this state that Lord Charnas found the room.

“Jodi, Jodi, Jodi...” the Demon Prince scolded, or really, I should say, the Rabbit Lord got up as the Demon Prince. “Here I am, and how do you welcome me?”

“Lord Charnas!” Jodi squeaked, coming up for air.

Paddy laughed, long and rich, and I have to credit either his acting talent or his knowledge of bath house culture, but he looked at the compromising position they were in and didn’t bat an eye. “Oh, go ahead. That’s a proper way to welcome me if there ever was one, and I might as well let you have one last fling before I take you down.”

Jodi swallowed hard and came up. “Lord Charnas! I pray you, let me—”

“Offer me someone else in your place?” Paddy finished for her as she struggled to disengage herself. He laughed again, the same rich operatic laugh he’d laughed before, like Placido Domingo, only not so Italian, and stood there so we could take him in in all his glory.

Picture Louis XIV. Then do his costume over in purple, every shade from plum to lavender. Then put the Artist-Formerly-Know-as-Prince into that outfit, with a glittery little spade-shaped sticker on one cheek, a long wig of pomaded curls done over in powdery violet, a gold-capped walking stick studded with amethysts, and boots so high-heeled they could have almost doubled as stilts.

Paddy Kearny, acting the part of Lord Charnas, the Duke of Perversity, done up as an eighteenth century version of the Artist-Formerly-Known-as-Prince, lifted a lavender silk handkerchief, embroidered with a border of copulating rabbits, and sniffed. “How many times have you fobbed me off with your little presents, Jodi?”

Jodi took a step away from Brandon and laughed, though it was a bit strained. “I’m afraid I’ve lost count, Lord Charnas.”

He sniffed again. “And why should I allow this again?”

Jodi simpered. “Because it is a truly magnificent present. Only look...” She gestured to the gigantic, panting werewolf, like Vanna White working a sex show, waving to draw attention to the various features of this model, and Paddy took a disdainful step closer, producing a stylized gold lorgnette, which is to say, one of those pairs

of 'glasses on a stick' favored by noblemen and fussy matrons in the eighteenth century.

He strolled around Brandon, glancing at him through the amethyst lenses, then finally reached out with a long purple satin Miss Piggy glove and flicked a bell. *Ding!* "A big ding-a-ling," he said dryly. "How amusing." He turned to Jodi, holding the lorgnette and the handkerchief in an effeminate offhand gesture. "I suppose you were just testing the merchandise, seeing if it was fit for your Lord and Master, eh?"

"Of course, Lord Charnas!" Jodi said breathily. "As always!"

Paddy laughed like one of the murderous clowns from *Il Pagliacci*, then turned back and gave Brandon another appraising look with the lorgnette. "And this one is a lycanthrope?"

"Verily!" Jodi swore. "A man-wolf from the Dawntime."

The ersatz Lord Charnas paced about with his walking stick and waved the lorgnette and his horny bunny handkerchief dismissively. "Oh, very well then. Six months."

"Six months?" Jodi gasped, shocked. "This is a lycanthrope, Lord Charnas! A pure soul from when the earth was young!"

"Six months and a day then," the faux Demon Prince sniffed, twirling the lorgnette between his fingers. "Apart from novelty value, this one is hardly unique, and they're not so rare as they'd have you think anyway. Now if you obtained something of interest... a magician, or perhaps a faerie... Well then, we might talk."

He turned around, then chuckled, and rang the bell again with a tap of his walking stick. *Ding!* "Well, perhaps not completely devoid of interest. And very amusing. Make it a year and let us have done with it."

"Oh Lord Charnas," Jodi sobbed, throwing herself at his feet. "You are too generous! I am unworthy!"

"Well, yes, I know that, but you're a great lay anyway, so who cares?" Paddy laughed. "Now get up, and don't you ever presume to kiss my feet again!"

Jodi scrambled to her stiletto heels, and Paddy stepped forward in his eighteenth-century go-go boots, still nowhere near as tall as Brandon for all the difference that made. “Well, boy, let us have your name. Names have power, and though you’re hardly worthy of my notice, don’t think I’ll forget you.”

“Brandon Fearnach Kearny,” Brandon said, “Galliard of the Fianna.”

Paddy laughed, and I heard a trace of the old bunny-boy giggle in the lilt. “And, Brandon Fearnach Kearny, Galliard of the Fianna, knowing full well who and what I am, do you willingly give yourself into my service? Consign yourself eternally to my pleasure, body and soul?”

Brandon trembled with rage, knowing exactly who and what Paddy was, and as I heard the words, the realization came upon me as well: Paddy was a faerie. And faeries, like demons, held words as their bond, and could enforce promises made to them.

It wasn’t quite so bad as selling your soul to a Demon Prince—then again, nothing was quite so bad as that—but the moment Brandon said the words, his cousin would own him, body and soul. And Paddy had said he wanted to play a grand trick on Brandon, and this certainly qualified, and here I was, up to that moment unwitting accomplice and now silent accessory.

Brandon grew even taller, the rings and piercings cutting into him and blood dripping down as he became the fearsome monster I’d first seen on the sidewalk outside *Neiman-Marcus*. But his voice was still his own, though deeper and gravelly and snagged on his fangs. “I know who and what you are, Lord of Perversity, and know that I only do this to save Melanie, my worthy kin, and who does not deserve this Fate, and to atone for my part in the death of her mother, my cousin Katherine. Who was a *true* cousin, and whom I loved.”

The tension and the words in the air were as thick as Jodi’s perfume, just as filled with power, and time seemed to slow as I realized the awful truth of that was about to unfold: Paddy had maneuvered Brandon like a chess piece, and myself as well, and

there was nothing either of us could do about it save unmask his deception and lose Melanie, and probably ourselves in the bargain. And even if I wanted to wipe away his glamour, I'd left my gloves back at his apartment. On his suggestion.

I squeezed the Udjat Eye in my hand, rubbing it like a worry bead, and wishing that there were something someone, anyone could do to stop this, to make a happily ever after for everyone. Everyone, that is, except Jodi and Charnas. Hell, I'd even be willing to let Jodi out of the loop so long as the Demon Prince stayed where he was and we didn't have to deal with him and I wouldn't have to go around for the rest of my life chained to this damned box!

Pardon me, but I was just a little bit stressed at the moment. And while there were Neville and Baron and Blackrose and Brent and Sasha and Peter and who knows, maybe even Hermes and St. Christopher in the loop tied to my Udjat Eye, they weren't here right now, and divine intervention isn't very common. For all that I'd had the Fates step in to my life personally twice in the past week.

Third time, as they say, is the charm.

I thought back on it, listing the occurrences. First there was Madame Cleo, the fortuneteller, named for Cleo, the Muse of History, and who obviously corresponded to Atropos, the Fate who cuts the thread, and who brought me a legacy. For all that that was at the start of much of this business. Then there'd been Norna in the ice cream parlor. Norna, who's name was an anagram for "A Norn," a.k.a. one of the Fates vacationing in the *Nibelungenlied*, and who also had the last name 'Weaver,' and if there was ever a name with Destiny tied into it, it was hers. But last I checked, she was younger than me, which would make her Clotho, the maiden who spins Destiny's thread, even though she'd instead chosen to tie it in a knot and free Brandon and myself from our twin nemeses.

They'd been here, Clotho and Atropos, beginning and end, Maiden and Crone, for all that they seemed to have gotten their roles a little mixed up. But even so, then where was Lachesis, the Mother, the one who does the actual weaving, and might, if the roles were that muddled, be the one to put an end to this mess?

I looked at Melanie, sitting next to me, Jodi's glamour spangling her eyes. Her mother was dead, whether or not I'd seen her in dreams, and even if Kate were up to the task, she wasn't coming back anytime soon. She was off in Heaven, or something very much like it, but unable to do more than peek in and offer a kind word or occasional sign. Which left me filling her place, whether or not I'd ever borne a child, regardless of whether I felt up to the job. This was my trial by fire for the Magickal Nannies Guild, and I hadn't yet passed the test, which explained why Mary Poppins and Phoebe Figalily and Eglantine Price and all the rest of the mystical surrogate mothers hadn't shown up to offer me my membership card and the invitation to the monthly tea. I hadn't earned it yet.

Well, we'd just see about that. If I had to take the mantle of the Fates upon myself to do my job, then so be it. It wasn't as if I hadn't already done it anyway. After all, Paddy had shown up when I needed him, like Lucky Seven Sampson falling off the cabbage truck, and he'd done it after I'd rubbed my silver penny, for all that I'd been calling it an Udjat Eye at the moment. And as for names and destinies and omens, I had one myself: Penelope. Penelope, the faithful wife of Ulysses, who'd been left holding the fort while her husband went gallivanting off around the globe, and while I didn't know who Ulysses might be—maybe Grimm off in Italy, arranging the auction—the first Penelope had been famous for her weaving, or perhaps I should say, her unweaving, having told all her suitors that she'd pick one of them when her tapestry was finished, then made a point of unraveling everything each night. Penelope, the faithful, responsible one, who made do with what she had at hand.

