

Beyond Common Magic

by

Jesse W. Brogan

Disciple

This is a fantasy, not a statement of faith. While each person reads a bit of themselves into a work such as this, there is no reason to confuse the work with the beliefs or many suspensions of belief that occur every day. This is simply written as a spiritual thriller, a story of suspense and intrigue that is to be enjoyed.

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By **Jesse W. Brogan**

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Author's Perspective:

I listen to the fantasies of today, and they center around power. The movies that draw in dollars deal with it, and with people who have it. Power is the popular goal of today.

I looked for a source of power, and found that it was really a second-rate commodity. It answers to another; it answers to authority. The source of authority is God almighty, who with his word upholds the universe.

Any fool can have power, but the one who is effective is the one who directs the fool with the power to get things done.

What is a prayer, but a dream of possibilities put into words and feelings.

That is what describes this story.

Unlike a dream, which is essentially private, this story is published. It enables a reader to share in the dream. Unlike a prayer, which is only for the moment, this story is enhanced by much thought and preserved in writing to be enjoyed to the full.

Introduction:

The witch utters her spell, saying the just the right words, accompanied by just the right gestures and potions, and things are set in motion. The sorcerer looks deep into his crystal, and sees into a far place. We call such things magic

The hero of the Western Movie whips out his gun and fires. The villain, well out of reach of our hero, falls dead. He is unable to continue his dastardly efforts to seize his neighbor's property. A man looks at the video screen, and he sees what the camera sees a thousand miles away. Is this also magic?

A politician says just the right words, accompanied by just the right gestures, and the wealth of a nation are soon put at his disposal. Just where does effectiveness end and magic begin?

I find that it is more a matter of perspective and understanding than of any real difference in the world. When we understand a little of what is happening about us, we call it science. When we do not, we call it magic.

This was brought home to me when my son, at age three, discovered light switches. This was when he learned that he too could make wonderful things happen by the simplest of movements. Instead of a witch whistling up a wind storm, he could control important characteristics of his environment by operating a finger lever. The movement of that little switch was how he could, with an insignificant effort, achieve a great effect.

What did he know of circuits and light bulbs. All he knew was that when he made just the right "adjustment" of the switch, suddenly the lights came on! To him, it was magic of the most potent kind. It was common magic that he could perform whenever he desired.

When men know how to say and do things that yield seemingly unconnected results, we call it magic. When it happens regularly, it is common magic. The man pushes the gas pedal on his car, and it

leaps forward, carrying the man faster than the swiftest animal can run. It is a common magic. A cook mixes just the right ingredients in a special way, and the result is raised bread, something different than anything that was used to make it. Is this common magic also?

In this tale, we have a different view of common magic, a special ability in certain people to have effects that seem out of all proportion to what they do. I call it common magic, for these people can always make it happen.

For the Christian, there is another magic that will never be explained short of the end of all days. It is the act of God, an effectiveness that goes beyond all that men might understand. The act of creation is magic of the highest type.

Jesus breaks bread, and gives it to the hungry. Thousands are fed, and there is more food left over than was there at the beginning. Jesus lays hands on the cripple, and he rises up and walks away on legs that are whole.

To put it simply, there is a level of effectiveness that is beyond the powers given to mortal man; it is effectiveness reserved for the one to who fashioned the world. There is a magic beyond common magic.

As men, we do what we are able; but there is always another authority dealing with things on a level we cannot control, or even foresee. There is another who sets the limits of human effectiveness; and He is not bound by these limits.

As all fantasies, this one is just a dream. The major difference is that this magical fantasy is written down for your enjoyment. Enter into a time when there is a different common magic in the world of men; it is a time when the gifted are able to make things happen in ways that are not common today. Enter into a time when reality itself seems to yield to the determined efforts of men.

The gifted are able to control many things in this world that God has made for us; but there is a change coming. The gifted work to fulfill their own desires, but this change is of a different spirit. The gifted are not ultimately in charge. There is a higher authority. There is the one who sets the limits of man, and even the time of common magic is but a season that He sets as any other.

Chapter 1

Evelyn was bone weary, as she had been for so many years now. Even her extensive gift was not able to ease the feeling.

And yet, she knew she could not stop. She had no choice but to walk the path to its end. It was her own path to walk, and she had to go where it led her. It was fate, and to deny your own path was to walk toward a death that went beyond death.

Funny that it should lead to Marcie Kendel's family. A lesser sister, but one of the few who had promise beyond the gift itself.

Evelyn smiled at that. She was self-confident in her mastery of her art and filled with the gift of magical potentials. There had been so many lesser sisters who wished that they could have what she had. She had watched as many less-gifted sisters wasted themselves by ignoring their own calling. Marcie had been one of the few who really had a feeling for where the world was going.

Marcie had always been the giver, the patient and caring young lady who gave because giving was so much a part of who she was. She never asked anything in return, because that was not the spirit that drove her.

Looking back, Evelyn was sure that Marcie would have changed little in the many years since they had last seen each other. Evelyn let the memories flood back to her, even her own disappointment as she realized that their paths lay in different directions.

She sighed within herself. It had been so many years past. Marcie had gone on to raise a family as only a gifted mother could.

Evelyn had to wonder what beautiful children she must have.

And now there was something with the children that required a senior sister's attention. Evelyn wondered again what it could be that had called her to the side of her old friend.

She was getting near to her Marcie.

She had to think of Marcie that way, as if she somehow had an ownership in her. Evelyn could sense the feel that was Marcie with unusual ease as she turned onto her street. This ease of contact was remarkable even for her; there was still a strong bond of some sort between them. She tuned to that familiar feeling that was Marcie and gloried once more in that still-familiar presence. It was less than a mile now.

* * *

Marcie Brennen, formerly Marcie Kendel, was both pleased and a little worried. Evelyn had responded to her letter, and was actually coming. Evelyn was coming to her home.

Sure, she had known Evelyn long ago; but that was before she became a senior sister, before she had been promoted to the most senior position. Marcie had known Evelyn when she had been no more than a good friend, a mentor and a most powerful witch.

Marcie remembered that curious sense of balance that had attracted her to Evelyn. It was something that had always impressed her as even more remarkable than her most obvious gift in magic. It was this balance that had permitted Evelyn entrance into the Senior Sisterhood.

Evelyn always seemed to know what was going on around her, and how she fit into it. She was always in the right place. She always seemed to make the right friends. Those who opposed her invariably began to fade away. Truly, she had proven herself a most remarkable woman.

She would be much older now, but she was coming. She was coming and perhaps, Marcie pondered, she could tell something about Paul.

There was the crunch of stone as the taxi pulled into the driveway. It had to be Evelyn. Marcie corrected herself, it had to be the Most Senior Sister.

It was very difficult to realize that the likable and personable woman she had known so intimately those many years before was now a personage of great respect and position. She would have to watch herself so as not to give offense.

She glanced out the window, and Evelyn emerged from the taxi. She was looking old and shriveled, but otherwise seeming to be well. It was good to see her again; and Marcie's heart went out to her. She

moved to the door, first purposefully and then with greater abandon. There were so many wonderful old memories forcing themselves to her attention. There were so many things they had shared. There were so many good times.

* * *

Evelyn checked her surroundings as the cab came to a stop. Marcie was in the House, and she could also sense the gifts of the two young teenagers upstairs. Several blocks to the South she also felt of another sister with the gift, but nothing remarkable. It was a quiet enough neighborhood. Nothing threatened, so she let the eager cabby help her out of the taxi. It took a lot of her attention to do even this simple task. She remembered with only mild regret how uncaring she had been in her youth. It had all seemed so easy then.

The feeling of care and love that was Marcie came flooding out to greet her, and she knew that her young protégé was fulfilled. There was no hate or bitterness in her, only the calm that came from following one's true path. This certainly was going to be a pleasant visit.

She felt Marcie's sudden reserve. It was a response that was not at all unusual considering her position in the sisterhood. Knowing its source, she reached out herself in the memory of those good times when they were both so much younger. She reached out with her heart as much as with her special sense in a greeting that could not be denied or misconstrued.

She saw Marcie as she came from the door, now a curious mixture of both the girl and the woman. The youth, she accepted as the greeting in honor of the many times they had shared. The woman was the accomplished parent who both encouraged and restrained the child in her. Marcie was a wonderful tapestry.

They embraced as only two old friends could, with a sure knowledge of acceptance. It brought back feelings of how she had missed Marcie when she had gotten married and moved away. How long it had been, and yet it was somehow right for both of them. Fate had steered them in different directions.

The home was somehow also Marcie, as Evelyn knew it would be. Though it had been picked up and cleaned, there was indication that it had been done only recently. Marcie was someone who lived in her house, not for it. She had always been more inclined to be a homemaker than a housekeeper.

As she was ushered into the house, Evelyn couldn't help but feel the curiosity of two pair of eyes that watched her every move. Marcie's training and presence were in them. Her girls had the gift in reasonable measure, only slightly more in the younger of them, but nothing really remarkable.

Evelyn noticed the cross on the wall with a feeling of relief. The feel of the presence of the Christian faith had always been a part of Marcie. She had followed her faith and it had always served her well.

Marcie, who had obviously seen her interest, told her, "Yes, I have kept your advice and have lived my faith. Like most of what you told me, it has done well by me."

"As you know," Evelyn replied with a greater depth of feeling than even she wished to admit, "I am pretty much excluded by my position from following that path. Lord, I miss it; but I survive on what I keep in my heart."

The children were watching her again, but she forgot them for the moment and just enjoyed the company of her long separated friend, renewing a deep and abiding companionship that her office generally denied to her these days. It was almost like being that younger witch again; like being someone who didn't have to watch her every step. It was good to be free and she meant to enjoy every moment of it.

When the time was right, Marcie brought the subject to the point of her letter. There was something about one of her children that had brought her to write to her old friend after all these years.

Evelyn reached out again, and there they were. "Which of the girls is it?" she asked. "The younger, I suppose."

Marcie had that same roguish smile that she had when she had been a young lady. It was as if she had gotten some prank past her old mentor. "Neither of them. I wrote to you to come and see my son Paul."

Evelyn reached out again, but this time with greater concentration and vision. There was no other force in the house.

It was only when she looked for people that she found him, the young lad in an upstairs bedroom reading a book.

"Remarkable," she said under her breath, and meant it. The boy had no detectable aura at all. He was so devoid of the gift that he

was difficult to find by its use. And yet there was something about him that....

She realized she couldn't even finish the thought.

"Could I meet this curious child of yours? I see now why I am here."

While Marcie called up to Paul and asked him to come down, Evelyn took stock of the situation. Her path lead to this child, that was clear enough. It even brought some sense to why she had been so powerfully guided to young Marcie those many years before. Some more of the early pieces of her life were beginning to fit into the complex pattern that she had become.

It was fascinating. Her whole life had been ordered for her from the beginning, and she was only now starting to see the pattern of it. Truly, she had not been gifted for her own benefit, but as part of some higher scheme.

* * *

The coming wave is a big one. We know because we feel the undertow that proceeds it sucking at the world; and there is such a flow of forces that the very fabric of reality is drawn along. This great flow is the beginning of magic

There is a flow in the world of men, and it is as restless as the sea. It has ups and downs that travel with it. And these are the changes in the flow that move through the world of men like waves. They move through time as well, causing changes to all things as they pass.

Are they irresistible?

The answer is "yes."

Are they unstoppable?

Again, it is the same. Many waves have come and gone and none have been hindered in their passage.

Such forces are a part of the flow of life; a flow from a source that sent it on its way at the beginning of time. It follows wave upon wave, having its way in the world of flesh.

An earlier wave passed. As it touched the Earth, it lifted Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden and into the world. Long after, another wave left Noah and his family alone to repopulate the world.

Still another brought Abraham into relation with God, and the backside of the wave saw the enslavement of the children of Israel in Egypt. It was a wave that saw the exodus of the children of Abraham, and saw the Hebrew people into their Promised Land. Its backwash carried them again into captivity. Yet another wave came with the Christ, and mighty Rome fell in the valley that followed its passage.

We see the waves that flow across the ocean, and they appear in the rising and the falling of the water. A man strikes an iron rod that is in the water, and a sound wave passes out from it; but with no rising of the water.

What then is a wave? While we can see its effect, the wave itself has neither form nor substance.

We see the river and the water flows endlessly toward the sea. But then we see the flame beneath a pan, and the heat flows through it leaving the pan unchanged.

What then is a flow? Once more, we can see its effect, but the flow is something different than the effect that it causes.

There is a flow in the world, a continuation; and this flow accepts no denial. In the affairs of men, it is like a giant mid-ocean roller. The cork bobbing upon the surface suffers no harm. It is safe so long as it rides above the sea. But an anchored ship will stand against the flow and will feel its real force.

This flow in the world can be withheld but for the briefest moment before one has to yield. What is a man, but a cork upon the surface that is lifted here, and is dropped there as the wave passes.

Many other waves have come and gone, and another is building. The time for change comes again. Its first signs have already been seen.

On Earth, it is a time of ebb, when the undertow of the coming wave is sucking at the forces in this world.

The flow is reversed, it is a forerunner for the wave that is on the way. Powers are in motion; powers that can be stayed only for the moment. But such a wave will not be diverted; it is coming as surely as the night follows the setting sun.

We enter a time of preparation for the wave.

If only men were truly aware, they would have prepared themselves throughout their generations. But then, this wave has already

been many generations coming, and men do not understand. How can mere humans prepare for the wave that will carry them higher than they have ever been before?

* * *

Even more clearly than his sisters, Paul had felt the Most Senior Sister coming down the street. For him, it seemed a matter of only minor curiosity. He knew that Betty and Carol would be at the window whispering things to each other, but he didn't want to have any part of it. He went back to the book he was reading, and the disturbing inanity of the plot. There were entirely too many logical inconsistencies. Still he stubbornly read on.

He stayed with it until he felt that something searching for him. It was like his sisters, but something more, something powerful and yet not threatening.

He felt it touch him, and then lightly withdraw.

There was gentleness in it. There was something that refused to intrude upon him.

It was so unusual, after his daily dealings with Betty and Carol that he was interested in spite of his resolve to stay away from his Mom's old friend.

His Mother's voice called him down, and he went willingly. He found that he wanted to meet this curious person.

* * *

Evelyn was able to note some of the child's responses as he came down the stairs, and remarked to Marcie. "He has amazing sensitivity, even for someone who is rich in the gift. I am sure he felt me."

Marcie replied, "I know. The girls drive him to distraction thinking at him. He has had to build up some unusual defenses."

Evelyn noted that the boy was Marcie's youngest. He was only about 10 years old. He was spindly and bony from top to bottom; not at all a pretty child, but with an air about him that was friendly enough.

She addressed him directly, "Paul. Your mother has asked me here to meet you. My name is Evelyn."

She had difficulty feeling any response from the child, but refrained from imposing herself. The young lad was obviously a strong sensitive, and would probably resent attention on that level.

Paul seemed a bit confused by this show of personal interest, and neither moved nor responded. Marcie, always the one to find the right word, said, "Paul, I asked the Most Senior Sister here to meet with you and the girls. You should be polite."

It made Evelyn smile to hear these words so common to all mothers. Paul obviously interpreted the smile as something friendly for him and advanced.

She took his hand, being careful not to reach out with the gift, and told him somberly, "I'm most happy to meet you, young Paul."

His mumbled response was neutral but not impolite, so she asked, "Paul, I am a sensitive of sorts, and your Mother asked me here to find what I might see in you.

"Would it be all right if I were to look?"

For a time, there was no response at all, but a feeling of some suspicion. Then Paul looked to Marcie, who nodded that it was her desire.

He just said, "Yeah."

She smiled and thanked him, and placed her other old hand on top of his, feeling the softness of the skin that announced his youth. Closing her eyes, she let herself look into the life that was before her.

Had she been younger and less experienced, she would have been surprised in the extreme because there was nothing for her to see. This child's life was closed to her gift. It was as if he had no life at all; but that was certainly not right. He was alive and there was something about him that....

But then again, she couldn't tell what it was.

Where a lesser sister would have stopped, she persevered, looking more deeply into the nothing for what was behind it. Down and down farther into quiet and blackness she looked, seeking something that was - well that was unknown.

It seemed a very long journey through emptiness, but finally she reached the bottom. She reached what made Paul the person that he

was. She found something ultimately startling, a presence both familiar and yet always new.

She knew enough not to try to touch that presence unless it bid her, which it did not. Knowing that her continued intrusion must be extremely disturbing to the sensitive child, she withdrew rapidly and completely.

Coming back up to herself, she opened her eyes and noted that Paul actually had beads of sweat on his brow. It must have been an extremely uncomfortable feeling for him. She wondered how much he actually had sensed of her presence within him, but knew that she could not tell. He was a book that was closed to her, and she had no way to know what he may have seen in her.

She had nothing really to hide, but didn't want to contaminate this new person with her filled-up life.

Still, the fact that he was so closed was valuable information, and she had learned what she was to do. She knew her duty in this, but it could wait a few more minutes.

She knew enough to take care of first things first; she had to attend to the other children or there was going to be hard feelings between them. She smiled to Paul as pleasantly as she felt at him, and thanked him for allowing her to see so much of who he was. By this, she implied to him that he certainly was someone to know. Being a child, he took the statement at face value and left the room feeling quite important. After all, it was the most senior witch in all the world who had smiled at him.

Marcie, who had also seen the need, was already summoning Paul's older sisters to come and meet the grandest witch of all.

After speaking to them in the gift, which delighted the girls to no end and enabled them to work at talking to each other by that means, Evelyn was able to be alone with Marcie once more.

Marcie could hardly contain herself. "Tell me what you see?"

It had that old familiar ring. It hearkened back to a time long ago when she and Marcie had looked together into the hearts of men. How often had Marcie asked that same question, seeking for someone to share her life. "Look, and tell me what you see."

She replied, "I saw very little, actually. But I found a presence in him such as one feels at a healing, and which I have felt in prayer.

“That child is in the Lords hands. I think I will have to speak to your priest. Is it possible for you to arrange for us to talk?”

“I tell you Marcie, that you were right to call me, and I was certainly right to come. There is a power in your boy that is not his own. He is in hands a good deal wiser and stronger than either of ours.

Please see if you can set up a time when I can talk to your clergyman.”

This seemed to please Marcie, who replied, “I told him that you were coming, and he said that he wanted to meet you if it could be arranged. He has heard of your healings.”

Evelyn was pleased by Marcie’s anticipation. She had already arranged it, and just needed to call Reverend Markam.

While they waited, Evelyn related her experience with Paul to his somewhat anxious mother. Paul, it appeared, was being set to some path which was not open to the gift, and which involved his relationship with faith.

They were back to pleasant conversation when the bell rang, announcing the Reverend Markam. Marcie led him in and introduced him to Evelyn. Then she stepped out to give them a moment, promising to make some more coffee.

Evelyn found him to be a bit of a surprise also, for he had no great aversion to her presence. In fact, he seemed genuinely pleased to meet her. He made no secret that he was fascinated with faith healings, and felt that all such were of God. “Great healings,” he stated, “were much akin to creation itself.”

Briefly, Evelyn and Marcie related to him what had been found in Paul, and Evelyn concluded that Paul would very likely need some unusual support. He probably would not accept external guidance in faith, as he had internal guidance surpassing anything that any man could give him. She noted, however, that it seemed wise to make sure that he had the scriptures available to him at all times.

The discussion then naturally shifted to the relation between witchcraft and the Christian Church. While they agreed that there was a definite prohibition against being a witch, there was certainly no prohibition against faith healing, even though that was a recognized area within witchcraft.

Evelyn was enjoying the discussion, and found the Rev. Markam to be well suited to the purpose of supporting Paul. She was glad to spend a little time with him, even though his understanding was somewhat restricted for her taste.

She was even happier that she could provide some comfort to Marcie, to an old and dear friend. As years had passed, Evelyn had come to realize that supporting others was both the highest and most rewarding of human endeavors.

* * *

The Bishop spoke. "I have been hearing things that disturb me."

The Reverend Markam just gave that maddening smile that he always seemed to have with him. "You know very well that I had tea with The Most Senior Sister of witches. A delightful lady if you are interested."

The Bishop was taken mildly aback by the directness of the response. "I met her once myself, thank you."

He did not elaborate on his experiences, but went forward, "You know the official stance of the Church on the issue of witchcraft and magic."

"Of course," he responded, "there is hardly a secret in it."

"I don't think a smart answer to me is proper, John. I am your superior, and this has been brought officially to my attention."

"You know me well enough to know that I am not interested in causing you any grief, but I do need something in the way of an official answer. Your meeting requires some explanation or I will be forced by my office to take disciplinary action. I am not free to ignore this."

The Reverend Markam replied, "I would respond that God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. I am just a pastor to those who call upon me, not a judge."

The Bishop continued, "I'm afraid that I'll need more than that this time. We aren't talking about another member of your flock, but an outsider who just happens to be the queen of the witches. By her office, she is anathema."

"What is your problem with that?" Reverend Markam replied. "Even Jesus spoke to Satan in the wilderness. Whatever ill this

senior witch may have done, she certainly isn't any worse than old scratch himself."

The Bishop paused for a moment, and looked upward as he thought. Then he smiled, "Yes, perhaps that will do."

"Now, just what did the old witch have to say? She doesn't go anywhere without a reason."

Chapter 2

Before completing the work, David Dearman checked the spell book one last time. What he was attempting to do was dangerous in the extreme, and he wanted to be as well protected as possible. He knew that he was dealing with powers that he could direct, but could not really control. He had to be very careful.

He rechecked the runes in the text with those that were chalked around the circle on the floor. If his magic circle did not hold, it could be disaster for him.

He checked the windows and doors one last time, and they also seemed to be perfect. Even if something went wrong, the damage would be limited to the house, and would not lead to a breach of the space between the nether world and reality.

He read the final spell to himself, and then read it again. There was nothing that was better than the recorded experience of an old practitioner for handling such an effort. All changes were dangerous.

It looked right, and it felt right; so he was encouraged to proceed. He sat and prepared himself for the effort, gathering his grasp of the gift and summoning all the considerable force of his will to the task.

Lifting the steel poker, he spoke the words under his breath. He watched in some amusement as the temperature of the tip rose until the poker was white hot. It was a magic heat, one that would burn nothing but flesh.

With a final word of command, he threw the poker down into the circle, where it struck deeply into the wood of the floor and vibrated there. The spell was complete.

Dave gave the command to appear, and he could feel it coming.

At first, there was only a feeling, a feeling of evil, a feeling of panic. What was coming had such a frightening power that even the shadow of its presence contained terror for all creatures of flesh and blood. Dave hoped that the magic circle would be enough to hold it.

It was too late to do anything about it, so Dave waited for the full manifestation. He added his considerable personal will to the command of coming that was drawing it. He fought the feeling of panic that something might go wrong, and he waited.

Then it was there, and it had form of a sort. There was a moment of exultation as Dave realized that he had succeeded where so many had failed. He had called a powerful demon from the nether world into the real world. He had broken through, and he had this most-dangerous creature to use as he willed.

Then he looked into those eyes, and he knew a moment of real terror. The power, the malevolence, the hatred and the despise rocked him. There was nothing even remotely human about the creature.

The creature's voice bore out what the eyes seemed to say. It was filled with contempt, "Well mortal, you have called me here. What do you want before I shred you."

The calm certainty of the promise of destruction was one of the things of which the spell book warned. Demons had no sense of time, they could wait forever to get their revenge. Everything mortal was just a temporary inconvenience.

He spoke with all of the authority he could command in his voice. "When I wish to direct you, I will need no urging." It sounded a lot weaker than he would have liked.

"I have summoned you here to have a good look at you, and to judge for myself what you might be able to do for me."

The creature roared and lunged for Dave with a blood curdling rage, only to be stopped at the limits of the circle. Then it settled back down and spoke, "It appears that your death will be delayed for a time, but I can wait. Soon, though, I will have your flesh beneath my nails, and I will taste your eyes."

"This is pointless," Dave replied. "There is nothing that you can do for me at this time. I will summon you again when I wish you.

"Go back!"

The creature did not move, or make any indication that it would. It just sat there watching him with those vicious eyes.

Dave watched for several seconds until it was clear that the creature would not go on its own. He spoke the words to send it back and put his considerable willpower behind it.

With a flash and an incredibly foul smell, it was gone.

Dave examined the circle carefully, it seemed to be unbroken so it was safe to assume that the demon had actually been driven back to the other world. He noted that the poker had fallen flat, and the hole it had made in the floor was no longer there. The doorway had been closed.

Dave fell back on his couch in exhaustion. Dealing with something like that was a strain. It left him feeling weak and almost impotent. The demon was so much more powerful than even he had hoped. It was dangerous. He would have to be very careful to keep it under control.

Still, it was also a rush; and he felt the exhilaration again. He had been able to get the magical monster to do his will. This was the sort of magic that separated the serious practitioner from the amateurs. He had done it!

Finally, he knew that he would be well served to make sure that the door could not be opened by anyone else, even by accident. He got a sponge, and carefully washed off all of the chalk markings throughout the entire house. Now it was his secret alone.

* * *

Teen years had not been unkind to Paul. He had the watchful care of two sisters. They both adored him and deviled him with equal zest. He had a mother who watched over him, occasionally interfering to keep Betty and Carol crossing the line with their magical pranks. He also had a most interesting acquaintance in Evelyn, the chief witch in the senior coven who seemed determined to be a personal friend to him. He welcomed this as well.

The bony awkward boy called Paul Brennen had grown up to be a bony and awkward young man. His sharp features were not unhandsome, but his large feet and hands didn't seem to work together.

He was a quiet and almost sullen young man with a great sense of privacy about him. He had no close friends. To Marcie's concern, he had few friends at all. He seemed to have little need for anyone else. He was not a social creature.

What he lacked in social or athletic ability, he more than made up for in his lively and active intellect. He had only a few grades below an "A," and those were courses like Physical Education. He was a most excellent student in grade school, and had little trouble being selected for a full scholarship to study in the state university. This was his natural choice, as it was also where his sisters were studying, and he very much enjoyed their company.

Finding himself even more independent at school than he had been at home, Paul had thrown himself into his studies with a zest that disturbed all those around him. Not only did he complete his assignments as fast as anyone could, but he kept right on studying, delving into areas left untouched by the professors. He was providing himself lessons from more advanced courses.

He had little social life beyond the occasional outings, where Betty and Carol dragged him away from his books long enough for him to take them out for one event or another. All in all, he liked it that way. He was just as happy as he could be with things the way they were.

Everything was going quite well until that day in the student union. Paul was taking one of his rare breaks for a cup of coffee with a few of his classmates when he was sighted by one Virginia Kaufman, a transfer student who just happened to be sitting with Betty and Carol.