Something snapped then, and it was the thread of Madame Cleo's shawl, the "gift" and the "responsibility" which she'd entrusted me with, something even more precious than the jeweled cover of my Book of Shadows, hidden in plain sight like Mister Mistoffelees and the Purloined Letter: Her shawl was the very literal Mantle of the Fates, and I reached up and pulled a silken thread down, unraveling a portion, twisting it around my fingers, twining it with the ribbon that held the power of the fallen Waydown,

knotting it like *Señora Duarte's* rosette and Mister Mistoffelees' cradle and the chain of flowers and spells I'd plaited but days before. And as I made my wish, I began to hum a mantra: *Happy now and happy hence and happy every after... Happy now and happy hence and happy every after...* The chorus of the closing song from the first act of *Into the Woods*, the fulfillment of a half-dozen wishes, for Cinderella and Jack and Little Red and the baker and his wife and Rapunzel and yes, even the Witch, and time sped back up to normal speed as I wove and watched the Tapestry of Fate unfold....

Brandon snarled, then began the oath: "I, Brandon Fearnach Kearny, Galliard of the Fianna, also known as Brandon Grief-Singer, do swear myself to your service, perverse creature, for all time, giving myself to you, body a—"

Suddenly, a shot rang out.

I know, it sounds trite. But it's really what happened. The Hunter came in and shot the Wolf.

I frantically twisted the fringes of the shawl around my fingers, pulling the threads of Fate and unraveling the latest knot. Dumb idea to call up *Into the Woods*, particularly when I wanted to *save* the Wolf, not make a coat out of him. But at least the shot had stopped him from completing the oath. *Happy now and happy hence and happy every after...* Twist, knot, plait...

"Don't you dare, Brandon!" Alexander yelled, standing in the doorway, waving his gun around as if he didn't really know how to use it. There was a slight graze on the wolfman's arm, the barest flesh wound, but still enough to stop Brandon's oath. And Alexander's next shot was considerably more on target as he drew a bead on the Demon Lord Charnas, or at least the closest facsimile thereof that anyone could see in the room.

"No!" I cried, shooting the rabbit not exactly what I wanted either, but Alexander didn't have time to hear me as he moved faster than humanly possible, almost a blur, squeezing off two more shots. The time fugue began again then, the ribbon and my luck piece cut into my fingers, and I watched as first the lorgnette was blasted out

of Paddy's hand, then the split second that he ducked, such that Alexander's second shot only hit the top of the long powdered wig.

There was a frozen moment where the wig hung in the air, and interminable second before it hit the electric chair. After which the long brown rabbit ears popped up. And then it was all over.

Jodi looked around at the strange tableau: the vampire with the gun, the werewolf with the flesh wound, the newest pledge for both the Magickal Nannies Guild and the Junior Princesses of Evil sitting beside the starry-eyed little girl clapping her hands—and her own Lord and Master, the Demon Prince Charnas, sporting a pair of brown Playboy bunny ears just like those worn by the pooka in the ice cream parlor a few days before.

Far be it from me not to steal from people I hate. And it was Jodi herself who'd suggested it the day before: "Deiter! Get her eyes! Now!"

Like the pigeons that flew down to peck out Florinda and Lucinda's eyes in *Into the Woods*, only covered with flames and not suspended from wires, my Hand of Glory swooped through the air and grabbed Jodi's face with blazing mummified fingers, gouging them into her eye sockets.

Everyone else stood there, still petrified with shock and horror, until I had the presence of mind to stand up and grab Melanie's hand. "Run! Run!"

Call it animal nature, but that simple fight or flight response was first picked up on by Paddy. One moment the Demon Lord Charnas, plus bunny ears, was standing there. The next a cheap frock coat fell to the floor, stripped of its glamour, and a large brown hare bolted between Alexander's legs and out the door.

I shoved Melanie's hand into his, "Run!" and Alexander, always a practical man (except possibly in this one instance), was even more a father, and a vampire besides—and not only do the dead travel quickly, as he'd just demonstrated, but when they go chasing rabbits, they don't do it by halves. I barely heard Melanie's giggle of delight before they vanished into the darkness, and I don't even want to think what she was deluded into believing was going down.

Which only left one person to get out of there, for all that he was a nine-foot-plus furry monstrosity. “Run!” I screamed, and when he didn’t, I added, “What do you think you’re going to do, Dog-Boy? Have sex with her?”

Having sex with Jodilyn Blake may have done something to delay her, especially if they went back to the *Kama Sutra* coffee maker position, but right now my Hand of Glory was doing a flame-covered riff on the face-hugger from *Alien*, so there wasn’t much point. However, Brandon Kearny obviously had a desperate need to do something heroic, so he rescued me.

Well, to be completely honest, he grabbed me in his long hairy arms and rushed out the door, Mister Mistoffelees digging his claws into the shoulder of my *unpadded* dress and yowling in protest. But then we were out and down the hall, Brandon scooped me up onto his back, and I hung on for dear life as he shifted to all fours, getting smaller but not much so as he turned into a giant primeval wolf, like one of the worgs from *The Hobbit*. And I’m sorry, not only am I not a Tolkien goblin, but I’m a city girl, born and raised, and I never had the money nor interest to learn horseback riding let alone wolf riding. Sorry to all the *ElfQuest* fans out there. I just clung to his back until we somehow overtook Alexander and Melanie, Mister Mistoffelees’ eyes blazing like twin lanterns.

Werewolves, I suppose, can run like the wind, but apparently they cannot stop on a dime, not even when they find the passageway cut off by a massive iron gate. Brandon’s claws scrabbled for purchase on the slick concrete floor, and he spun out, slamming ass-first into the metal bars. And I don’t know the proper way you’re supposed to dismount a worg either, but I’m certain it’s something other than tumbling off in a heap at the feet of your boss.

Mister Mistoffelees landed beside me, back arched, ears back, eyes blazing, a Halloween cat to serve as inspiration for all the pale imitations. “Hssssshh!” His claws lashed out, raking the nose of the giant wolf and spattering blood across the floor. “A lesson, beast! Beg my Mistress’s pardon and you may yet live!”

There was something ancient in my cat's eyes, something powerful, something which thought that it should be worshipped and that could look upon the naked splendor of a prince of demons and be unimpressed. And Brandon saw it, same as I did, and the next moment he reverted to a naked man. He looked to me, shivering in the cold green light. "I— I'm sorry."

I sat up, pushing my hat back out of my eyes, the twists of the ribbon and the thread of the shawl tangled around my fingers. *Happy now and happy hence and happy ever after...* "What about Alexander?"

Brandon glanced up at his cousin-in-law, at the moment not looking like a vampire, just looking like what he was: a frightened father holding his little girl in his arms, and the man who had risked his life, or what was left of it, to save the soul of the man responsible for his wife's death. Even if that wasn't exactly what had been going down.

Mister Mistoffelees sharpened his claws on the concrete floor of the prison, a sound like knives and chalkboards. "I will know if you lie, beast."

Brandon bit his lip, now bare, the rings having popped free during the transformation. "I'm sorry, Alexander. For everything."

"And what about me?" Paddy had now resumed, if not exactly human form, then anthropomorphic bunny form, and lounged on the floor on the other side of the metal gate.

Brandon snarled, but at a signal from me, Mister Mistoffelees scraped his claws again, and the werewolf flinched. "For some of it," he said after a moment. "Not everything."

I looked to the pooka. "And you, Paddy?"

The pooka paused, realizing the scrutiny was now upon him. And while he seemed ready to bolt, he realized that he could never escape such a merciless foe as my familiar. "Answer my Mistress, rabbit." Mister Mistoffelees continued to sharpen his claws. "I will know if you lie..."

Paddy's ears went back and he quivered, looking to Brandon. "I— I'm sorry. For absolutely—" He broke off, with a nervous glance to Mister Mistoffelees. "Well, for a lot of it. But not everything."

Never everything. You deserve more than tricks for the Hell you've put me through, Brandy-Boy. A lot more."

You could have made absinthe with the bitterness in his voice, which is to say, it was as bitter as wormwood. But Brandon only looked at him and said, "I'm sorry, Paddy. I never meant to hurt you...."

"No," Paddy spat, "like you never meant to hurt Kate. 'If you love something, set it free. If it doesn't come back, hunt it down and kill it. It's probably "of the Wyrms." That's the werewolf code, isn't it?" He just about choked on gall, then spat on the floor between them. "Too bad for you you killed the one who was the forgiving type."

My fingers twisted in the shawl and hit a snag. "Listen, guys," I said. "I realize this is a real Hallmark moment, or at least good psychotherapy, but trust me, we'll have more than enough time for a family bitch session if we *just get out of here!*" I pretty much roared this, but then stood up, looking to the plain and obvious problem: the locked gate. And as it was, only Paddy could turn into a bunny and bounce through.

"Melanie?" I said sweetly. "You remember how to pick locks, don't you?"

She giggled as I handed her a hairpin and set her to work on the prison gate. "*Señora* Duarte isn't going to like this...."

I was certain that Alexander's housekeeper really didn't have an opinion at the moment, but if Melanie's fantasy world kept her from fainting in terror or hearing unpleasant family revelations, well then, so much the better. There are things children are better off not knowing.

There are things that adults are better off not knowing too, but once you do, you simply have to deal with them. A bloodcurdling screech echoed through the air, making Mister Mistoffelees hiss, and with that, I knew that Jodilyn Blake had gotten free of Deiter. Then a second later, I felt a sensation like someone had just stepped on my grave. Someone, to be specific, with long, pointy stiletto heels.

Jodi had my Book.