Ginny first expressed her curiosity by thinking at Paul to get his attention. She wanted a better look at him. Much to her surprise, nothing happened. It was as if the boy hadn't felt anything.

Then she really looked at him through the gift, and found herself looking at nothing. His aura was so flat that it wasn't there at all. He had no gift whatever - a most peculiar situation.

Ginny looked up and saw her new friends Betty and Carol looking at her in puzzlement at her obvious lack of attention. In her embarrassment, she called their attention to the curious boy who had no ability at all.

They both laughed at her, and told her who he was.

Naturally, they were gleeful in their description of their little brother. By this, they assured that he would be attractive by putting him out of easy reach.

They were especially happy to be matchmakers, because Ginny was a gifted witch in her own right, and they both wanted to see what would happen if some other girl tried to reach their little Paul. Also, they were both genuinely fond of their brother, and wanted him to be with one of their friends if he was with anyone.

Carol said, "Watch this, I know how to get to him." She concentrated on a vision where she and Betty were waking Paul up early in the morning with a glass of ice water. Even Betty was a little taken aback by the realism of the feel of the cold cubes. It was a masterful vision, and one that Paul could not ignore.

His head snapped up and looked around for his tormentor; and he had no difficulty finding her. Carol motioned to him to come and sit with them, and he went. He was always glad to spend some time with them, and also they were sitting with a fascinatingly pretty girl.

As soon as he met Ginny, he realized that she was the one who had been thinking at him, a fact that immediately told him that she was a witch. Of course, growing up with Betty and Carol had inured him to most such intrusions. He had been forced to learn how to ignore psychic contacts in order to maintain his own sanity. To get to him, the contact had to go far beyond idle curiosity.

Meeting Ginny opened up whole new areas where Paul was interested in being sensitive. She was beautiful, and she was bright. And better still, she seemed to be genuinely interested in him. That was something unique, as he wasn't the sort of person who normally drew the attention of young ladies.

He suffered one moment of doubt from the fact that his sisters were there, and they would not be above pulling a stunt like this just to amuse themselves at his expense, but Ginny herself soon put that fear to rest. She was really interested in knowing him.

* * *

Marcie was a little worried about her children, especially the two girls. She knew that witches tended to be sexually promiscuous, and have stormy personal lives.

It was true that she had seen no signs of this in her girls, but they were away at school where she couldn't keep an eye on them.

She had always hoped that they would find the sort of peace that she had found, but only time would tell. They had no steady boyfriends, and they insisted on messing around with black magic.

All she could do was to warn them, and to see that they kept an eye on each other.

It brought a smile to her. She had been very clever indeed when she had urged them on Paul, asking them to take care of him. Their sense of responsibility kept them so busy that they didn't have much time to get into trouble. The three were often to be found together.

She read the double letter again, feeling the girls' delight that they had fixed Paul up with a witch. It seemed that the two were enjoying their duty to the full.

Marcie knew that she had done all that she could do by herself, and bowed her head in prayer for what she could not do. There were so many dangers for sensitive children these days.

* * *

The years after Evelyn's first visit had continued to be good for both Evelyn and Marcie. They had begun writing shortly thereafter, and Evelyn had kept a watchful eye over the whole family.

Now Marcie held the coin-sized wooden disk gingerly in her hand as she read the letter again. Evelyn's writing had become more and more shaky as old age had its way with her, but she was certainly not getting old in her mind. Still though, Marcie had half a thought that she could be getting senile in her compulsion concerning Paul.

Dear Marcie,

It was so good to hear from you again, like a little fresh air in a stuffy room. Following you and your family has been a blessing to me. It keeps me young to watch your children grow.

I know you must be curious about the remarkable little trinket I have enclosed. I came across it some years ago in a little

curio shop in England, where its properties drew my attention immediately. I doubt that it came to me by accident, though I have had no use for it myself.

The story had a bit of unreality to it, or at least something left unsaid. There was no way that such an object could ever go unnoticed. A good sensitive would feel so strong a talisman from miles away.

Marcie was loath to close her hand on the wooden disk; it fairly crackled with the psychic power it harbored. It was incredibly powerful and yet it seemed benign. It was filled with some powerful white magic, but without any obvious or specific direction for application.

Marcie knew Evelyn; and because of the source, she trusted that the amulet would not be harmful. If it was dangerous in any way, Evelyn knew her friend's limitations and would have warned her.

But it was so substantial in its power. The very fact that Evelyn had sent it meant that there were some other powers involved. Marcie, who was usually pretty unshakable, felt a twinge of concern for her children.

She continued reading.

It has come to me that the coin should be given to Paul, at least for the time being. I sense something that is focusing around him, and I am concerned that he may not be up to protecting himself. This should bridge the gap, and preserve him until the threat passes.

He remains an enigma to me. I recently looked for him again; and he is as closed to the gift today as that first

time I met him. I have had my thoughts on him, however, and will continue to keep him under my protection as much as I can without interfering.

I will soon surrender the Most Senior Sister position to another, as my age is finally overtaking me. I know who it will be through the gift, but I have managed to keep it to myself. I have told no one.

I tried your recipe for hot and sour chicken, and was most pleased with the result. I shared it with some of the other sisters who also send their thanks.

May God continue to bless you and yours.

Evelyn

Marcie scribbled a note to Paul and enclosed the coin, letting him know who had provided it. This continued a sort of running commentary that developed with the three of them; It continued with letters when Paul had gone off to school. Marcie was nervous about the whole thing, but she had a great deal of faith in Evelyn, and in the feelings that they had shared over the past years. Evelyn had become a de facto grandmother to the kids. Even her husband felt that it was a good influence, though he was very nervous about magic, and stayed far away from Evelyn.

Chapter 3

Evelyn didn't have to call the coven into being, they gathered on their own. It had already happened on five previous occasions during her time with the Senior Sisterhood, and it had always happened just the same.

They all felt the tremor in the gift, and even the new inductee knew what had to be done. They gathered around the table and Evelyn took her place at the head of the nine. The power was with them.

The three junior members formed a separate ring and called up the spell that would find the source of the difficulty. They did not have to know where it was in any but the magic sense. With such power being used, they would find it as surely as a compass pointed to magnetic North.

They formed the door, without opening it, and donned their robes. They wanted to step through quickly and all at once. They had strength in their coordinated efforts that would not be easily resisted by any coven.

They opened the whole wall, and all of them stepped into the little room where three witches hovered around a magic ring. Something there was definitely not right.

The three practitioners, two older women and a gifted youngster, were not happy about having their close opened and they turned as one to do something about it. The sight of the robes was enough to give them second thought. Every witch knew of the senior circle, even those who had never stood in their presence.

The three settled back into their places. The strongest of them, who was marvelously gifted, asked. "Why have you intruded here?" It was close to being a challenge, but not quite. One didn't try to take on the whole senior coven, no matter how strong you felt.

Evelyn, as Most Senior Sister, was the speaker. "Your work has called us." She had a way about her that disarmed even as it

reprimanded. It was stated without rancor and with a sure knowledge of the force behind it. “We have come to protect the sisterhood.

“What you have created is a threat to all of us if it ever leaves that circle.”

At a motion from the one, the other two moved aside to show the elfin creature within. “We have created no evil, only a creature of the light. Surely you don’t object to this.”

Evelyn almost cried. They had tried so hard to do what was right; and the creature they had made was beauty and righteousness itself. All that work, and it had to be destroyed.

With a motion, Evelyn bid the sisters wait; and she approached the circle. “It is yet incomplete. Some of it is missing.

“See,” she said, pointing out the empty place with the gift.

The three witches looked at it in obvious amazement. How could they have left such an opening in their creation? It had a hole into the nether world.

Evelyn continued, “We came to see that hole closed before the ring is broken.”

It was the gentlest way to put the situation to rights, and it left no scars on powerful witches that might cause later difficulties. Evelyn was acting on behalf of all those in the Senior Sisterhood. Her ability to handle situations like this was one of the reasons that she had been universally offered the Most Senior position.

“In a sense, we have come to help you close it if you cannot.”

Her delivery definitely had a challenge in it, and the other witch picked it up. “The three of us are quite able to finish what we start.”

Evelyn accepted it as a mark of respect for their obvious talents, “We will wait, then.

“I for one enjoy watching a good work.”

The three set to the task with all the skill and artistry by which they had created the being; but try as they could, the hole would not close.

Finally, the leader declared to her two companions, “There is something on the other side that is connected. We won’t be able to close it unless we bring it through.”

So saying, they set to work again, and it popped through easily.

It was a demon of such vile nature and powers that even they shrunk back from it.

Evelyn approached the trio. "You cannot have one without the other. If you loose one of them, the other can follow at any time. That is why we are here."

The leader was clearly upset. "You mean you knew this all the time and let us struggle for hours."

She responded, "Would you have believed us if we told you? There are some things that every able intellect must find out for herself.

"We are just the guardians of the sisterhood; not its masters."

She shifted her direction to that formal recognition that was the effective mark the senior coven. "My sisters, we know that you will continue in power."

With that, the senior coven left as silently as it had come.

The world was still safe.

* * *

These were good times for Paul, times when he could do what he really enjoyed doing and could revel in the company of his peers. He could study as much as he liked without being looked upon as all that much of a freak. Unlike his earlier education, being smart wasn't considered socially unacceptable.

Ginny was a benefit too, as she was taking a few of the same courses. She was more than willing to study with him. She even made it her habit to go out with Betty and Carol when they dragged him away from his studies.

That really made it wonderful for him. Betty and Carol had always been interested in what he was doing, but did not share in it. He was just their little brother, and was doing what "all the kids his age" were doing. Their condescension nearly drove him crazy.

Studying with Ginny was something entirely different, and even exciting. Though she was a year ahead, she was alive and intelligent. She was actually studying some of the same material herself. They were partners, learning together and loving it.

If the truth be known, Paul also found her interesting in other ways, but she did not accept any advances, even the most innocent of them. In fact, she seemed somewhat indifferent to them.

Paul just put it down as something one experienced with witches. His sisters were the same way. It never crossed his mind that his mother, who was certainly as much a witch as the others, was a genuinely warm and caring person who would never slight anyone.

No matter; he was used to it and it did not really bother him.

Paul wasn't bothered by much of anything. He just continued his studies with the same diligence and intensity as he had demonstrated in the past. He locked out most of the world and went purposefully about his business as a student.

And best of all, he had discovered the study of philosophy, the recorded ideas of great minds of the past, principles and lofty subjects to address and to understand. It was like Christmas for one such as Paul. With his intellectual abilities, each new thought seemed to have his name personally written upon it. Each idea seemed more fascinating than the one before.

Substantial though his ability was, Paul did have one intellectual weakness, and that was youth itself. He looked at the great thinkers of the past, and saw that they were often shallow in their thoughts. As time went on, others superseded them. In his immaturity, Paul counted this as failure.

He did not understand that each thought had to be judged in relation to the times when it arose, that the very novelty of an idea was sometimes great, even when the logic behind it was relatively simple.

Paul had been forced to take many courses that really didn't interest him. He had suffered through six weeks of music before he had finally seen the logic of it. Then suddenly he had that jump of reason that put him into command of the subject. The work of the old masters was no longer simply enjoyable for the ear, but was music for the mind. The shading, the tones, the feelings generated, it was all part of a masterpiece that he could analyze and understand.

He studied all of the works presented with an intensity that disturbed even his instructors.

His obvious understanding forced them to conclude that Paul was one who might best appreciate genius. Still, Paul obviously had little musical talent of his own, and they were also agreed that he would never be able to produce such works.

They had to band together to get this message across to him. That proved a challenging effort in itself.

All thoughts Paul had for switching majors left him, and he stayed in the study of philosophy. He returned again to this first obsession, throwing his considerable abilities into it with no thought for any value that his studies might afford him in the future.

And at the center of all of his study was the truth. Where many people sought education for earning a living, or for improving themselves, Paul sought after the truth simply because that was what he sought. His study was everywhere, in every subject and every word spoken by another. He studied structural linguistics, even though the school had no course in it. He studied Boolean algebra. He studied mathematics as a system of logical inference generators.

In short, he became an immature, but very able logician, and was openly considered to be a crashing bore by his classmates. They took problems to him for solution and for explanation, but tried to avoid having to listen to him expound on his favorite subjects.

He joined the debating society, and was so into it that no one wanted anything to do with him. Even other members of the team were discouraged from debating anything with him. He always went for the jugular. Friend or foe, it did not matter who he was debating. He always went for the kill; and he was pretty good at it.

In all, Paul had come to look upon himself as an effective part of the school, and certainly it was a substantial part of him. He had found his own level, and he had come to a sort of acceptance of his relationship to those around him. He was comfortable as a student.

Then came the letter. He had felt it when he went into the dorm, but had no inkling that it wasn't some visitor. It was very obvious that something psychic drew his attention. It was a new force in the dorm, but he didn't know who it was. It was not like anyone in his experience.

After looking around, and seeing that there was nobody there, he went for his mail. Fifteen steps before he arrived, he knew that it was something in his mailbox, and an inner sense told him it was

something that was very much out of place. Nothing like that belonged to him, and he wasn't looking for power toys.

His first thought was that Betty or Carol had found something, and had put it there to torment their little brother. It was the sort of thing they had been doing to him all his life.

Still, somehow this was different. It did not feel like anything that had come in contact with his sisters, and it was so intolerably strong. No they wouldn't have given it to him even if they had found it.

He reached out a hand that trembled a little, and took the envelope. It was from home. It most certainly wasn't like Mom to give him power implements. She knew he didn't have ability to use them.