I knew it, as clear as clear. In the rush to get away from the death chamber, or perhaps I should say, the rush of suddenly being carried off by a werewolf, I'd left my bag of tricks behind, including my Book of Shadows. And remember how I said a witch knows when someone else opens her Book unless that someone takes lots of precautions? Well, Jodi hadn't taken those precautions, since she obviously didn't give a damn whether I knew she was reading my diary, and moreover my Hand of Glory was extinguished, the lock was open, and the Book was no longer asleep. And I understood why Madame Cleo had said to guard it so carefully....

A person is the sum total of their experiences, and my journal of the past week was the story of my life, or at least the most important part to date. I'd bound my soul and magick and blood into those pages, whether I'd thought I did or not, and you don't have to read the *Kalevala* to realize that the story of your life and your history is your life and your history. And now it was in the hands of an enemy, and I felt it, with horrible crawling certainty, as she read the words and saw the truth of how thoroughly I'd deceived her.

I reached out to that fragment of my soul caught in the pages, that piece of me that made my Book my latest and greatest spirit ally, the one most intimately *familiar* of them all, straining to form a link just as I had with Mister Mistoffelees. Then I blinked, suddenly seeing Jodi's face in front of mine, like the Wicked Queen's in her magick mirror, clear as if she were standing right before me, and in a way she was, except that I didn't see her glamour, not a wisp of it, not a shred of her latest masquerade as the Queen of May or any of the illusions of youth and beauty she clothed herself in. I only saw the ancient hag with the crown of yellow lilies and foxgloves stuck to her bald head—with athletic tape, I kid you not—and across her face, a charred brand in the shape of a palm and five fingers. Where her left eye had been, her good eye, only a smoking socket remained, which left only the right, filmed over with cataracts, squinting close, almost touching the paper, while her long witch's nose nearly put out my eye as she read the words of my story bleeding onto the page.

Are you reading this, you old hag? Are you reading the story of my life? Then look closer, ‘cause this is for you!

Jodi leaned closer, her nose pressed against the page as she strained to read what was written, the cramped writing of anger and violation and rage, then—

Got your nose!

I slammed the book, snapping my teeth together since my hands were more than bit busy at present, then heard the second bloodcurdling shriek in as many minutes. “*You bitch! You little bitch! I’ll get you for this!*”

Something writhed in my mouth, pushing against the back of my teeth, and I gagged, spitting it out to bounce across the floor. Then it lay there and twitched, gray and shriveled as a four-hundred-year-old prune, which, after all, is what it belonged to. A prune with maggots. I coughed, then looked up. “Would you like a nose, Mister Mistoffelees?”

He cocked his head, green eyes blazing like chemical torches. “I suppose so. Though noses aren’t nearly so fun as some other things.” He reached out then, claws sharp, and batted it towards him.

There came another screech, and I felt phantom fingers digging into my shoulders, then Mister Mistoffelees pounced and bit the nose hard, producing another screech and making the fingers let go. “You feel that, you old bitch?” I called back down the passage. “You take good care of my Book! Or— Or you’ll never see your nose again!”

My cat was also right: Even if ‘Got your nose!’ is old children’s magick, noses aren’t nearly as useful as some other things. And speaking of children, Melanie giggled in delight. “It’s open!”

Thankful for small miracles, I ushered her and Alexander through, Brandon and myself bring up the rear, Mister M— rushing gaily ahead of us with Jodi’s nose in his mouth.

“Fuck!” Paddy screamed from around the bend. “It’s the cotton-picking Braid-Braid Road!”

I paused, parsing out the allusion, then recognized it: the Path of Wickedness from *Tam Lin*, a.k.a. the Left-Hand Path, the Long and

Winding Road and so forth. *There was a crooked man who walked a crooked mile...* The references were everywhere, if you just had enough of a clue to pick them out, and likewise with the warnings. Brandon shivered as we caught up with his cousin and looked down the shadowy passageway by the green balefire of my cat's eyes. "The Black Spiral...."

Yes, the passage was dark, and it did indeed kink left, but then that's what it was supposed to do, by definition. "Oh shut up," I told him. "Paddy already said that." After all, it wasn't as if I needed a werewolf to point out what I'd learned from Mother Goose when I was four, and likewise with the "I'll get you, my pretty!" or whatever trite line Jodi was attempting to terrify us all with from back down the corridor. "Bite her nose again, Mister Mistoffelees, if you would be so kind."

He didn't say, "Yes Mistress," his mouth full of witch nose at the moment, but I heard the answering screech as I twisted the Waydown ribbon around my fingers and made my wish, rubbing my talisman, my bit of silver, my lucky sixpence. But unlike the one in the children's rhyme, it wasn't crooked, and neither was I, and as for my cat, he couldn't properly be called that either, merely aloof and amoral, which is standard for any cat, and anyway, what he'd caught wasn't a mouse—it was a nose, albeit a crooked one, or at least it was very much out of joint. *Happy ever after....* There's a terrible thing about a witch's calm, but I'd just bit off my enemy's nose at a distance, and I'd be damned, in every sense of the word, if I was going to let something like a fork in the road from a children's rhyme get in my way.

Besides which, Mister Mistoffelees was sitting there staring at the wall in front of us, the way cats often do, as if he saw something that we didn't. But I already knew from my previous experience that that was actually the case, besides which I felt the ribbon in my hand thrumming like a kite string, the loose end stretched out and pointed straight forward. "Mister M—?" I inquired.

My cat looked back, then leapt to my shoulder, and then I *saw* it: the passage before us, the one that should properly have been in

front of us to begin with, but blocked and cobwebbed over by spells, a weaving as tight and far more impenetrable than the ordinary iron gate behind us. And leading off into it, like the Red Clue from *The Enchanted Castle*, was the Waydown ribbon, shading from the orange satin in my hand to blood crimson in the distance, a thread like Ariadne's to lead us safely through the Labyrinth.

The lock, however, was chained with Jodi's spells, and there was no way that Melanie was going to unpick it with a hairpin. But, while I didn't have an ash key or even the Golden Key, which was back with my Book, I did have the Elector of Saxony's Silver Nutmeg. And with that and Madame Cleo's shawl and the talent of my namesake, I knew I'd make short work of it.

Unfortunately, there's short work subjective time for lock-picking, short work for the time it takes to unweave a spell, and then there's the straight fact that 'short' is relative to how much time you actually *have*. Which was why, though cocksure, supremely confident, and trusting in my ability to manipulate Destiny at the same time as being Her darling child and golden girl, this didn't change the fact that Jodi could still move pretty god-damn fast in those spike heels of hers. And she arrived just as I was unpicking the last threads of her spell.

"Nibble, nibble," she said, tottering forward, her long witch's wand held out like a blind man's cane. "Nibble, nibble, little mouse." She tapped the floor in front of her, searching, and I saw Deiter, or what was left of him, skewered in the middle of the hazel switch, charred and twisted, like a game hen half-eaten then put back on the rotisserie. "Who is nibbling at what I so carefully built?" In her other arm, Jodi clutched my Book with her dragon lady claws, and I felt them digging into my shoulder.

I paused, the threads of her magick and my own clutched in my hands, and I realized how she had tracked us. Not by scent, for obvious reasons (*Jodi Blake has no nose—How does she smell?* No, never mind), nor by sight, her right eye all but blind, her left eye burned out of its socket. It was by sound she'd tracked us, sound and Sound, and the tingling of her sixth sense, for I knew she could hear

the tinkling as I snapped the more stubborn threads of her spell, just the way I had known when she opened my Book. Witches are sensitive to things like that. Plus the fact that she was probably playing Toucan Sam and following her nose, though in a somewhat more literal sense.

And she was an absolute horror, an ancient hag with a brocade gown draped over her hunched, bony frame, a crown of heat-blasted flowers atop her head, one eye blind, the other a smoking ruin, a handprint charred into her face, a black gaping hole where her nose should have been, and held in one red-taloned claw, a stick with a twisted mummified hand skewered in the middle, all that remained of poor Deiter. Her glamour had been burnt away with her blinding, and she was now revealed for the hag she truly was.

However, there is glamour and glamour, and the matter of spells already cast and witcheries not yet broken. Melanie was still firmly under her spell, this evidenced by the sheer fact that she was not screaming in terror, and there were others for whom the witch's charms were still fresh in memory. "Hello, lover..." Jodi croaked, then took her arthritic claw with the wand and its red Lee press-on nails and hitched up her skirts, proving again that demon sorceresses do not wear panties and I think trying to reproduce Sharon Stone's infamous beaver shot from *Basic Instinct*. "Remember this?"

I hope, one day, I shall forget, but from Brandon's reaction, I realized that he, or at least a significant part of him, was still beglamoured, and very much under her spell. She scissored her legs again and he grew another foot. "Come on, lover! You know what you want!"

"You've got to be kidding..." Paddy said, his bunny-toothed jaw hanging open in shock. Then he bounced up and snapped his furry fingers in front of his cousin's long nose. "Snap out of it, Brandon! If any woman's not worth, she isn't!"