He carried it to his room before opening it. Once there, he sat it down on the corner of the desk and just looked at it for several seconds. It was apparently from home. He sensed Evelyn in it, but it was his Mother's writing on the envelope. It was so psychically hot that he longed for tools to open the letter. He did not want to touch it with his hand.

But that was silly. It was from home. He grabbed it and tore the letter open.

Seeing the wooden disk within, he knew that it was certainly the source of the power.

Dear Paul,

Evelyn sends you her best regards, and this remarkable disk. She asked me to pass it on to you, and to urge you to keep it with you for awhile.

I think I would trust her in this.

When you see Betty and Carol, please give them my love.

Love you,

M.

Indeed, Paul was a sensitive, and he could feel his Mother's unease in the message. There was something wrong, or this would never have come to him. Was he in some sort of danger?

Evelyn had sent it. What could that mean? The old witch did quite a number of things that puzzled him, but she had never given any of the family such an item. Something was not right.

Without thinking further on it, he pocketed the coin, where it almost burned his flesh by its hidden power.

What can this thing do, he wondered. It was obviously too powerful to address the little magic tricks that the girls played on him, and too independent to be just another charm. It seemed to have a life of its own.

Still, if the old queen of witches asked him to carry it, he would do so. Her advice had always been so wonderfully accurate, and so apt to his situations, that he obeyed almost out of instinct.

* * *

David Dearman, at the age of 25, was not a scholar. He was not all that much of a person to know socially. He was working as a printer in a local print plant, and had a reputation as a magician. This didn't endear him to his coworkers; but they did keep their distance. Even the bosses were not eager to take actions that might offend him.

For his part, Dave gave them little reason to complain, except for occasional magic pranks. He did his job well and consistently, and was always there at work.

When he left work, though, he became a real somebody. He became David Dearman the sorcerer. He was rapidly getting a reputation for his magic works and ability, and he always had plenty of young witches from the local college to take part with him. He considered his situation to be most enjoyable.

He had recovered from his effort in calling up the demon, and was beginning to feel the old urge to exercise his powers to the maximum. He would not call up the demon again until he had

something for it to do, but he could always find something else to amuse him.

He wanted to take a trip, and that would mean that he would have to have a lot of psychic help. Magical relocation was a fairly advanced bit of magic, even for those who could enter and leave the nether world.

He had not yet really mastered that fully for personal transport, though he had many times managed to move through the nether world with the help of his coven. And now, he thought a little sadly, even that was being closed to him because of the demon. He didn't want to meet that creature in the other world where it had full freedom to act. He would have to use something like the more clumsy method of full magical translation.

That meant calling in his little band of witches to help him open the door. He would send them out a call, and the following evening they could be in Bimini, relaxing on a beach he had visited several times before.

There was a song in his heart as he headed up to his apartment. He was already preparing the message in his mind, and soon would be in his glory, enjoying the adoration of the young beauties in his coven.

In his room were eight bowls of midnight water, each with its own psychic aura. These were his private lines to his coven.

In a spell that seemed to work unusually well even for him, he wrote the message with water-soluble ink on eight slips of paper, and dropped them one at a time into the bowls. Then he washed the ink off into the water, and it was done. The message would get through.

Chapter 4

Carol was the first to feel Dave's call, and to look at the message through the Gift. There was going to be a powerful time with the coven next evening. Something big must have happened, and Dave wanted to celebrate by doing something that took real power.

The message called for her to bring any witch she could find, as the more strength, the better the spell would be. He planned to travel in body.

Carol had never done anything like that, and wanted to go with him, even if only through her own astral projection. She could manage that much without help.

Betty received the message too, but was not able to read as much into it as her sister. She asked Carol, and they both decided that they would have to be there.

With one thought, they decided to ask Ginny to join them. The invitation was open, and they wanted to see just how she would fare in their circle. She could be a very valuable part of it if she had a mind in that direction.

They called her, and she did not sound overly enthusiastic about the whole project. She related that she had some problems with a leader in another group and would just as soon pass this one by.

With a flash of brilliance, Betty told her that they intended to take Paul with them, and it would be good if she were along.

That did it. Ginny was genuinely fond of him, and knew that he would be out of place in a setting like that. She had a lot of faith in Carol and Betty, but felt that Paul would be better served if she was there.

Then again, it might be fun to be out with him for the evening. She had been pretty crude in ignoring all of his puppyish advances, and this was something that could make her feel a little better about how she used him.

So she agreed.

That taken care of, Betty called Paul and told him of the meeting. She also let him know that Ginny expected him to come along.

He accepted, of course, and only felt a little guilty about leaving his studies. He wanted an evening out and this promised to be an interesting diversion.

* * *

Dave was genuinely pleased by the turnout. He already had five witches of the coven present and three transients, and there was still time. He was almost certain to succeed.

The gift was full with him, and he felt the other friendly presences. Even Charlotte had brought her unusual cat with its quiet manner. Having the familiar was an added bonus.

They were busy with the coffee and cookies when Dave first felt the new presences. He recognized Betty and Carol before they were within a block. He also felt two others who were new to him. The one was obviously another witch, one of good force. The fourth was something not quite alive, and yet very powerful.

That disturbed his calm for the moment. The new presence was not animate, but seemed to have some sort of pseudo-life of its own. It was like one of the older spells that hung on for generations.

He looked to the door as they entered, and was actually startled to see Paul. How had that boy gotten in without him knowing it?

He looked again, this time more closely. Then he knew who it was. Carol and Betty had spoken of their unusual brother on more than one occasion, and this could be none other. He had no detectable aura at all, he was so flat in the gift as to be invisible to it.

In the brief moment it took to recover, he also noted the newcomer. She was stunning, a truly beautiful girl. He sensed a little standoffishness in her, but she was witch, and that meant that she was fair game for him.

He got up to greet them, reaching out with the gift to touch the new girl before even the members of his own coven. He knew it was a serious breach of etiquette, but he didn't mind if any of them knew that he was interested in her.

She gave no response in the gift, but accepted his hand graciously enough so that he felt encouraged.

He ushered them to the large low table, becoming again acutely aware of that other presence, which he now knew was with Paul. It was as if the boy was under someone's protection; but from whom? He did not recognize any other presences in his feel of the charm.

He asked Paul about what he was carrying, stating that it might influence what they were doing that evening. Paul responded by producing it so that the young sorcerer could take a good look at it, explaining that it had come to him from Evelyn, the Most Senior Sister, through his mother who had been an old friend of hers.

Dave eyed it suspiciously, and felt of its character. It held no ill for him. It was also very much self-contained so that it would probably not cause any interference. Still, it was incredibly strong. Some gifted practitioner had once poured a lot of him or herself into it. He also noted that the power was not new, the magician who made it had probably been dead for centuries. It was a remnant.

He considered asking to hold it, but thought better of it and merely indicated that Paul should put it away.

It was also the first time that Carol and Betty had seen it, though Paul had told them that Mom had sent him something. They had felt it, but were too excited over the evening's activities to ask about it. There would always be time for that.

There was genuine excitement when Dave told them what he wanted to do. He wasn't going to be satisfied with simple transportation, but wanted to open a doorway through which they all could travel. It would take a lot more force, but they would all benefit from the effort. It would be a wonderful adventure for the coven as a whole.

Dave started the evening by sealing the doors and windows so that they would not be disturbed. He and his believers would be free to concentrate on the task at hand, opening a doorway to the beach in Bimini.

Then they took their places about the table, with Dave at the head and hands joined around. With only minor discussion, Paul stood behind Ginny, he was not a witch and could add nothing by being in the circle of hands.

Having him stand there irritated Dave a little, but not enough to do anything about it. He would take charge of all things when they were into the transportation spell.

With that in mind, he started the spell, putting his great natural ability into the effort.

It was an extremely difficult spell to bring into effect, and had some danger from opening the wrong doors. That, of course, would be more dangerous for him now than for most others. Still, he had done this a few times before, and wasn't about to make any gross errors.

With the spell hanging half formed in the air, he left the group and chalked the circle of effect onto one wall, and added such runes as seemed appropriate to the distance and innocent purpose of their effort. You didn't have to be terribly particular when dealing with white magic.

Only after he had stepped back and carefully evaluated his work did he return to his chair. He was the prime practitioner, and had to be satisfied with his work. No one else in that coven was so gifted or experienced that he would trust her to judge what he did.

On joining the circle again, he was very pleased to note that his witches had been busy while he was setting up. They had come on board with the spell, adding their persona to his own in the maintenance of the spell. Indeed, it was a good time for his efforts.

He briefly looked at the half-formed spell through the gift, and observed the interaction of the various people around the table.

Their parts in it were as clear to him as they were in their physical bodies. He was most pleased to see that the new girl, Ginny, was strongly gifted and was taking part effectively. She would make an excellent addition to the coven, both for her ability and for his interest in her.

Now Dave was the artist, the sorcerer weaving the fabric that would bend time and space to the will of man. And every now and then as he worked, he looped a thread of the spell around Ginny, drawing her ever more deeply into the heart of the action. Without even knowing it, she was becoming a part of the spell, and would answer to it like any other part.

And now the room was thick with psychic power, so much so that Paul was quite uncomfortable. The cat spit and hissed over in a corner. It was nearly done.

Dave congratulated himself just on doing as well as he had. He was getting the complicated procedure so well along, and the charge so high, that it was almost certain to work just as he desired. He could already sense the moist sea air on the other side of the opening that was forming in the wall. It was going to be an excellent work.

He even toyed with the idea of taking the new witch to Bimini, and cutting the line. Then they would be stranded together.

That brought him a memory both cherished and a little embarrassing. He had once done just that with a witch, and had found himself alone. She had wired home for money, and was an airplane in two hours. It took him three days to find enough local talent to open the portal again so that he could go back.

It had been a lot of fun, but hardly the sort of experience he wanted to repeat.

He decided that it would be enough for now if she accompanied him through the portal as a part of the spell. She would be anchored in the coven, even as the spell was anchored in Bimini. He could maintain the anchor even when the spell itself was dissolved, so he concentrated his efforts on that.

Then the portal was fully open, and the beach of Bimini could be seen beyond. All they had to do was to step through.

He rose up, and pointed to Charlotte and Betty, indicating that they were to remain and keep the portal open for the first watch. He would go through and anchor it so the rest of the coven could also travel.

He was ready. He reached out in the gift, and shortened those lines of the spell that were woven around Ginny. Without even realizing it, she started from her chair to join the Sorcerer. She was completely within the spell, and didn't even know it.

As she stood up, her arm brushed against the back of Paul's hand.

You wouldn't think that there could be much to that, but the effect was as startling and puzzling to Dave as if this wholly ungifted

boy had transmuted iron into gold. The spell around the girl was around her no more.

It had not been dissolved or destroyed, and there was not even a tremor in the spell as a whole. Just one instant she was a part of it, and an split-second later she was completely separated from it.

Dave looked quickly around the table and saw that no one took any notice. He had been so artful in his weaving of the spell than no one else even knew she had become part of it. The termination of her presence had been so undramatic that he was the only one who even noticed a change.

A glance at Ginny made him reappraise that. She most certainly knew, and didn't seem pleased about it. He didn't know how much she had felt, but knew that she had sensed why she was no longer sitting in the chair. The look she was giving him could mean nothing less.

Ginny spoke to Betty, "You go ahead, and I'll be glad to stand guard."

Betty, of course, was thrilled. She would be able to spend more time at the beach.

Dave stepped through and anchored the spell to two palm trees. Then he motioned the others to follow, which they did, all except the witch called Charlotte, Ginny, and Paul.

Ginny reached up and took Paul's hand, "I don't know how you did that, but I certainly thank you."

Paul took her hand gladly enough and replied, "I don't even know what I did, or if I did anything. But if you're happy, then I guess I am too."

Ginny thought about it for a moment, and then asked, "Can I see that amulet that you showed Dave?"

He produced it, and she tried to look at it closely with the gift. Truly powerful, almost to the point of being painful when that close, but nothing that would seem to free her from a spell the way she had been freed. She had been freed instantaneously. One second she was in it, the next she was not. There was no power flow noticeable, no effort, no nothing. The effect seemed to be all that there was.

Then she looked up at Paul, this time with the full power of her gift. She couldn't put her finger on it, but there was something hiding

in him. Was it something that had just reached out and kept her safe from that lecherous little sorcerer? She didn't know what it was, but....

She had the same problem with defining it that Evelyn had, but without Evelyn's ability to see into the person. Paul was just the boy who had been there for her, and she appreciated it more than she could tell him. The last thing she needed in her life was another personal entanglement with a magic freak.

After an hour, Betty and Carol came back to relieve the two other witches at the portal. Charlotte went through, but Ginny stayed with Paul, never once letting his hand out of hers. This young sorcerer was so good that she hadn't even noticed what he was doing, and she wanted her protector right there if she needed him again.

If it hadn't been for the spells on the door, she would have just left.

It was another two hours before the rest of the witches were back, and Dave stepped back into his room. He noted immediately that the new witch was hanging onto Paul's hand, and realized that it would be some time before she would let herself be vulnerable to him again.

Something had gone wrong, and he blamed it on Paul. He didn't know what had happened, or even how it could happen, but he had been left high and dry while this almost invisible lad had taken over the affections of the pretty one. He would make sure that the boy suffered a bit for his performance.

Dave didn't say anything about it, or even indicate that anything was not as he had planned. The rest of the coven, and the visitors, were as excited as they could be. The entire session had been a resounding success as far as they knew. Dave resolved to bide his time.