"Come on, big boy!" Jodi cackled, Brandon undoubtedly seeing something far more glamorous than the geriatric temptress Paddy and I were being flashed by, but while I could tell that Brandon was fighting it on the mental level, it wasn't so much on his head that

Jodi had cast her spell upon as something else. It was, let me be delicate and simply say ‘Toto,’ who was so firmly entranced and enraptured by Jodi, and while I’ve heard of women ruling men through the bedchamber, I realized that with a little Tantric magick, they could do just that—and Jodi didn’t even need to touch him to do it, since it seemed she could work her charms through sympathetic magick, touching him without touching him, the same way I’d reached out and seen through the pages of my Book, not to mention grabbed her nose. And once Jodi had made Brandon a slave to his passions, she’d have a nine-foot slaver monster at her beck and call.

I could see the threads of her sorcery stretched out as well, the bindings between her and Toto tight as fishnets and garter belts, which they in some ways resembled, and while I might have been able to unravel her spells if I worked at it, that would require getting more intimate than I ever cared to get with Brandon Kearny, and there simply wasn’t the time.

Witches, however, are nothing without instinct, and I realized that while Jodi’s bindings might be too tight to unpick without significant effort, the bindings on what her binding was binding were only as tight as I’d made them the day before, and I’d done that spell on the fly (in more senses than one). And what was hastily done up could be just as quickly undone. “Run, Toto! Run!” I cried, grasping Brandon’s significant manhood and pulling, then heard the pop as my own binding unraveled. “He got away! He got away!” And with that, Toto flew from my grasp, landing on the floor like the prizewinner at the Lorena Bobbit invitational.

Then he put up his head, suddenly animate, and it was rather like one of the stop-motion penisauruses from *Flesh Gordon*, or maybe like the business with the King and Queen of the Moon from *The Adventures of Baron Von Munchausen*, had the separation been done somewhere other than the neck. Regardless, the threads of Jodi’s magick were stretched out like a slingshot, and there was now neither physical body nor moral propriety to restrain Brandon’s member from what it wanted.

“No!” Brandon and Jodi screamed as one, Jodi falling back in horror, but that was exactly the wrong move to make, and if he thought anything, Toto thought that the lady doth protest too much. Paddy jumping in the air to cheer “Sic ’er!” Toto ignored all of his master’s cries for him to return, and beyond that, let me just say that Jodi was quickly reminded of the witch’s aphorism, *Be careful what you wish for—you may get it.*

Jodi got it but good, my Book flying into the air, and trite as the line might seem, I called out, “Come hither, my pretty!” since it’s also a magickal precept that there’s power in trite, or at least in classicism, and behind every cliché, there appears to be a spell. Or at least this one seemed to work, since at that, my Book of Shadows spun off at right angles to where it had been headed and next second thumped me in the chest.

I hugged it to myself, feeling much more complete now that I had it back, but then realized that good as it was to have regained my Book of Shadows, Toto would only keep Jodi busy for so long. Plus Brandon was freaking out, since for the second time in as many days, his willie had gone gallivanting off by itself, and he remembered what had come about the last time that had transpired. “Paddy, Alexander, calm him down if you could...” I said, then bent back to the task of unraveling the last of Jodi’s spell.

“It’s Barney!” I think I heard Melanie giggle, and much as I detest Jodi and her magick, I suppose I should be grateful for that; if not for the rose-colored glasses spell, Alexander’s daughter would doubtless be needing years of psychotherapy, and as it was, if we got out of this, I’d have to ask my boss if he had a good health care package for his employees, hopefully one with a shrink who was used to dealing with vampires and werewolves and witches.

The last knot was stubborn, but then again, so am I, and in the end I just shoved my Silver Key into the nonexistent lock and turned. There was a click, the last thread snapping like a cobweb as the blank wall opened like the Pied Piper’s door in the hillside, excepting the fact that I was using a key and not a flute, and I only had one child with me at the moment, though a number of dancing

children would have been easier to deal with than a pooka, a vampire, and a maimed werewolf who was either having connip-tions at leaving part of himself behind with a murderous hag or else having an orgasm via sympathetic magick, I'm not sure which. "Come on, Melanie, the birthday party's this way. Guys? Drag him if you have to."

"My— My— My—" Brandon stammered.

"I'll get you a new one," I promised. "Come on...."

Brandon whimpered, whether in ecstasy or horror I'm not sure, but I'll just say that Alexander's psychotherapist was going to have more than one patient if we survived this night. I stumbled through the gate, holding tight to the Waydown ribbon and winding it about my fingers as I went, and heard the sound of music in the distance, hollow and spiraling.

I recognized it a moment later—the 'Spirit Dance' from *Into the Labyrinth*, one of the most hypnotic tunes you're liable to hear at club, and also, as I knew, a personal favorite of Blackrose, who bore the silver bulla with the Crimson Ribbon. The drums and shakers sounded louder in the darkness, and I spooled the ribbon about my fingers, the skein in my hand never increasing one whit, though the Red Clue still hove out into the blackness in front of me, the end glowing bright in a point of light.

The point moved closer, bobbing and weaving like a will-o'-wisp's fire, then, in the glimmer of Mister Mistoffelees' witchy green eyes, I saw differences in the darkness around it, twists and folds, the ribbon rippling with the suggestion of the spiral at the heart of a rose. Then the blackness resolved into a black ruffled dress and black gloves, black tights and black dancing shoes, black feathered mask and Blackrose, with a black satin rose pinned in her hair, and upraised like a magician's pointer, her long-stemmed black lacquer cigarette holder, the Crimson Eye tied to the tip just below the point of light, the glowing cherry of her clove kretek, the ribbons and smoke describing twists and spirals in the air as she danced, like the streamers of ancient caduceus.

“Take my hand, Penelope,” she said, extending her black velvet glove, “Baron is holding the door, but we mustn’t tarry long.” Baron, who held the Violet Eye, the next in the chain of symbols.

My hands were busy at the moment, one chained to the Demon-in-the-Box, the other tangled with ribbon and Fate-betwined shawl, my Book of Shadows clutched to my chest, and I wanted to ask her what she expected me to take her hand *with*. But my elbows were still free, sort of, and I extended the one with the Book and shawl.

Blackrose linked to it, not missing a step, spiraling to the music, and I tried my best to match her, but truth to tell, I have neither her talent nor her practice, nor for that matter her dainty feet. Though to be perfectly fair to myself, I also happened to be busy weaving a spell one-handed while clasping a huge tome to my chest and the other arm was weighed down with chains and demon and a lunch pail, so I can be excused a few stumbles or missteps. “Hold on to my arm, Melanie,” I said. “We’re going to play ‘Ring-Around-the-Rosie.’”

Never minding the fact that we happened to be waltzing through the metaphysical other-reaches in a realm of perfect darkness, or that she was grabbing onto a wrist just above a Satanic lunchbox, or for that matter that Ring-Around-the-Rosie is actually the Dance of Death, and had been invented to commemorate the Black Plague—whatever, regardless of all that, Melanie just grabbed hold and began skipping merrily and singing the song: “Ring-around-the-rosie, pockets full of posies—Come on, daddy!”

She had Alexander by the other hand, who had Brandon by the other, who had Paddy at the end of his leash, bouncing like the proverbial bunny, though it was still the werewolf who was the most easily freaked. “The Dance of the Black Spiral!” he cried, horrified almost to the point of madness.

“It’s just Ring-Around-the-Rosie...” Melanie called, oblivious to the fact that her mother’s cousin was an over nine-foot-tall dickless werewolf. “Don’t be a baby!”

My sentiments exactly, even though ‘The Ring of Roses’ is in fact the Dance of Death, and the pockets of posies she’d mentioned are the primrose bouquets that form one of the charms for opening the Gateways to the Otherworld—and according to the lore, if you get the number of primroses *wrong*, it opens the path to Doom, which is exactly what we were on.

Blackrose laughed, weaving the chain back and forth in a serpent dance. “Listen to the child, wolf-spirit,” she advised, waving her caduceus beneath his nose. “Out of the mouths of babes is great wisdom spoken, and what is danced to the Left can just as easily be danced to the Right, if one knows where to place one’s steps.”

With that, she spun away, laughing, and I stumbled to follow after, my elbow wrenched back, making me feel like one of the less nimble dancers you see in those medieval margin illuminations with the chorus line of peasants and princes and millers and their wives. Or in this case witches and little girls and vampires and werewolves and pookas.

If someone had done a picture of us right now, I would pay money to see the art history deposition attempting to explain it.

Regardless, the strains of ‘Dead Can Dance’ became louder as we danced the Dance of Death, or alternately, Ring-Around-Blackrose, following the glowing point of her cigarette and spinning towards a silver door in the darkness. Baron was nowhere to be seen, though his Violet Ribbon hung looped through the portal, leading back to the Crimson Eye atop Blackrose’s makeshift wand, leading to the Orange Ribbon in my hand. It reminded me a lot of “Further up and further in!” from *The Last Battle* (the only worthwhile part of the book in my humble opinion), though while there were witches and little girls and talking animals in all his books, I don’t remember C.S. Lewis including any vampires or dickless werewolves. Then again, Lewis never mentioned *what* it was that the White Witch did after her parties at Caer Paraval, and what I knew was transpiring behind us in the Labyrinth is certainly something the noted theologian would classify under “unmentionable acts” and “unspeakable evil.”

Whatever, Blackrose danced us through the door, and the next thing I knew we were stumbling into the corner behind the bar at the Maritime Hall—still in a dark *Labyrinth*, truth to tell, but now just the mundane reality of a gothic dance club. And Baron was there, holding the door as promised—a door cut into his chest where his heart should have been, his nipple the doorplate with his nipple ring as the handle.

He pushed the door shut, the seam sealing with a trace of blood, then twisted his nipple ring 360 degrees, impossibly locking it, while the Violet Ribbon looped up to become a bow around the Udjat Eye atop the seventeenth-century church doors tattooed across his chest. The end of his Ribbon, looped impossibly out to the Crimson Eye tied to Blackrose's cigarette holder, dissolved into nothingness, becoming nothing more than a tattooed purple ribbon with a V-cut end to mirror the one on the other side.

The Red-Orange ribbon tying me to Blackrose disintegrated the same way, leaving Rose with her makeshift caduceus and me with my Udjat Eye tangled inextricably with the unraveled fringe of my shawl. All very mundane, nothing to cause comment, except of course for the heir to Uncle Wiggily and the maimed werewolf standing behind us.

Paddy twirled his ears, and a moment later they resolved into his mop-top brown do, the rest of him following suit, leaving him looking a little out-of-place for a Goth bar, but not so very much as Brandon, who no one aside from us had yet noticed. "Alright, Brandy-Boy," Paddy said, "I may not have your soul, but I do have your body. So human, if you would be so kind?"

The giant werewolf didn't appear to hear him, his face a study in mixed agony and ecstasy as Jodi did *something* to him—or at least part of him—that C.S. Lewis wouldn't approve of (even if the Tantric Masters might), but at Paddy's words, Brandon shrank back to looking like a naked mid-op transsexual, one hand clutching his crotch.

Neville stood there, diffident, taking us in and screening us somewhat from the dance floor, a glass of what appeared to be scotch

in one hand. "I'd appreciate the full tale, but of course later, when there is more time for such matters. But now is not the moment. Norna has arrived, and her elderly counterpart, and I see—" He glanced to my shawl, "—that you have taken on the mantle as well. I shall leave you Ladies to Spin, and merely watch, if I may have your leave."

"But of course, sweet Neville," I found myself saying. "You have always been so wise, never interfering with Our designs, only suggesting possible patterns...."

"I live only to be of service, Great Lady," he said, and I knew he wasn't talking to me, Penny, but to Someone with a capital S who I happened to be channeling at the moment, that Someone being Lachesis/Verthandi/whatever-She-wants-to-be-called-at-the-moment, the Middle of the Three Sisters, the Great Mother who plots the Grand Design of the Tapestry.

"And so long as that is the case, you will," I said, both promise and threat, standing on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek, then, with more grace than Blackrose will ever possess—unless she happens to channel one of the Three Graces, but that's another story—I stepped out across the dance floor, with Book and Shawl and Cat and Talisman and Box, the dancers subconsciously stepping aside for me, even regular mortals able to sense when Destiny is afoot, even when she happened to be dressed as a Goth girl in calico print and a Satanic Minnie Pearl hat.

Nonetheless, I was still more fashionable than Madame Cleo, who continued to look like nothing more than an escapee from fortuneteller's row at Ren Faire—except for the look in her eyes—while Norna was dressed in a sheer gown of sequined black silk with matching purse and shoes, exquisite and elegant as if she were the fashion plate for the Academy Awards, her eyes still glowing with the silver hourglass-shaped contacts, the dainty spider still dangling from her ear cuff.

"We meet again," I said.

Norna smiled warmly. "Hello, Penny."

“Welcome, little magpie,” Madame Cleo added, and I realized, with the mantle I now wore, names were unimportant. ‘Penelope’ served as well as ‘Lachesis’ or ‘Verthandi’ or whatever woman chose to assume the mantle when it was offered to her, and had the strength not to go mad from the weight of that gift and that responsibility.

I felt the thread around my fingers, spinning and spanning to every corner of the globe, all the facets of the Present, the mantle that I wore. *Happy now and happy hence and happy ever after...*

Norna smiled, touching the chain that held her jeweled spider. “Always the romantic, weren’t you?”

Madame Cleo grinned back, her snagged teeth filled with gold. “It’s a mother’s prerogative. But we shall see what we shall see.”

They stepped back then, making their way back to opposite corners of the dance floor, between us forming a triangle just as the deejay changed songs. It was Destiny, that’s all: Blind Melon’s cover of ‘Three’ from the old Multiplication Rock, recorded before Shannon Hoon’s suicide. A dead man’s voice sang from the speakers, a song of nostalgia and magic and Magick, and though not precisely Goth, it was late, into the three hours of the Witching Hour, and it was oh-so-appropriate: *“Three, it’s a magic number... The Past, the Present and the Future... Faith, Hope and Charity... The Heart, the Brain and the Body give you Three—That’s a magic number...”*

Great truths are hidden in the songs of children, if you just have the sense to listen, and Jodilyn Blake had songs and names and games for her aplenty: the Queen of Hearts, the Gold-Dust Woman, and for that matter, Old Maid, though it was the second of those three she chose to appear as.

Jodi knew the importance of an entrance, I’ll give her that much, and what an entrance she made—Her gown was now cloth-of-gold, her lipstick and nails painted to match, and in her golden hair, the lilies were gilded as well, a fantastic floral crown you couldn’t wear anywhere apart from a Goth club, and that you could only pull off if you were as young and sexy and ravishingly beautiful as she appeared. I didn’t know what she thought she was, but I recognized

her as the Merry Widow of King Croesus, and the crowd parted for her in awe as she stepped forward, measuring out her tread with a fabulous scepter, a long gilded wand tipped with the Golden Hand of Midas, a conceit worthy of the Sun King.

Of course, I could see beneath the Seeming, so I knew it for the lie it was. She was still blind but for her magickal Sight and the tapping of her wand, her face charred with the mark of her former Hand, now moved up to the tip, and her missing nose was still being sucked by the cat sitting on my shoulder. All that she'd done to change her appearance was add another dollop of perfume and toss a tube of craft-store glitter liberally over herself, cheap gold sparkles caught in the creases of her flaking, withered flesh.

"And so, Penelope," she said, stepping forward as the dancers parted for her, her bearing regal regardless of the form you watched, "the chase is finished, the game is done."

"Yes," I agreed, "and midnight is past, the ball is over, and it's come time to pay the piper."

"What are you talking of, impudent child?" she said, though for all the onlookers knew, she was scarcely older than myself. "I have finished my chase, and you are at my mercy."

"So said the wasp to the spider," I finished for her, wrapping another twist of the shawl around my fingers, then another, and another, until she looked and realized what I was doing, and I saw a look of fear come across both her pretty and her hideous features. "But you have stepped into Our Web, and I call Destiny to witness these proceedings, both as I promised and as We desire." There came a strobe of light, spangling from the disco ball over her head to the gold and silver threads of my shawl, to Norna's contacts and spider ear cuff, to Madame Cleo and the large iron shears she held in her ancient hands.

"*Three, it's a magic number...*" The song ended, and stricken by the scene on the dance floor, the deejay failed to put on the next, leaving the room in silence. Sensing the drama about to unfold, and cautious of the line of fire, or merely wishing not to interrupt the play which had been staged for their amusement, the dancers and

club goers cleared aside, leaving the Gold Dust Woman alone in the middle of the floor.

"You fool," Jodi hissed. "You little fool! You have no idea what you've called up...."

"Perhaps," I said, "perhaps not. It matters very little now. We are here. We will watch. And We will decide what We see fit."

Jodi was hemmed in by the three of us, as surely as a golden wasp in a spider's web, buzzing angrily, but at last she saw her Doom was upon her, though seemed unsure of which quarter it might come from. "Mercy..." she whispered.

"That is not Our function," said Madame Cleo.

"That is not Our purpose," Norna echoed.

"That is not Our design," I said simply, then added, more in my voice than Destiny's, "nor is it Our desire. We will do what We shall do, and then We shall see what needs to be done. And do not seek to escape your Destiny, for I hold the Key to your destruction right here." I held up the lunchbox, with the chains and handcuffs and bloody sigils and Spottie Dottie padlock. "You know what I hold, Jodilyn Blake. You are intimately familiar with this blasphemy."

Jodi peered at it, blind eye and false eyes searching, then recoiled in horror at what she read there. "It is nothing," she whispered. "Nothing. Just an old lunchbox."

"Have you lived a lie so long that you can't see the truth when it's held up by the scruff of the neck?" I shook the box, so the chains rattled, and she flinched. "Very well," I said, "I shall spell it out, for in the spelling there lies power, and you won't be able to deny it once the words are spoken: I hold here your Lord and Master, the demon to whom your soul is some hour and a half past due, the Prince of Darkness whom I trapped with the following tokens—a blessed rosary of olive wood, for Peace and Faith; a tapestry woven with the seals from the Ring of Solomon, given to him by the Creator to bind the Spirits of the Outer Darkness, these patterns reproduced faithfully by his heirs, the pigments ground from herbs and minerals whose natural properties reinforce the meaning of the seals; a chest of iron, bane of demons and sorcery alike, wrapped round with

Words of Faith and the likeness of a blessed spirit who in life wrote songs in praise of Heaven, this painted over with sigils and the Names of God, written in the blood of His Son, this given as a Gift from the Divine; and lastly, a lock fashioned in the shape of a Dalmatian, one of the most faithful and watchful of companions, and a pup at that, symbolic of Perfect Innocence. These are the tokens I bound your Master with, and these are the same tokens I can loose to set him free.”