The sorcerer worked slowly and carefully, and he meticulously retrieved each strand of the spell, preserving all of the power and the feel as he gathered them back in. Due to his artful work, hardly any real energy had to be permanently expended, it was an adventure that had cost them nothing but time; and they had enjoyed spending it. They all thought he was wonderful.

Each of the witches, with the notable exception of Ginny, voiced their interest in doing the evening again, but this time to various other

exotic places. Dave made no promises, but ushered them out. Ginny wouldn't even take his hand, and did not demonstrate the courtesy of wishing him good night.

Chapter 5

The wave was coming, and yet it was generations away. Time, as it was understood by mankind, was not the determinant for this force of nature. The wave hung there like dark cloud over the future, confounding long-term predictions. The undertow that proceeded it sucked at the world, and there was a shallow but tremendous flow of forces.

Where there was flow, there was also force for the one who could control the flow. If a man redirected the flow even a little, it would make an eddy in the flow that could have all sorts of marvelous effects.

Still, you could not cancel the wave that was coming, or make it more or less than it was. Neither was there any clear way establish a permanent effect. As soon as the redirection was taken away, the flow returned to its original path. Magic was only for the moment.

Where the flow was strong in the world of men, there was strong magic for the gifted. To them, there was a possibility for action, there was a potential for effect.

* * *

Dave felt distracted as he worked on the press. He worked automatically for the whole day. He kept doggedly at his efforts, but had trouble concentrating on keeping the machines working properly. He even had to do some rework which was most unusual for him. He was just plain hacked at both Paul and Ginny. He hated being crossed in his own area of expertise. He took it as a personal affront, almost as an attack on his authority as the head of the coven.

On his way home that evening, he finally made up his mind on what to do. He would put a spell on Paul and on Ginny that would not permanently harm them, but would certainly cause some very serious discomfort.

He had spent many hours thinking of the possibilities, and settled upon the gout. He had a spell for that and it seemed to work well for him. Its crippling effect would be most satisfying.

The witch, of course, would know what was happening, and would try to defend herself. Dave knew that he was strong enough so that she could not undo his work, or appreciably lessen its effect. She would know that he was the master, but could do nothing about it. If she wanted the curse lifted, then she would have to come and ask him.

Dave used some powdered bones that he had gotten from a local Chinese peddler to set the spell. He buried them in a large flowerpot he kept on the porch. To this, he added a few nice touches like peppercorns, and wished it into their dreams. The spell was set.

He suspected that they might be animal bones, but that was not a matter of concern. They had been presented as human, and he would use them as such. Belief was the key, not fact. He deliberately avoided looking deeper into the powder.

* * *

Far away, Evelyn stopped listening to the others at the table. They, being of the sisterhood, simply waited for her attention to return. They knew that an event had been set into motion somewhere else, something that called her attention in the gift. They also knew that she would be with them again as soon as she could.

With only a short pause, she returned. There was a smile on her thin old lips.

In response to their unasked question, she told them that she had a remarkable young man under protection, and that he was not seriously in threat at the time.

Amray Cham, the incredibly gifted Eurasian witch - and also the fourth most senior member of the sisterhood - resumed her oral attack on the Most Senior Sister as if it had never been put on hold. "Why shouldn't the office be taken from you? You have done nothing.

"I have looked over your reign as Most Senior Sister, and nothing has happened. You have changed nothing. You have worked no unusual magic and achieved no unusual effect. I find it difficult to understand how you have remained in the leadership office as long as you have."

Evelyn just smiled and waited. She was sure through her office that she would have the last word and sure through the gift that Amray would not be the next Most Senior Sister. In spite of Amray's obvious superiority in the gift, and even more obvious ache to hold the office, she would not even remain more than a decade as a senior sister. There were too many forces pulling her in other directions.

"You misjudge me, Amray; even as you misjudge those who have gone before me. The Senior Sisterhood has never done those things you imply that we should be doing. The only time it was even attempted was in the days of Mary, when the orbit of the moon was temporarily altered.

"As you certainly have read, it was almost the end of the Senior Sisterhood. The backlash from the changes had the whole of the world in an uproar. There were calls to have witchcraft banned. It was the threat of that price that led the Senior Sisterhood to depose Mary and to annul her magical works. Nothing less would have sufficed.

"If I, as Most Senior Sister, were to do such works, it would be the Senior Sisterhood who made the changes. I have intentionally avoided putting the Sisterhood in such a position by my having great effects. I leave that to such gifted sisters as yourself, whose more substantial works do not officially represent us all."

Having pretty much defused the situation, Evelyn looked meaningfully around the table. "Sister Amray is right on one very important fact. As I have mentioned at earlier gatherings, my time is coming to a close. It is time for me to vacate the office you have so graciously allowed me to hold."

This caused no stir, as most of them knew that the change was inevitable, and would come soon even if Evelyn tried to continue in office. She was just getting too old and frail to keep up with the requirements of the position.

"Besides," she continued, "I have some other interests that will need my personal attention. I am declaring the office vacant from this time; and am sitting as The Most Senior Sister only until the next can be selected."

Already knowing the decision that would be made, she added, "And I will not influence the choice by making a nomination or

supporting any candidate. I will limit my effect to being the presiding officer.”

She shifted subjects to the process, “I would suggest that each senior sister provide one or more nominees as has been our custom, and that a convention be called by the full council to select the new Most Senior Sister.”

This was met first with silence, and then with nods of assent. The mechanism was in motion. It was time for this to happen. Soon, Evelyn knew, even her earthly life would be over. She only had a few more things to do before she was ready to go.

* * *

Ginny awoke with a start. What a dark and horrible dream, so unlike any she had ever suffered through before. Even the memory was like an inky shadow haunting her.

She tried to shift position, and it hurt her knees and ankles. Something was very wrong.

Half knowing what to suspect, she felt the air with the gift, and felt the tendrils of the spell around her.

She was livid. That son of a bitch had put a curse on her because she hadn't bowed to his will. He wasn't going to let well enough alone.

Her first instinct was to return the favor with interest. She knew a few nasty little spells herself. But then she thought better of it. He was too strong, and obviously too skilled. He would be able to fully protect himself, and she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of overcoming her lesser gift. That would be an error.

She even considered for a moment giving in to him. That thought passed as quickly as it had come. She had tried surrender before and it lead to even more grief. There would be no request to the sorcerer for her relief.

It was terribly frustrating. She hesitated even to try to lift the spell from herself, knowing that the source was so much stronger than she was. Still, it would be necessary to try, no matter how slim her chances.

This attack was black magic, so she reached for the Bible that she always kept handy. She opened it, and found herself reading in the book of Job. It was in the passage where his friends urged him to

repent. She thought on it for a moment, and noted what Jesus had said, that great suffering did not always come from great sin. She concentrated on the fact that she should be free, and called upon the name of the Lord.

She reached out with the full power of her gift, commanding, "In the name of Jesus I shall be free!"

The grip of the spell upon her only wavered slightly, but did not fail or weaken. She was not to be freed by intervention from that source. Still she prayed, knowing that there was little else that she could do to get out from under.

She could almost feel him laughing at her. She was helpless against his strength and mastery of the gift. She was being forced to pay for rejecting his advances.

But then, in her blackest mood, she remembered Paul. She recalled the miraculous way that he had gotten the other spell off of her. Maybe it could happen again.

She dressed and went painfully down to the lobby, the only phones in the dorm were there. The lobby was deserted at this hour of the morning. She looked up the number and dialed.

It took forever for someone to answer. Most of the students were in their rooms and asleep. She told a strange voice that she wanted to talk to Paul Brennen and gave his room number. The response was a quizzical, "Why?"

Paul was obviously not the sort of person most of his classmates would seek out for a midnight conversation.

She held her peace, and was rewarded by the sound of shuffling feet as he left to get Paul to the phone.

It was a painful eternity before she heard the familiar voice at the other end of the line. "Hello?" He didn't sound too sleepy, but he didn't sound all the much awake either.

"This is Ginny."

That brought some animation into his voice. "Man is it good to hear your voice. I just woke from the most gruesome dream I ever had." This brought despair; he wasn't immune either. Well, she told herself, at least she wouldn't have to suffer alone. "I need to talk to you."

She half expected to hear him moan, and tell her that he couldn't walk anywhere feeling like he did, but he didn't. "I can meet you, but the dorms are closed to non-residents at this hour. Where do you want to go?"

She hurt, but kept her head. "I don't know what's open. Can we get into the lobby at the Union?"

To her delight she heard, "Yea, it's open all night for insomniacs with exam troubles.

"I have to get dressed, and I'll be over in about fifteen."

* * *

A long way away, Marcie Brennen tossed in her sleep and then awakened. Something wasn't right. The air felt threatening. She couldn't put her finger on it, but something was not as it should be. Still, there was nothing near, and she couldn't sense any specific menace.

Marcie fought the feeling and tried to go back to sleep. She was more or less successful; but she dreamed of the amulet that Evelyn had given to Paul; and the dream wasn't at all pleasant. In it, the amulet throbbed with power, and kept growing stronger.

* * *

Ginny breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Paul come striding up to the door. He didn't seem to be suffering pain like she was. Perhaps he did have some protection.

She reached out in the gift, and sure enough the feel of the spell was on him too, but he was very obviously not crippled as she was.

As soon as she stepped out to meet him, she knew that it was the amulet. It fairly burned with power, and the spell never quite touched Paul. He was protected.

She was a bit envious. She reached out her hand to him, wondering if it had enough power to protect them both.

Even as her hand reached out, she felt the amulet grow still stronger with its insistent near-life. It almost reached out to her in her need. It could not reverse the damage done, but it certainly fought back the spell. She knew that she would feel better in a matter of minutes.

They walked in silence for a time, and Ginny felt better with every step.

Finally she asked him to relate his dream. She couldn't understand how the spell could be away from him and he still suffered a nightmare.

She wondered, that is, until he began to relate it. It was her dream.

Somehow this strange young man was so tuned into her that he dreamed what she dreamed. She had heard that some gifted people could think another person's thoughts, but Paul did not have the gift.

Then she reminded herself that this was the same boy who had been there when she needed him, not really asking for anything in return. What she felt for Paul was as close to love as she had ever experienced before.

She squeezed his hand to stop him in the middle of the relating the dream, and then she began to tell him the rest of it.

For a one painful instant Paul thought that she must have somehow sent the awful dream to him, maybe just to wake him up. That is what his sisters would have done. How else could she know it as she did?

With another moment to consider it, he vowed silently to wait and see. He couldn't imagine that his friend would do this to him.

Then she relayed what she knew, and that she saw Dave Dearman's work in it. She had dealt with these people before, and knew that both of them were in for a very rough time. A strong sorcerer could make their lives miserable.

She told him that his amulet was the only thing protecting them even then. She had been suffering until she got close to it.

Paul liked the sound of that, and told her so. He'd just as soon have her near.

"It's not that bad," she told him. "These black spells get their power from the grief they cause to others. As soon as the spell becomes ineffective, it weakens and dies away. Only a spell that is working remains strong. The amulet is protecting both of us, and this spell should die out soon enough."

“She would,” she assured him, “stay near for a time.” She added before really thinking about it, “Maybe for a time after that as well.”

She heard herself say it, and couldn’t believe that she had. This boy was really getting to her, and she didn’t feel ready for that again.

Still, she had said it, and was not about to start arguing with herself. If she said it, then she probably meant it. For the moment, it was enough to be free of pain. Soon, it would be over, and she could go forward. She didn’t have to make choices now, so why bother about it. She resolved just to enjoy the time as much as she could.

Chapter 6

The day seemed very long for Paul. That was natural, starting as it did in the wee hours of the morning. Even with Ginny, who was most acceptable company, the need to stay immediately together was wearing.

It wasn't long before they completed all of the schoolwork that they could. They couldn't go to classes together because they would have to go to different classes. So, almost like a married couple, they just stayed where they were. They stayed in the library where they wouldn't be conspicuous from being so inseparably close.

How long can any two people study together? Even with their best effort, they still lost some of the effectiveness of the amulet when they had to separate to use the bathrooms. The spell was still alive, and was able to gain a little of its strength back when either of them were outside of its protection.

They were able to learn a lot more about each other in their whispered conversations, but the situation did not lend itself to the effort. They were under attack; and with that they had other things on their minds.

Ginny, an only child, received an introduction to the life and times of a boy who grew up with two witch sisters. It wasn't surprising; but it was educational. The only unpredicted lesson was the very strong relation between Paul and his sisters. They looked upon him as somewhat deficient for his lack of the gift, and had always been extremely protective. Indeed, she had to admit that she instinctively felt that way herself.

She realized that this wasn't sensible, because it was she who had been relying on him, and not the other way around. He might not be gifted, but he certainly had something going for him.

She even liked him, which marked him as a most unusual person.

Paul got an introduction to the life of an only child, the gifted offspring of a family that was not gifted. It was logically fascinating, each piece fitting into the other to provide an understandable picture of a very nice person. He was frustrated to some extent by her limited willingness to speak about herself, but he persevered.

Then she spoke about her attempt to break the spell using the Bible as a power source, and her frustration at her inability to do so. This gave Paul an idea. For years, the Most Senior Sister had been telling him to rely upon his faith. This would seem to be a situation where it would be sensible to do just that. To that end, he resolved to call in his old spiritual guide from home, Pastor Markam. He had carried that number in his wallet ever since going away to school. It was just a matter of getting to a phone.