Jodi looked at me, her expression a mixture of fear, awe, jealousy, hatred and disbelief, all in equal measure. “You....”

“What?” I said. “What are you going to say about me? What are you going to call me, Jodi? An audacious fool? An impudent chit? Tell me that I dare too much? That I forget my place? That I’m nothing more than a presumptuous child?” I rattled the box, spinning the web about my fingers in the other hand. “The truth is, I’m all these things and more: I’m a witch, and you know what that entails. I dare as much as I have to, am as presumptuous as I need be, am as impudent as circumstances would have me be to get done what I need to do. Looking after my other responsibilities while getting free from you took some doing, which is why I dared as much as I did.”

“You will never be free from me,” Jodi swore, her wand and poor Deiter’s broken hand quivering with rage, “never free from that to which you’ve chained yourself. Trust me, young one, but I am older and I know more.”

“And I am younger, and I dare more,” I countered, “but do you really wish the Fates to witness your words, Jodilyn Blake? For that is why We are here—to witness, to arbitrate, to uphold. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“To pronounce judgment?” Jodi asked.

“Where appropriate,” said Madame Cleo.

“Where poetic,” Norna added.

“Where We see fit,” I finished, tying another knot in the fringe of the shawl, “but We are neither Heaven nor Hell to reward or damn. Those responsibilities lie to others. We merely wish to tie up

loose ends, and yours is a thread which has run much longer in the Tapestry than it would have otherwise, if you had not been so willful and had not tied your Destiny to much longer and stronger flaws in the Web and Woof.”

Jodi looked about at us, Present, Future and Past, Mother and Maiden and Crone, and was doubtless tripping on the idea that I’d taken the role of the Mother. But then again, I’m an audacious chit, so it went with the territory. “So I am to die,” she finished for us.

Madame Cleo snicked her scissors, contemplative. “To end your thread here, at this Juncture, would leave other threads hanging, an unsightly tangle which would result in knots from which the Tapestry might never be free.”

Jodi smiled as she realized the meaning of the old fortuneteller’s words, looking about to each of us, and leered. “What you mean, hag, is that if I am to die, the Demon must first be freed, since I cannot die until He takes my soul. And if Lord Charnas is let loose, He shall take his revenge on young Penelope here, for her audacity and for His pleasure, which will force You to end her thread prematurely, before Your plans for it are done.” She smiled, having perceived the lay of things. “For while You have marked her as one of Your darlings, and even given her Your Mantle to wear, the Masters of the Outer Darkness are older than Your Creation, They are Blots upon Your Tapestry, and Lord Charnas could sever dear Penny’s thread in a heartbeat...and You would be powerless to stop Him directly. Besides which, since He is a Flaw in Your Fabric, You would prefer to keep Him neatly pinned where Pretty Penny trapped Him.”

“In a word,” I said, “yes. You have the lay of it. I knew you couldn’t be that blind.”

“There is blind and there is blind,” Jodi said. “What would You Ladies have of me? For it appears we are at an impasse.”

“Not so,” said Norna, “all that remains is to straighten the skein.”

I added, “Untangle the knots.”

“Or cut them, if need be,” Madame Cleo finished. “Find the prettiest and most pleasing Pattern with which to end matters.”

“For which purpose,” Norna continued, “we must begin at the beginning, with the first oaths sworn. Neville?”

The leader of the Hollowers stepped forward, head bowed in respect, hands held out to the club goers, indicating that they should remain silent where they were and intimating that what was taking place was nothing more than an elaborately staged theatrical production. “Grave Ladies, ask of me what You wish.”

Norna cocked her head, the spider swinging from her ear. “Tell us of the beginning of this business, as you witnessed it.”

He bowed, then looked back up. “I was not there for its inception, which I understand involved a slight and another slight, a theft followed by a greater theft and a retributive strike, but I was there for the formal challenge. Jodilyn challenged Penelope to the Duel Arcane. Penelope accepted, setting the time as here and now, the place as the same, and the stakes that she would surrender the contents of her lunch pail if she were to fail, while if she were the victor, then as ransom Jodilyn would leave, never again to bother Penelope or those she considered to be under her protection. That is all.”

“And the victor in this duel?” Norna asked.

“Twas I,” Jodi answered. “The girl broke the circle first. That makes the game forfeit.”

“True,” Neville allowed, “but ‘here and now’ are highly subjective terms. Were the bounds so clearly set? And regardless, I distinctly saw you pursue, which by ancient understanding means that you chose to forgive this breach of the boundaries and to continue the contest, rather than call for a ruling.”

“Jodilyn was the next to flee,” Norna added, “after I did nothing more than descend on my thread and extend my greetings....”

Jodi looked to her, her witchsight possibly seeing the giant silver spider Norna had once appeared as, though now I saw nothing of the arachnid save her contacts and silver ear-charm. Yet, before she could comment, Jodi suddenly clutched the hole where her nose should have been.

Mister Mistoffelees had it hooked in his claws so as to not drop it on the floor, smacking once or twice as if to clear a bad taste from his mouth, or perhaps to savor it. “I was the prize in that box,” he said smugly to all assembled, proud no doubt that two witches would fight over him. “Mistress Penelope surrendered me to Mistress Jodilyn, though Mistress Jodilyn took flight before we could amend our compact, forfeiting her claim. In my view, that makes Mistress Penelope the victor, and Mistress Jodilyn has no honorable cause to be troubling her or hers. Which includes myself.”

There was polite applause from the club goers at this amazing feat of ventriloquism and puppetry, since my lips weren’t moving, though several pointed to my fingers clutching the Threads of Fate just below the shoulder on which Mister Mistoffelees sat, misinterpreting these as the strings with which I operated the cat puppet. The Goths who’d pointed them out were quickly shushed by their fellows, who wanted to enjoy the show.

“The bounds were never clearly set,” Jodi pointed out, gesturing in a circle with the Hand atop her wand, the foot never leaving the floor. “What is ‘now’ to one who has lived hundreds of years?”

“Terribly subjective,” Neville answered. “I take it then that you wish to call for overtime? As referee and boundsman, I could countenance that, but perhaps there is another solution....”

Jodi looked to him, seeing, as I did with the eyes of Destiny and of my familiar spirit, that he had no soul, or at least not one he displayed for the idly curious. “What is it you suggest, Old One?” she asked respectfully.

“An arbitrated peace,” he responded, “witnessed and bound by the Sisters Three. Penelope here wishes to be free of you, for you to sever all contact with her and with those she considers under her protection. In return for this, she will surrender her lunchbox and its contents. Not its contents as of the beginning of the Duel Arcane, for that lockbox is gone, and her familiar quite clearly prefers her company at present, but for her current ironbound chest and its contents—the demon whom you count as your Lord and Master, the Prince who holds the claim on your soul.”

"She would offer me this?" Jodi said, querulous, then, seeing that he spoke the truth, looked to me. "Why?"

"Because," I responded. "Because I owe you, for what I've done to you, and for what you've done to me. Because you asked what gift I could offer as recompense for the slights I've done you, and you really didn't want my old pet food dishes. Because Kate asked me to be nice, and while I can't think of any person I'd rather see carried off by a demon or anyone more deserving of such a Fate, in the holy and moral sense, I know that no one, no matter how wicked or reprehensible, deserves anything that awful. And because I don't intend to spend the rest of my life locked to this damn lunchbox, and when I think about what person would be even more crazy and fanatical than I would about keeping it shut, well, you're at the top of a very short list." I held up the lunch pail, giving the chains a shake. "What do you say, Jodi? I'm offering you your soul—something worth more to you than all the burnt mansions and magickal knickknacks and bitchy comments in the world put together—and I'm also giving exactly what you deserve, since I can't think of anybody on the planet more deserving of the Fate of being a crazy old lady who spends every waking minute of her immortal life guarding a lunchbox bound with nothing more than fetish gear and a Spottie Dottie padlock."

Jodi paused, contemplative. "You would be taking a great risk, young one. I could always choose to free Lord Charnas, renegotiate my contract, then offer him your blood for the indignities we have both suffered at your hand."

"Yes," I allowed, "but I'm betting that you won't do that. I'm betting that because one thing you won't admit, not here where your Master will hear, is that you're the type of girl who likes to be on top. It pisses you off no end that you have to get on the bottom for anyone, even and especially a high muckety-muck Demon Prince. You let him out, and it's on the bottom you go. No matter how nice he makes it sound, you know that's how it's going to be. So you'll get more of a buzz off of having him locked in the lunchbox than you'll ever get setting him free." I gestured, showing the web of Fate I'd

spun in my hand. "So you end up the crazy old lady sitting in the corner, cackling over her lunchbox. For all eternity. Growing older each year. But it's better than what you have, and there's no one more deserving of that Fate."

Jodi glanced to me, then to Norna, then to Madame Cleo. "Great Ladies," she said at last, "Wyrd Sisters, you speak of Eternity, and of my life and Fate. Might I have a minute to consider it?"

"A minute," I said, "no more."

Jodi paused, then trod out the boundaries of her prison, from me to Madame Cleo, from Madame Cleo to Norna, from Norna back to myself, the tap of the foot of her wand the only sound in *Labyrinth*, echoing back from the corners and from nameless passageways and corridors beyond. Then she nodded gravely. "Very well then, Sister Penelope, Ladies Three. I accept your bargain. The price offered is sufficient for forgiveness for the many and varied slights this one has done me, and for security for the girl and those under her protection. Give me the box."