He explained what he planned to do, and Ginny agreed that it was a good way to go, in spite of her reservations due to a few past experiences with unsympathetic clergymen. Her hesitation wasn't for lack of faith. There was no such thing as a Christian witch who didn't respect the authority that came with scripture and the church. It was the difficulty of finding a faithful servant who would deal with a witch.

* * *

Reverend Markam had just finished his second premarital counseling session of the morning, and was beginning to think of getting some lunch before his regular visit to the Ames Nursing Home where Ryan MacKinsley had been for the last 26 months. He had his mind filled with this, and with his class on Acts. He had to have that prepared by the following evening.

The soft chime of his phone actually startled him. He hadn't expected to receive calls, though it was certainly not unusual. He had just let himself get too wrapped up in trying to make plans.

The voice on the other end of the line was familiar, but it still took a few seconds to recognize Paul Brennen. He hadn't heard from Paul since that last Sunday before he went off to school.

"Good Morning, Paul. It's good to hear your voice."

He listened then as Paul relayed what had been going on. He was genuinely shocked to find that Paul had attended a coven meeting, but kept his peace. It was, after all, something that was in Paul's family.

Then Paul related the situation with the curse, and the protection from the amulet. The clergyman was also disturbed by the use of some power other than the person of Jesus, but he wouldn't argue with protection.

On the other hand, he was definitely glad to hear that the Most Senior Sister was keeping her faith with Paul, and protecting him as she had said she would those many years ago. Evelyn had also predicted that Paul would come to him with a need, and to let his own faith guide his answer.

He had accepted that advice when it was made. The witch had been so sensible and practical that it would have been unthinkable to reject it. She seemed extremely well versed in Christian doctrine, and was certainly a spiritual person in spite of her official position. Now, with the prediction coming true, he thought again on what she had recommended; and let himself be led by the Spirit as he listened. He recognized this as a time for divine leadership, and he wanted to limit his part to being a channel through which God could work.

Paul was saying, "So that is where we now stand. We have been together since very early this morning, and the spell is weakening rapidly. Ginny predicts that it will be effectively gone by 6:00 O'clock. By 8:00 we will be able to assume a safety margin and stop all of this.

"I'm calling you because I see that this will not be the end of our problems, and because I don't know how to proceed to put a real end to it. It isn't right that we should be subject to attack like this."

John let the words flow from the first thought that popped into his mind, "No, there should be no need to suffer. You should be free and freedom is from the Lord.

"Have you been looking there for the answer?"

There was a sort of embarrassed silence from the other end, and then, "Well, Ginny has."

The clergyman made no reply, as nothing came to him to say. Paul continued, "Yeah, I guess you're right. It's something I have to do for myself."

Another idea seemed appropriate, so John replied with, "The Lord said, 'Seek ye first the kingdom, and all these things shall be rendered unto you.' I think I would start with that, with doing what Jesus said to do and seeing where it leads."

* * *

Paul finally returned to the dorm, seeking a little of the privacy that had been denied him for the last 20 hours. He didn't like being with anyone that much of the time, even Ginny. He needed time for himself, time for internal reflection.

Paul considered it, turning the situation over as he recalled it. His time had not really been wasted. He had gotten to know Ginny much better, and she was indeed a very wonderful person. They had stayed together for two hours after Ginny figured that the spell would be dead, and then only went as far as the other side of the room. With that, she could have gotten close again if the spell still had power.

He half wished that she had been wrong, it was nice to be near her; but she knew the things of the gift. The spell was completely gone, and would not bother them further. They would be safe unless the sorcerer did something else. Paul was a little tired, but also excited. He had a direction to go, and that provided him with all the energy he would need for a little study time. He fell asleep only after an hour of readings in Matthew.

For all he learned that night, he might as well have gone to bed immediately.

* * *

Evelyn felt as if a great load had been lifted from her.

She had stepped down from official leadership, and would hold the chair only until a successor was selected. She didn't have to really fill the office except to preside over the selection process.

She had to smile at that thought. She would preside over a selection process that was already certain. She would need to do nothing in the way of the office except to pass her robe to the next Most Senior Sister.

She knew the witch who would be the new Most Senior Sister very well, and she was a little taller and considerably heavier. Evelyn had already contacted a seamstress to make the required adjustments so that the robe would fit perfectly when passed. It was a good final shot. It was something that would tell the new office holder that her selection was not by chance, but had been foretold. Such a statement would add a valuable perspective to the new Most-Senior's

first days in office, it contained an understanding that might serve her well.

Then there was something in the gift, a tremor, a feeling of shifting. She checked, but nothing seemed to have changed.

Still, Evelyn sensed that something had been put into motion on a different level. Such changes could have great effect, even though the effect had not been realized as yet. Something important had happened.

Almost by instinct, her thoughts went to Paul, and she traveled to him in spirit.

He was asleep. A rapid survey of the situation told her that nothing was amiss. The spell that had been directed at him was gone, as she herself had predicted. The amulet had worked, and he had not been touched. She fought against her instinct to assume some credit for the actions she had taken in the matter. She knew she had not participated on her own.

“Was Paul really unaffected,” she asked herself again. She looked at him as a sensitive, looking into him as much as she dared with his own unusual sensitivity.

She could see that he was so exhausted that a little intrusion would not disturb or waken him, so she determined to look a little deeper.

It didn't work; she ran into a barrier within him. Something profound had happened; and she had been right in her feeling that it happened to him. Then she partly corrected herself; it happened through him. Something had triggered a change in him.

She felt of the new wall, and could sense some kind of activity beyond. No longer was he a black emptiness to the gift. He was just closed, but there was some kind of liveliness within him that echoed his active intellect. He was finally surfacing, but still could not be reached. There was construction going on within him.

Feeling sure of the architect, she removed her aura and returned her attention to her present place. Paul was in the most excellent hands.

She considered calling Marcie, but thought better of it. It would probably be best to let the changes occur without stirring anything else up in the family.

She considered her own position for a moment. She had provided the protective medium, and the work in him was now underway. Why then was she still a part of this? Was there more that she would have to do?

She looked into the future using the gift, but saw nothing but haze where Paul was concerned. Whatever was happening had closed him to the gift altogether. His future could not even be predicted.

She was disappointed in one sense, like a child being sent to her room while the adults had a party. But in another sense, it was comforting to know that things were finally moving, and that she had been included as a part of it.

She never had liked standing still.

* * *

No one was more surprised than David Dearman. He checked his flowerpot in full expectation of finding the strong bands of the spell reaching out and holding the victims.

What he did find was a common planter, with a common rose growing in it; and it was gloriously in bloom. That was definitely disturbing!

Black magic generally tended to wilt and kill plants that were exposed to it, and this one was alive and healthy.

Even more surprising, there hadn't been a rose there at all. It had been a dead pot when he buried the ground bone and pepper in it. Someone must have dug the stuff up and planted the rose; but who would do that? It didn't make any sense.

He looked at the plant more carefully, checking it with both his normal senses and the gift. It was just a rose, and it had not been handled by anyone unless they were incredibly skilled in removing the aura of their contact.

He grasped the stem carefully, and was further puzzled to find that the roots seemed well established. He gave a pull and found that it was indeed well rooted, and the roots were throughout the soil. Everything but the pot came up.

He dropped the plant with its root-ball back into the pot, both surprised and a little bit nervous about it. He had heard of some rare

individuals who could force-grow plants through the gift, but had never really met one. How else could this have happened?

There was some impressive life force involved with this situation, and he would need to be very careful not to step too far out of line. That meant he would do no major magic where it could effect either Paul or Ginny.

He thought about it for a few moments, and decided to just bide his time and see what developed. He definitely was not interested in getting third parties involved, especially someone who might be able to manage this.

He looked at the rose again, still bewildered. He had witnessed really powerful white magic on only two occasions, and this seemed to be a third. He had heard that white magic could have this strength; but applications outside of faith healings were rare. Practitioners were even rarer.

He did, however, decide to keep the plant well cared for. He would water and turn it; and he would watch to see what happened to it.

* * *

In the weeks that followed, Paul threw his best efforts into the study of scripture, seeking for that elusive “Kingdom of God.” He studied, and studied; but couldn’t seem to get a good grasp on the subject. Everything concrete that could be derived from the scriptures seemed to be partly canceled out by other passages. In a strictly logical sense, it didn’t make sense.

His challenge was on every level. In one passage, the Kingdom of God was a place where men entered on the last day. In the next, Jesus was urging a present kingdom, where men enter immediately. In one passage, the Kingdom was a place where men go. In another, it was a place that comes to men.

Realizing the source of his difficulties, Paul made a leap beyond his own understanding, and set out to develop his own set of rules for interpretation. The exact logical meaning of scriptural passages could not be determined so long as there were internal inconsistencies. This meant that there had to be external rules of interpretation.

His first approach to the rules was to try to find the rules that his church had used in its interpretation. He had a good understanding

of scripture from growing up in the faith, and he was able to read with great logical precision. For four days he engaged in intensive studies, just barely sparing time to eat and prepare normal lesson materials for his courses. He came to the conclusion that there were no hard and fast rules being employed. Interpretation varied by results to be achieved, not by any set of rules. There were too many systemic logical inconsistencies.

He took the weekend off to think. He was in a dilemma as to interpretation, as there was no developed set of logical rules by which he could interpret the scriptures, and no apparent natural basis for developing the rules. He was lost, not knowing which direction to turn to make a tight logical understanding of what he was reading.

* * *

Betty and Carol knew that their little brother was into something; they hadn't seen him for a whole week. The only information they could get was from Ginny, who relayed an obviously abridged version of her tangle with Dave's spell. She said that Paul had some sort of religious study going on; and she was just as curious as they were.

The three of them showed up at Paul's dorm in a united front, demanding that he come down and go to supper with them.

There was, of course, no way he could refuse, and no reason why he should. His studies had come to a standstill.

Betty was the first to notice that something was very different. She didn't know what it was, but he wasn't the same. "What have you been doing to yourself, Paul. You feel different."

That, of course had the other two looking closely at him. Ginny didn't really know him well enough to sense the change, but Carol did. Not having Evelyn's gift for looking into a person, she didn't know what had changed, but he certainly felt very different. She instinctively knew that thinking at him would no longer reach him, somehow her brother was no longer open to her intrusions.

Paul didn't know what Betty was talking about. He felt just the same, except perhaps a little more rested than usual since he had broken off his scriptural studies. He thought, for a moment, that she might be giving him the needle about the amulet, but why?

He took it out of his pocket, and presented it for her inspection. "Is this what you're talking about?"

Betty took it, and examined it carefully. “No, I don’t think so.”

It was so powerful that she felt uncomfortable even holding it. Still, if it was what was affecting her brother, she wanted to know about it. “Why don’t you let me keep it for a time. I think your problems with Dave are over for the moment and I want to take a better look at this thing.”

Paul felt a little like he was giving away his clothes. He had learned to accept that it protected him. Still, he had no objection to her having it for a time, because he knew that she would let him have it back if he needed it.

Betty checked Paul again, and he was still not the same. It wasn’t just the amulet; though she still suspected that it was having some sort of effect upon him. She was highly suspicious of anything that might harm someone in her family.

In spite of their worry over Paul, they all had a good evening. It was nice to be out together.

They were also interested in what their little Paul had been doing with himself all those hours in the dorm. He hadn’t even been studying with Ginny.

He gave them a brief outline of his new direction. He related the applicable parts of his conversation with Reverend Markam, and his logical study of the scriptures, which went nowhere.

Carol, a bit of a student of scripture herself, was offended by his casual dismissal of the church interpretation of the scriptures, but knew she lacked the tight logical discipline and the authority to dictate anything to her very-smart little brother. She just bit her lip and listened.

He then spoke of his dilemma, his inability to derive any logical approach without assuming the conclusions by his choice of rules. That would spoil the study by interjecting his personal preferences.

Without even realizing it, Carol gave him the first rule. She didn’t remember how naive her brother could be. “Well, you know that the New Testament supersedes the Old.”

Paul knew it on one level, but had resisted application because it was an unknown in logic. It attacked the assumed truth of all scripture, which he had been using as a starting point.

It was like an intellectual explosion in him. It really didn't matter what other rules were in place, the Old Testament was still superseded by the New, and all conflicts had to be resolved in favor of the New. At last, he had a rule.

Chapter 7

The wave was coming irresistibly, and nothing that was of the Spirit would be left unaffected. It was coming, but was not yet being felt as itself. It was still the time before the wave. The time of the lowest level was approaching as the undertow sucked at the powers in this world. There was a great flow, and there was strength for the gifted. There was magic in the world of men.

Soon, the wave itself would arrive, to boost the level rapidly and change the world. Until then, the tension was building, always building.

The flow was approaching that point where it would pause, and nothing could happen. For now, though, there was a definite flow away. The powers in the world were ebbing as the wave itself neared. There was a tension throughout all things. The very faith of mankind seemed to pause like a breaker gathering itself before rushing ashore.

Already, the flow was nearing the point where its direction would change. Those who were richest in the gift could hear the roar of what was coming even though it was still more than a lifetime away.

* * *

Paul returned to his room happy. He had something more to work on. He had the first rule, and he applied it with a will.

It was amazing how swiftly much of the interpretation could be done, how clear it made the flow of the development of Christianity. It provided him perspectives that he had been missing altogether. He could see the old views being bent by those of the New Testament. He could see certain values being developed.

And so he continued, at a reasonable pace, for an additional three days, ever seeking to separate Christianity from the earlier Hebrew faiths.