"You will be held to this," I said.

"Bound," Madame Cleo echoed.

"Kept," Norna finished.

Jodi nodded. "I expect no less from ones such as You. But the price is sufficient, the sum is enough, and I am eager to have this bargain at an end."

I held up the lunchbox, the keys to the handcuffs appearing magickally in my hand, for all that I'd left them in my Kiki bag on Alcatraz, and Hell if I know how I suddenly managed that trick. But the Goths only clapped at this handy bit of prestidigitation and I smiled. "Neville, if you could do the honors?"

"Of course, Dear Lady." He stepped forward, glancing to Jodi, only his soulless lack of emotion allowing him to look so plainly at the horror of her face that I knew he saw. "Jodilyn Blake, do you accept this bargain, as set forward by the Lady Penelope? In exchange for this token will you hold her blameless for all her past actions, both against you and otherwise, excusing all slights, real or imagined? Giving also your word and your bond that you will trouble

her nevermore, with the same promise given to all those with whom she holds kinship, whether through bonds of blood or affection or moral or legal responsibility?"

"For this token, I do so swear," Jodi hissed, clutching her wand, knuckles white. "*Now give it to me!*"

Unhurried, yet efficient, Neville took the keys, unlocking the handcuffs and transferring them one by one from my wrist to Jodi's, such that the box never once was completely free.

Once the deed was done, Jodi looked at the iron box in her hand, then slowly brought it to her lips and kissed it, long and luxuriant and passionate and hateful. "Rest well, my Master," she whispered into the cracks. "Rest soundly. Rest secure. I will keep you safe, this I promise You. I will keep You safe from anyone, anyone at all, who might ever seek to trouble You." She hugged the lunchbox to herself, like a spoiled girl with a teddy bear she's just won at the fair, and looked to me. "My thanks, Sister Penelope. I could not have done this alone. You are very clever, and your talent will take you far."

"Thank you, Queen Jodilyn," I bit out, since I didn't want to spoil any of the negotiations by affronting her again and screaming, "Bitch! Bitch! Fucking bitch!" like I wanted to. "You serve as an inspiration." An inspiration for homicidal maniacs and serial killers, but an inspiration all the same.

Jodi smirked in triumph, as if it were not she who was in the cage, and the upper hand belonged to her, but then, as I've pointed out, she's the type of girl who likes to be on top, and this moment was no exception. "And now for last minute pleasantries," she said. "I'd like my nose back, if you please, Sister Penelope."

I gritted my teeth. "I'd like Brandon's...."

"Naughty-bit?" Jodi asked and laughed gaily. She rested her wand in the crook of her arm, then reached into her décolletage and removed the world's largest dildo, still ringed and belled, like the staff for some obscene Morris dance.

Jodi flourished it with a ring of bells and the audience cracked up. After the tense scene just enacted, this was obviously the comedic

relief, or perhaps just an inadvertently hilarious bit of performance art, especially as Brandon rushed up, still nude and sexless as a life-size Ken doll. "Give it to me!"

Jodi looked to him and laughed, making the bells jingle again. "I'm sorry, lycanthrope. You have nothing left that I might want; you'll have to negotiate separately."

It was time to put an end to this. "The nose please, Mister Mistoffelees?"

"I thought it was mine to keep," my familiar remarked. "It's been a while since I've had one to play with."

I sighed; I didn't have time to think up anything better. "But wouldn't you prefer a pair of boots, and pirate shirt, and a little musketeer hat with a real ostrich plume?"

My familiar leaned out, looking me in the eyes. "Would you sew it yourself?"

"I might have to buy the hat," I admitted, "but everything else, yes. Including high fringed moccasins like they make at Ren Faire."

Mister Mistoffelees blinked, straightening back up. "Very well then, Mistress. You may have the nose. I've tired of it anyway."

I took it from his claws. "Thank you, Mister Mistoffelees." I extended it to Jodi, who traded it for the dildo, then befuddled the onlookers by taking the small lump of cat-mauled gray putty and causing it to vanish up her nose, or really, beneath her Seeming. Mere slight-of-hand, but definitely performance art, since no one could figure out exactly what it might mean.

I followed this by attaching the Morris staff to the naked man, the dildo suddenly snapping into place and wilting in reality with a jingle of bells, causing comments regarding foam appliances and special effects. I probably shouldn't have done that, at least not there in front of God and everyone, but then again, it was no more outlandish than *Crash Worship*, and much less so than *Gwar* and some of our local theatrical productions, and as I've said, this is San Francisco, and you can get away with things here that would get you arrested other places.

"I'd also like Deiter back," I added, causing Jodi to look perplexed for a moment.

Then she brightened. "Oh, yes, the traitorous Hand." She reached up to the top of her gilded staff and removed the golden hand, the whole of it transmuting to the blackened horror I knew it to be, while the audience happily misinterpreted what they were seeing. "He's hardly of any use to me now, but if he amuses you..." She tossed him to me, as if she were disposing of a bit of rubbish. "I'd also like my books back—you know how attached you can get to such things—but it needn't be this moment. Just your earliest convenience, since I'm certain there are items you still wish to peruse. But you're a quick study, so I'm sure it shan't be long."

"Just tell me where to send them and I'll make sure they get there."

"Never fear," Jodi said. "I shall. But if you Ladies are through with me?"

"Almost just," I said. "If you would be so kind as to free Brandon and Melanie from your spells?"

Jodi laughed, high and light, then turned to Brandon, who'd retreated to the corner and to whom Blackrose had apparently lent her opera cloak to so he could attempt to cover himself. Jodi merely blew him a kiss, and he fell to the ground, writhing in ecstasy. She smiled. "As for the child, the Glamour of the Rose-Colored Glasses shatters at the merest touch of physical cruelty. A good, hard slap should do it... but I'm sure you'd prefer to administer it yourself. After all, I do have my oath to uphold."

Jodilyn Blake had a way of being a raving bitch even when she was being nice. "I'll see to it myself, Jodi. But thank you. You may go."

I stepped aside, breaking the triangle of me, Norna and Madame Cleo, or really maneuvering myself such that Jodi was now outside of its boundaries. She paused, then took up her wand and tapped her way forward, stopping for a moment as she came alongside Peter. "My regrets, Sweet Peter," she said, smiling as winsomely as a



toothless hag could, at the same time as her golden Seeming beamed as sunnily as a summer day. "It could have been wonderful."

He looked at her with his cold gray eyes, not even seeing a trace of her glamour. "Like Hell, you old bitch."

"Yes," she laughed lightly, "like Hell. But I now have another to keep me company. Come along, 'Master.' We have such delights to share, You and I." She patted the lunchbox chained to her wrist and left the dance floor, the Goths milling about in her wake, realizing that with that, the show was over.

And it was. As Jodi left the room, I came to the conclusion of the Pattern I'd woven between my fingers, and the presence of Destiny left me.

It was over. The Tapestry was mended. The Labyrinth was solved. And the Witching Hour was at an end.



Penny Dreadful™

A Mage: The Ascension® Novel in Eight Parts and an Epilogue

Epilogue

In which Penny thinks upon names and stories, ties up a number of loose ends, and sees what can be done with regards to happily-ever-afters.

Kevin Andrew Murphy



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Sunday, the Fourth of May
Nightfall

I'm back in my room as I write this, as opposed to having it written for me, either by Deiter, or by my Book of Shadows itself, with the words bleeding onto the page like with that magick tome people in fairytales have found chained to a tree so many times that it has its own entry in the Folktale Motif Index.

Of course, it's not as if I don't have an entry in the Motif Index myself, or at least in the history of Gothic literature. *Penny Dreadful*. There's power in names, as well as inherent risks, and I'll advise my fellow witches and Goths and Goth-witches and whoever else may come to be reading these lines to choose your name carefully, because names are stories, and come with their own baggage. Being christened *Penelope* Fated me to be left holding the bag, or at least the fort, while my husband goes gallivanting off across the globe, and while I haven't been married yet, if you remember, Grimm left me minding the shop. And he still hasn't come back from Italy, even if I got April to cover for me and avoided that part of my doom.

But by choosing *Penny Dreadful* as my *nom de Goth* and my *nom d'Art*, I fated myself for a worse one—I turned my life into a Gothic mystery. After all, just look what happened: windswept mansion, dark and brooding master, clairvoyant children, witchcraft, dreams, locked chests, mysterious messages, and a creepy housekeeper who

I swear, now that matters have calmed down, is probably back in her bedroom, highlighting her copy of *Rebecca*.

You see what I mean. True, it's not all so pat as that—Alexander is a nice guy in addition to being a vampire, and he's not all that mysterious (and I can't blame anyone except myself for the witchcraft)—but the lesson still holds true: *Be careful what you wish for, you may get it*. And be equally careful what you call yourself, since Names have power, and if you choose one, you may very well live up to its history.

It's a basic principle of magick. But what I've also learned from my adventure is that for every thread in the Tapestry, there's a spirit, and for every spirit, a story. Yet some stories and spirits don't have threads, so they attach themselves to those who do, hoping to get woven into reality, finding some thread with a familiar name, a similar pattern, and just maybe, a kindred spirit. Like a girl who fancies herself 'Penny Dreadful.' Like the story in this book. Yes, it's the story of my life, or at least the epiphanies and revelations of the past week, but it's also a Book of Shadows, a mage's *agrippa*, a witch's familiar spirit and an expression of the essence of the penny dreadful, the horrid, shocking Gothic mystery of the past century, or at least one of them.

I know, I know, it just sounds like more weird metaphysical rambling, but weird is just another name for Wyrð, and when you speak the words of a story, when you set pen to paper, when you perform any of the ancient Arts, you're giving life to that tale, and magick, and a piece of your soul. And when Jodi Blake said I'd never be free of her, she was right, at least in one sense: The old bitch is part of my story, an important piece of my life, since like I said, our lives are our stories, and our stories are our lives, and my thread has crossed Jodi's and intertwined. Even if we never meet again (and I hope we don't), we share that history, and moreover, I've used her spells, the magick from her own Books of Shadows, pieces of her own story of her life, and even if I send the books back, her shadows are now a part of mine. I've learned from her, things about myself I

neither wanted nor intended to learn, but then again, I think she's learned a few things from me too, so I suppose it's fair.

Whatever. I've reached the end of a chapter in my life, and I might as well write down how things turned out. By myself, as I did at the beginning of my tale, without having my penny dreadful (and how *do* you refer to your Book of Shadows so as to avoid confusion?) do it for me. And also explain to myself why my last chapter ended where it did, since any number of significant things happened afterwards, and the only reason I can come up with for it stopping short is that my Book of Shadows has a flair for the dramatic, since after the Fates leave the room, anything else is anticlimactic.

So here's my anticlimax: I still have my job. Alexander realized I was only being a bitch so I could save his daughter, and that while I appreciated the gesture of his coming in with guns blazing (and bad aim), it wasn't strictly necessary. Except, of course, to save Brandon from eternal servitude to Paddy, which we sort of did, but not exactly. Also, for anyone who's wondering how Alexander managed to show up in just the nick of time, vampires can be as resourceful as witches when they have to be, or at least fathers can be as determined as nannies; he'd tracked us by the scent of the murdered park ranger, since, as Fate would have had it, that ranger was one of the good guys, or at least good enough that Alexander's blood fetish let him trail us across the Bay, even though he at first thought it was Melanie's blood he scented. But as they say, it's an ill wind that blows no one any good, and this ghostly wind led Alexander right where he needed to be to save his daughter, or at least his wife's cousin.

Funny that. I'm going to have to find out the guy's name so I can say a few prayers for him. Alexander, always more practical, is going to make sure the man's family is taken care of. Vampires know all about blood money, and with the Gorian's, it's a longstanding tradition.

Then of course there's the matter of blood, and money, and so long as I'm able to send Mister Mistoffelees to liberate dairy products which I can then transubstantiate into the blood of holy innocents, Alexander is willing to forgive me almost anything. Including

slapping Melanie in front of him, even if this is what I had to do to break the rose-colored glasses, thank-you-very-much Jodilyn Blake, and with *that* sort of catch worked into the charm, all I can say is that the spell will need some serious work before it's let anywhere near the arsenal of the Magickal Nannies Guild.

As for the MNG, well, I still haven't gotten my membership card or the invitation to the monthly tea, but I have done my stint as a member of the Fates, so I suppose it comes to pretty much the same thing. The Fata Morgana are supposed to show up at christenings and so on, the same as Faerie Godmothers, but all the same, I've decided to hang up my shawl, at least for the time being.

Norna says that's because I'm "One of the responsible ones," which I've said myself, at the beginning of this business, and which is why I was given the mantle of the Fates to start with. It's also why I've been allowed to hang it up. I have responsibilities. Specifically two small children, their vampiric father, and their assorted neurotic second cousins. Norna and Cleo don't have those sorts of obligations, and as such, they can turn their attentions to greater concerns, while with me....

Well, if anything, call me a Boutique Fate. Once I finish dealing with the problems in my lap, I can turn my eyes to the world at large and fixing the grand Tapestry of Creation. But for right now, I've got all the trouble I can deal with, or at least all the trouble I want to deal with.

Let me also say that Blackrose is an absolute slut, and I'm grateful for it. She took one look at Brandon Kearny and his... remarkable attributes... and decided she liked what she saw and woe to any woman who stood in her way. After an afternoon of comforting and consoling him about what he'd suffered at the hands and spells of that *horrible bitch Penny*, she got him wrapped around her little finger and I think into her bed. And as I said of Jodi Blake, Blackrose is a braver woman than I am, Gunga Din, and certainly a kinkier one. But then again, Rose is one of those girls who's into status, and Brandon Kearny is a lot more to brag about than just some rock on your finger. Plus, if she can build up his ego and personal self-esteem

(especially after I sort of ran them through a food processor), then all the better. Particularly if she makes him happy with the way he is right now, since that will save me a world of guilt, or at least spare me whiny phone calls and a load of magickal research, since aside from Isis's spell to fashion a new naughty-bit out of clay and breathe life into it (and now *there's* an enchantment that appeals to the prurient interest), I haven't been able to find a thing that would undo what I accidentally did, short of a curse to give Blackrose's new boyfriend the opposite problem, which I'm certain he would think even worse (and I know she certainly would). And anyway, Brandon and Blackrose both dance better than I ever will, so I suppose I should wish them every happiness, including the *Kama Sutra* coffee maker, and leave it at that.

Then there's the matter of Paddy. While Jodi was having her hour in the sun, or at least her hour as Sun Queen, and the Fates were busy sorting out the threads of the Tapestry, our favorite psychotic bunny-boy up and slipped out the back—having kept the keys to absolute rulership over Brandon's body via his sneaky faerie promise. Unless, of course, he sold that to Blackrose while I wasn't looking and that explains the state of her and Brandon's relationship. Whatever. Either he did, and that's done with, or else he tries another trick or two and Blackrose threatens to make *hasenpfeffer* out of him if he doesn't let her boyfriend go. She's that sort of girl, and I'd pay for box seats for a fight between the two of them.

Worst case, Paddy owes me a favor or three, and when I catch up with him, I'll get him to turn over his hold on Brandon. That simple. There's got to be some way to blackmail a faerie into it, and failing that, I can probably tell him I need it for some grand trick on his cousin. Which I'll probably do anyway once I give Brandon a bit of mental health leave. Call me a ruthless bitch, but one thing I learned from Jodi is the matter of debts and people owing you, and while Brandon may not owe me, he certainly owes Kate, even if she forgives him, and she's too nice to ever ask for anything more.

What I'm beating around the bush about is that while I can't pull off a resurrection so far as I know, and Alexander certainly can't,

there is the matter of the rites of Orpheus and Eurydice and the fact that you can't channel the spirit of Destiny without learning how to delegate. And Brandon already knows how to sing, he can enter the spirit world on his own, and, well, if he really wants to atone for his crimes, it's what Sister Mary taught me in the second grade: It's not enough to say you're sorry, or even to be forgiven, unless you do everything in your power to put right what you did wrong. Brandon loved Kate, even if he did accidentally kill her, and while I don't know whether a werewolf can ransom someone back from Heaven, it certainly can't hurt to try. And if an old-fashioned Catholic guilt trip isn't sufficient, I'll lay it on him as a *geas* if I have to, once I brush up on my Irish folklore. Come to think of it, that wouldn't be a bad idea for Paddy either. After all, if the two of them can't bury the hatchet after the witch sends them on an epic quest, then there's no hope for either of Kate's cousins. And I'd just love to see the scene when they get to the Pearly Gates: *St. Peter is at his desk when a pooka and a werewolf show up...*

Finally, there's the matter of poor Deiter. I asked Pete out to the house, but even our coven's resident necromancer couldn't do anything, or really, said there wasn't anything more that could be done. Deiter had died a murderer, served as a Tool of Evil ever since, but in the end, had martyred himself to save a little girl, or at least to put out a bitch queen's eyes, and if that didn't count as good and perfectly holy deed, it was at very least human, and deserving of rest and a few kind words.

We considered any number of possible forms of burial, but in the end, the ocean seemed most appropriate, along with one last taste of flight, without any reliance on murder or even secondhand black magick. Call me a hopeless romantic, or at least a Goth. We said the words, the children gave him flowers, then I wrapped him in a silk handkerchief and tossed him as high and far as I could off the cliffs near the house, spinning over the ocean as the handkerchief came loose.

There was a brief moment while both hung there, suspended in space. Then Deiter plummeted to the ocean below. And then, just

a moment before the last of his mortal remains hit the water, a crane swooped down, snatching him up in its beak and flying off with him.

I was almost ready to cry out in protest when I noticed a faint tint in the feathers, a heavenly color, powder blue, like the sky and the simple wishes of children. An origami crane, one one-thousandth of a wish, of innocence and the hope for something better.

The bird flew higher, out to sea, and into the setting sun, until we at last lost sight of it.

I suppose that's part of all of it, of the way of serendipity. No piece of magick is ever wasted, no deed you do is ever forgotten, and if you just trust in Fate, everything will turn out alright in the end.



*Here ends the First Book of Shadows of
Penelope Anne Drizkowski
and with it her Apprenticeship in
The Hidden Arts and Arcane Sciences*

*Completed at Nightfall
Sunday, the Fifth of May
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