But try as he could, he could not find a key to remove the remaining discrepancies. The inconsistencies remained. He was still being frustrated.

For over a week he was sullen and disheartened, working listlessly at his new study, but continuing stubbornly to chip away at what he had found. He chewed over and challenged everything he had already done, repeating his work again and again. He knew there would have to be a breakthrough sometime.

What was the advice that Reverend Markam had given him? “Seek ye first the Kingdom....”

With a start, he suddenly realized that this is not what he had been doing. He had been seeking the truth. Then he corrected himself again. He had not sought truth, but strict logical understanding of what was written in the scriptures. There was a second concept of the truth. Jesus was the Truth, the life and the way.

He actually stopped breathing for the better part of a minute so that it wouldn't interfere with his thoughts. He held his breath in awe of how little he had seen. There had been so much that he should have seen from the beginning.

He had been a victim of an unwritten assumption that came from the Old Testament, that it was the law that was right and proper. He realized that even his search for the truth had been colored unmistakably by this bias.

Paul was still young. He missed entirely that this was just as appropriate to him as it was to the great minds of the past. He had despised them for not seeing the obvious. He was aware enough to realize his own shortcomings, but not enough to compare them to others. As with most young men and women, he was so taken with his own growth and needs that he was focused only within.

It was so simple, he had wasted so much time and effort when the right direction was clearly before him. He had to seek the kingdom, and Jesus was the doorway. He had to pass through Jesus to get there.

The very concept that scriptural truth was the center of faith in Jesus was an assumption that was not beyond question. Even that had been subject to discrepancies within the scriptures.

The enormity of the logical flaw in his approach appalled him. It spoke to him of his own inexperience, his intellectual immaturity, and

his lack of tolerance for his own limitations. Bright though he knew he was, such simple things seemed to be getting by him all the time. It was most frustrating.

The very idea that the whole foundation for his approach could be in error was so novel that it took him a considerable time to settle down and get back to work. His ideas were racing ahead, leaving huge holes in his understanding that could not be tolerated. He knew that he had to be thorough or everything he constructed was likely to fail.

He tried, unsuccessfully, to do other work to get his mind off of the subject. But whatever he did, he found his thoughts drifting back to what he had missed. He had the effective interpretive rules at his fingertips; and he had been ignoring them.

That night, he had to force himself to sleep, almost arguing with himself to keep from shooting off in an intellectual effort that he knew would be wasted.

Instead, he concentrated on what he would tell Betty and Carol, or if he would tell them anything until he had walked the new path for a distance. He just didn't know what he was going to do; and wouldn't know until he had given the new idea a little time to build.

His last thought before sleep overtook him was, "Gad, how could I have been so stupid!"

* * *

Dave checked his new rose plant and noted that it had taken another spurt. There had been powerful white magic at work again, and he never knew it. Some time during the past 24 hours, some great practitioner had reached into his very home and worked this most substantial piece of magic.

Was someone trying to irritate him, was someone laughing at his inability to do such work? He didn't know who or how, but he was becoming very upset with the whole thing.

He decided that there was no need to keep the flower any longer. He didn't want its presence constantly reminding him that he wasn't fully in charge.

That brought a feeling of rage; it was all Paul Brennen's fault. He didn't know how he had done it, but everything centered on that strange boy.

Dave was a little nervous about throwing the plant out, so he got with his landlord and planted it in the flowerbed beside the building. That would get it out of his sight; and if anyone wanted to work on it, more power to him or her.

The sorcerer returned to his apartment, and he brooded over how things were not going his way. Strong though he was in the gift, he had been thwarted twice in his dealings with Paul Brennen. Somehow, the witch Ginny had also been freed from his best efforts at weaving a spell, though he knew he had done a good job. Still further, the attempt to put a curse on Ginny and Paul had ended with white magic at work in his own home.

Dave even entertained the idea that Paul might have some sort of hidden talent. He conjured up a fantasy of a power so great that Paul could keep it hidden. If he hadn't known the two older sisters, he might even have believed that. As it was, he knew Paul's personal history, and knew that he was not a practitioner at all.

No, it wasn't Paul who was causing the trouble, someone else was mixing in his business. Paul was just a point of focus. If Dave was to take any action, it would just be directed to Paul. He was unsure how to proceed, but he knew that he would think of something.

* * *

For the first time in her long life, Evelyn was suddenly unsure of herself. Her view of the future was getting fuzzy, and multiple possibilities were interposed upon each other. It was almost as if the gift was losing some of its power, as if she was becoming normal, and could not see into the future.

Yet, she knew, she had seen past this point before. Had something happened to mess up predictability? Changes were taking place, but that much change seemed far beyond any regular magical effect.

Somehow, she knew that Paul was involved, and she turned her thoughts to him.

He was much harder to find, and very different when seen through the gift. He no longer was a part of the picture at all. It was as if his absence of the gift had been emphasized, so that even the basis for the gift avoided him. She could no longer find him except by

astral projection. He had effectively disappeared from monitoring through the gift. He was beyond reach.

She noticed immediately that he no longer had the wooden disk, so she looked for it. Finding it with Betty, she breathed a relieved sigh. That was probably where it would belong. Something about the changed Paul told her that he would no longer need it, even though there were still harmful influences gathering around him. Those people who were near to him would be the ones in need of protection.

Things were proceeding satisfactorily, but Evelyn was terribly curious about what was happening to Paul. He was changing, he was becoming something.... She couldn't describe it, not even to herself.

She realized that this was the same sort of problem she had from the beginning in addressing Paul. Perhaps he was not becoming anything that he had not really been all along.

* * *

Paul woke with a start, immediately wide-awake and eager to get moving. Unlike the night before, he was intellectually rested, primed and ready to work; so he did.

He started with the base rules:

- 1 - The New Testament superseded the Old;
- 2 - If our Lord did it, then that was the last word, and nothing was to be accepted as contradictory evidence;
3. If our Lord said it, then it was to be accepted unless he did something else.
- 4 - If it was implied from our Lord through what he did or said, then it was to be accepted as determinative.
- 5 - By default, all else was to be determined from the rest of scripture, with emphasis for the New Testament over the Old.

With those few rules, he set forth on another intensive reading of scripture. It was amazing how much this cleared up. The recorded teachings of Jesus were marvelously consistent and direct. It simplified everything. What emerged was quite startling to Paul, for it was not what he had learned in church, but was something he learned through the Church. What was important to Jesus was

people, and Jesus spoke for God. Everything that transpired had been for the ultimate benefit of individual people, both in the Old and New Testaments. The focus on holiness fell by the wayside. The focus on commandments also fell away, as Jesus taught them in principle only. What was left was God seeing to the welfare of his people. God took care of selected people through action, through directions, through interference, and through providing them with Jesus.

It was incredibly simple, and yet very profound; it put things into a new perspective.

For the first time in his life, Paul used his sensitivity to really look for what was beneficial to people.

What he saw was crazy. He couldn't believe what his senses told him. He could actually feel the flow of benefits as if it was some sort of soup in which he lived. There was a flow to life that was somehow centered on him.

He looked out the window, and looked at others through this same sensitivity. Indeed, they were also at the center of the flow. Life was centered on people.

* * *

There was an incredible shifting in the feel of magic throughout the world; there was a change like the sudden release of a spring. Some indefinable source of tension was released. The air was cleared; it was as if a cloud had passed and the sun broke through.

Betty felt something change, but only lightly. Her gift was not great, and her sensitivity very limited. All she knew was that it was a change for the better.

Dave felt the change but did not understand it. Like most of the sensitives of the world, he felt the shift, but was not able to interpret it. It was not a change in the gift itself. This change addressed something more fundamental, something not of the gift, but that would affect the gift. All he knew was that something had happened to the flow of power. He felt freer to work than ever before. He felt stronger, he felt more able.

Such sensitives as Evelyn felt it as a shock. She had been close enough to what was going on in Paul to have a good idea of the source. She immediately looked for him, but didn't waste time looking

in the gift as he was quite invisible. She used astral projection, and found him staring out the window.

She was frankly shocked when she sampled the aura around the room. It no longer avoided him, but passed through him, and was gathered into him. He was in the center of it, and yet not a part of it. Some remarkable change had been wrought.

She looked at him through the gift, and found herself looking through him and beyond. He functioned like a switching station for the effect of the gift, but he was not to be seen using it.

* * *

Paul just looked out the window for a time, speechless. How could he have missed all this?

He felt the subtle change when Evelyn's interest entered the room, and he knew it was right that she was there. He felt it when she looked through him, and again he knew that there was benefit in it. He could see that it was right and beneficial that she did so.

He did not understand why, but he could sense its rightness by the effect that it had. It was not that he saw the effect, but that he could sense how it did good for people.

He tried to contact her, but nothing happened. It was obvious that he needed the gift to control the effect upon whatever it was that he sensed.

He felt the change when Evelyn's presence left. All he had to do was to concentrate on benefits to people, and he could sense all sorts of things.

He felt a need to tell Betty and Carol about this. And as he thought that, he felt a surge in the something that he sensed. It was right; it was beneficial.

As a test he tried to picture himself jumping out the window, and the something inside him seemed to set the flow across his path. He had a whole new perspective on the world, one based upon benefits to people.

Then he sat as still as he could, and let his natural sensitivity roam about the dorm guided by his desire to know what was beneficial to people.

He didn't know how he could have been so blind. Through this simple approach, he could see people as they were helping or harming themselves by what they were doing. He could see them traveling with the flow or bucking against it. He could see what needed to be done to bring the individual into harmony with the world. In a way, even in the craziness of what he sensed, the world came to make more sense. He turned his interest to Betty and Carol.

* * *

Carol had never felt anything even remotely like it. It was a presence that seemed to look right into her heart. It wasn't like magical intrusion by use of the gift, but was something else, something that could not be avoided or blocked out. There was no feel of wrongness about it. There was something familiar, but something she never felt before. It was there, but then she could not describe it.

She used the gift to see who it was, but there wasn't anyone there. It was like the gift, but on some parallel level. It wasn't the same. It wasn't subject to analysis by her grasp of magic.

She shuddered, and the feeling left her.

That presence had not been unpleasant, but there was something highly intrusive to it. She was unsure whether she should mention it to Betty.

Chapter 8

On his way to the dining hall, Paul used his newfound ability to look around him as he had never looked before. The people looked different.

It wasn't that they were physically any different, but there was something of their lives that was newly visible to him. He saw who was happy and who was hurting, and was able to sense something of why. He could see the flow around them, and how they tried to manipulate their lives.

He saw people bucking the flow and sometimes succeeding. He saw others who just went with the flow, going where it seemed to blow them. Still others didn't seem to be doing anything at all, and the flow passed them by, bringing all the good or ill to them that was in the flow.

He saw possibilities for them. It wasn't as if they could do whatever they wanted by some little change, but there were many paths open to any person at any time if they took their opportunities to heart. No doubt, there was much that any person could do given time and concentration of effort guided to their best advantage, but this was not to be. There were other people also seeking after what they thought they wanted.

Not knowing what he should do, Paul just watched and tried to make sense of it all. There was so much to understand, and so little of his attention to spend upon it. Everyone had his own personal world of possibilities, each almost infinite, and each impacting upon the possibilities of others.

After 40 minutes of it, Paul had to leave his meal. He wanted to return to the quiet of his room. He had to have some time away from people. He couldn't stand too much of this new concentration of vision. He realized that he would have to learn to keep his interest to himself a lot of the time or he would have a great deal of difficulty doing anything.

It was, he realized a need for organization in his life, a way to see the necessary and to ignore anything that was not. It was going to be akin to learning to see again.

He remembered from his reading in developmental psychology that one sees an incredible amount of detail every moment that the eyes are open, but only a small amount of it is really meaningful for immediate attention. He would have to learn to do the same thing for his new found ability. He had to learn to see what was important, and to ignore the rest.

* * *

Ginny saw Paul get up to leave as she was coming in. There was something different about him, and she wanted to see what it was.

Instead of getting a tray, she went after him. It was something new. There was a sense of power about him that was frankly not expected of anyone except those who were strong in the gift.

As she approached him, she began to feel different. As she understood it, she suddenly felt very small. Again, it was something like she felt in the presence of the very strongly gifted.

“Paul,” she called out to him. It was as if it took several seconds to get through to him. He seemed horribly distracted by something. “Paul, wait.”

Then he turned, and looked through her.

That was the only way that she could describe it. It wasn't as if he had seen what was on the other side of her, but that he was somehow looking at what was inside her. Coming with it was a breeze in the gift, a flow of great comfort that seemed to come from him.

He smiled then, and it was as if the rest of it had been a dream. It was just Paul, and he was glad to see her. Sure, there was something about him that... There were no words for it. But then he had been like that from the first. It was amazing to her, but she really liked him.

She took his hand and they walked.

And as they walked, he spoke about what he saw, and the new ability he seemed to have discovered. She realized that what she

had felt was no illusion. There was something about him that could actually see into a person's being.

She couldn't resist the challenge. "What do you see when you look at me?" she asked.

It felt like a searchlight, but looking through her and beyond. And his eyes began to fill with tears.

It was a moment of panic for her "What do you see?"

She could see him fighting for words. The answer, when it came was so obviously worded for careful digestion, that she determined to remember it word for word, and to analyze it on that basis. It is how he would think.

"I can see no way that anyone can defend you from what is coming your way. I don't know what it is, but it will be extremely dangerous. The flow seems to go against you no matter which way you might turn."

Several things had worried her before this. Hearing it from him put a bit of panic in her. "I could stay near you, couldn't I?"

He was deadly serious when he responded, "I cannot protect you. Being with me would be more dangerous still. The best thing that you can do is to get as far from here as you can, as fast as you can. But even that only reduces the danger; it does not remove it."

She felt rage rise up in her. Who was this kid to put such a burden on her? She threw his hand down. "How dare you put such a curse on me!"

She turned on her heel and strode away with as much composure as she could fake. Something in her gift, however, told her that what Paul had seen was not to be denied. She would try to stay away from him for awhile. That should be as much as she had to do.

* * *

When Paul looked at Ginny using the basis of benefits, He saw something that brought tears to his eyes. Paul had to do some growing up in a great hurry.

He didn't know what it was, but he saw the possibilities that were available to her flowing away. There were no benefits for her. Soon all possibility would be gone unless something was to change.

He looked deeper and farther, but saw nothing. He looked at his own possibilities, and saw that they did not in any way alleviate hers. There was no way that he could be of aid.

He also saw something else, something that was also to have a direct impact upon him. He didn't know what it was, but there was a sense of terror about it. There was such menace that he had no way to even describe it. There were many possibilities for him when addressing the terror, and he could probably avoid it. When it came to Ginny, there was no way to keep it from getting close. All her possibilities either seemed to end with it or to pass very near it.

But he didn't have time to look into it further right then. Ginny was waiting for a reply and he owed her one. He was almost struck speechless. What could he tell her?

He told her what he could. And she responded pretty much as expected. It hurt, but what could he do? He was helpless.

It hurt. It was just as it always had been. He was the one without the gift, the one who could not make things happen in a world where everyone else seemed able to do all sorts of things.

He just turned sadly, and headed back to his room. He still had the problem of learning to cope with his vision. Perhaps there was something he could do once he had learned how to handle it.

He only wished he had more time.

* * *

It was over, and Evelyn was no longer the Most Senior Sister. In fact, she had resigned from the Senior Sisterhood itself. Now she was free to follow what was happening, and perhaps to be of some help in the little time left for her.

She almost had to laugh. There was a feeling in the Senior Sisterhood that the changes had come from the change in the leadership, that there was some sort of cause and effect relationship.

She was sure that her own death was near. Age had seen to that. Now she felt really free of all cares and worries. There was nothing wrong that could happen to her. Her life was already full to the brim, and on to overflowing.

She looked for Paul using the gift. He was not to be found.

She chided herself for not remembering; he was probably completely invisible to it. So she looked for him in his room using astral projection. He was not there.

She was about to look elsewhere when she felt a presence coming. It was like him, but it came in great power. She waited.

She was startled to see Paul come in. The power was with him, and passed through him. But he didn't seem to be able to direct it. Much to her surprise, Paul looked up to where her persona floated near the ceiling and greeted her by name.

He then said, very clearly, "Please leave me for awhile, I need time to think this through."

She withdrew, but only after tasting of the atmosphere about him.

Back in her room, she reflected on what she had felt. He did not have the power, but walked in it. She didn't know if he controlled it, or was under some sort of other protection. It went where he went. She had also felt the dark forces that were drawing near to him. Something was coming to him that would require even more protection than she could offer.

But again, there was time, and the forces on his side just seemed to mount and mount higher. She would just keep an eye on things, and take a hand if it seemed appropriate.

* * *

Paul had learned from his earlier failures. If he was going to solve this problem, then he would have to trust to the directions that he received from others. This included the obviously inspired guidance from Reverend Markam.

The real heart of the advice was to seek for the Kingdom of God, and not to worry about the rest.

He needed to look for the Kingdom, and he knew that this took study. He returned to the scriptures, looking for the Kingdom.

There was no good basis for looking in his new vision. There was just nothing similar to key on, except for the ability of Jesus.

Jesus obviously could see the benefits that might come to people. The difference was that Jesus was able to do something with it. He could do things that had never been done by others. He had

actually returned from the dead without being raised by the prayers of others.

Still, he thought, his direction had to be something along the lines of what Jesus did, but without the ability to have effects directly.

This thought hit him extremely hard, going to the heart of who he was. He could not do it. He had to work through others or he would remain impotent. His ability was not for his own use, but for the use of others. He could help others, but could do nothing directly for himself. He was going to have to change the way he dealt with other people, and change it drastically.

He was not going to remain the studious recluse that he had been.

This required a change in self-vision, it sharpened his need for gaining his balance. He would have to learn to be with people. He would not be able to continue working in seclusion. He would need this to be able to handle the extent of his ability to see, in spite of its complex and comprehensive character.

This brought him back to the study itself. If he was going to work for the benefit of others....

He left that thought only half-formed. It was a moment of inspiration, and another thought took the focus away.

This was the same way that he had learned to see God's action in the world through his previous efforts. It was another aspect of what he had discovered in his earlier studies. The whole interaction of God with man had been to give benefit to people.

With that thought, he looked to the ministry of Jesus using his new vision.

What he saw astonished him, at the same time that it fascinated him. Everything that Jesus had done, from the first to the last was balanced. All of his teachings and examples were balanced. Everything that he did was the Kingdom. He had taught balance, Jesus had presented exactly what needed to be done for the benefit of people.

Indeed, Jesus had said the same throughout his ministry. He was the way, not simply the teacher. He didn't provide scripture, but direction; and that direction was encapsulated in the words, "Believe in Me."

Paul looked at others using his new ability in that understanding. He looked at others through a way of doing what Jesus had taught. He looked for the direction to coincide with the teaching. What he saw superimposed on the general ability to see benefit, was a larger and deeper flow. There was a natural balance to what he sensed, a flow to life that was in perfect harmony with the teachings of the Master. Indeed, it appeared that all life had been managed for the benefit of people.

He had found direction. He had found a way to look at the world through his new ability. It was a way where he would not be blinded by the extent of the detail revealed.

* * *

There was another shifting in the gift, and David Dearman sensed it. Again, it was as if some inner tension had been released and satisfied. It resulted in a feeling of power, of confidence, of effectiveness.

He had no idea what was going on, but he knew that he suddenly felt more able than he had ever felt before. Something had reached out to him and freed him.

It was, he felt, time to go into action. He had waited long enough without answering the insult that centered upon Paul Brennen. It was something that needed to be done if he was to ever feel in complete control of his gift.

He decided that he wouldn't even bother with Ginny at this time. There would be time to deal with her later. What he had to do now was to put the fear of his ability on Paul, and on whoever stood behind him.

Dave took out a picture of Paul from his files, and he set to work. He worked very carefully, because he knew that he was dealing with really dangerous magic. It would probably lead to serious injury at the very least, and that kind of magic could easily rebound. There was a reasonable chance that it would actually kill the boy. He sincerely hoped that whatever was protecting Paul would be able to stave that off, but he still intended to make a magic-statement that could not be turned off the way his last one had been.

He worked in relative silence, watching the candle flame flicker and grow. He was at his strongest, and he was intent on doing the

most competent and able job that he and his considerable ability could perform.

His only worry was that someone else would find out about his efforts, and interfere. The Senior Sisterhood had taken interest in such dealings in the past.

To avoid that, he carefully hid the fact that it was his work, or that it even had a center. It would even appear to be an independent and accidental spell, even to someone of his own ability.

It took a lot out of him, but he completed the job and set it loose. It was not even anchored, but was free to go where it would, accepting Paul as its only real point of reference.

It was done, and Dave was satisfied with the workmanship and power, even if he still had some reservations on the need for such a terrible spell.

* * *

Paul felt the darkness trying to form around him, but he also felt the flow. He went where the flow went; and the darkness could not get to him.

He sensed the wrongness in the evil that was trying to reach him. There was no way that it could get in front of him to trap him. It was imperfect; it bucked the flow at every point, fighting to maintain its own existence in the face of what was right. The flow always cleared the path in front of him.

There was always an obvious way to avoid harm, and he seemed to grow more able to avoid it as he pursued that path. The harm that the darkness could do was not certain to happen, even to one who had no gift to make the threat go away. Paul knew by some instinct that there never again would be such a closed situation for him.

In fact, all he had to do was to go in the direction of the flow. He would not have to fear so long as he was walking on the Path that Jesus had left so clearly marked by his teachings. And what an advantage he had. Where most of the world had only those few years of record to follow; he, Paul Brennen could actually see the path. He could see each step, each possibility. He could see where he was going.

Where those with the gift might have more possibilities, he knew which choice to make.

And so he chose to walk in the way of the Lord, step upon step. And with each step, he felt more in tune with the flow, and it felt good

At that point, he really concentrated his vision upon the darkness that tried to reach out to him. It was a force that had to buck the flow in every possible direction.

There was something about it that was puzzling. How could it exist at all? It had no real source, nor real ending. It just was.

This, he realized with a start, was real magic. It was a force opposed to nature, an effect that bent reality to the will of a person or persons.

It shocked him. He looked at it again, and the tremendous power that seemed to be in it. Its very existence was in conflict; it had been constructed in opposition to natural forces. It was the result of the will and persona of some spiritual creature. The skill and ability of the one who made it was clear. The work was obvious, and it was tremendous.

At that moment, Paul Brennen had realized the source of the power that stood behind the magic that people used. There was something in the human spirit that was able to reach beyond. It was an extension of that same ability of Man that allowed him to build a tall building in defiance of gravity. Here, it built a force that defied even the flow of nature.

What a marvel! Paul stopped in awe at the thought of it. What a gifted artist must be at work to do this great and magnificent construction.

Paul was almost certain of the source. He was worried for Ginny, even as he felt awe for that sorcerer.

Still, this couldn't be the danger he had seen in her future. There had to be something else. This magic would attack, but left doors open. What was before him in his vision was something else, something much worse, and something very different than this floating nastiness.

Still, he was concerned, and placed a call to Betty. He told her that he had a falling out with Ginny, but was still very much concerned for her. He was under attack again and wanted to make sure that

she was safe. Betty replied, "I still have the charm, I'll bring it over now."

He answered, "I don't think, I'll need it this time; maybe you should let Ginny use it."

He felt Betty trying to think at him, and sensed her surprise when she was unable to make contact. "Are you sure you're all right?" she asked.

"Absolutely. I have been doing some religious study that seems to be paying off. For the time, at least, I seem to be out of harms way."

She sounded a little suspicious of that, and a little worried. "Why can't I see you?"

He answered with something close to the truth. "It seems to be a side effect of the studies.

"But don't worry, it doesn't give me the gift. You will still be able to do all those things that I can't." Paul was amazed that it didn't bother him to say it this time. He was able to do something else.

Betty said that she would take care of Ginny, and do whatever seemed necessary. She would even call the coven to oppose Dave if he was intent on causing problems for potential members.

That taken care of, Paul felt relieved. He knew just how protective his sisters could be.

Chapter 9

Paul felt very good the next morning, rested and alert in spite of the evil that was almost all around him. He noted with considerable satisfaction that it was not as strong as it had been the night before. It had not been able to feed on him, and was losing some of its potency.

There were more important things to do, and he set out to do them. He knew that he would have to be with people to follow the flow, because everything centered around them.

He finished his schoolwork, which really should have been done the night before, and set out to class.

It was amazing what he found that he could do. He was able to say the right thing to people, and they prospered by being near him. He was able to do things for others that really helped them. A right word, an effective and helpful deed; and it was all so simple.

He watched as every little act seemed to add to the whole. The flow around him grew, and increased with each step along that Christian path. He shared his faith where it was effective, he put in a kindness where it did something constructive. And all the while, the flow that was with him seemed to grow.

He looked at others through the flow, and the flow about them seemed to be increasing also. He prospered as they did, and they prospered when he did. The world around him was beginning to change into something new, something more meaningful.

He could hardly understand it himself, except to note that he was only doing what Jesus had commanded people to do in that ministry so long ago. It had all been there, it had been available, and yet it had not been used.

In another sense, he realized that he wasn't able to do what he wanted to do, but that he just did what he was supposed to do. He didn't need magic to have power, he just needed to follow in the obviously correct direction.

That was the difference. Those with the gift were able to do what they wanted to do, whether or not it benefited themselves or others. The power that flowed around and through him was not his own. He was going with a flow that was keyed on something else. Simple though it seemed, his continued effort had an effect that was strong enough to fend off even such spells as that which still dogged him.

It was fascinating.

And as he continued through the day, saying and doing the right thing, the flow concentrating through him continued to increase and grow.

When he looked around at others, they were caught up in the flow themselves. When Paul dealt properly with them, the flow through them became just a little bit stronger also. It appeared that what he was doing was somewhat infectious. He saw others starting to get a feel for doing what he was doing. It was fantastic.

There were no overt changes that the average person would see, but the change was as clear to him as if one of them had suddenly come down with chicken pox. It was all he could do to keep from staring.

He watched as new people entered the sphere where he was having an influence, and it affected them. They seemed to come into line with it, as if they too had some sort of sense which picked up on the flow.

But that didn't make sense, or they would have aligned with it on their own. No, it had to be something dealing with him, and the fact that he was actively practicing what Jesus taught. It was having an effect on the spiritual environment. It was creating a power to which others responded.

Sure, there were some who fought against it, but even they had come in line with some of it as they did. It was apparently not the sort of thing that could be easily resisted.

* * *

Betty and Carol entered the cafeteria with a sense of wonder. Something was not as it should be, and yet it was not wrong. There was something powerful in there, something that was....

Well it was different. It was like some sort of great white magic spell, but it obviously was not a spell. It was compelling, and yet it was not insistent or demanding. It was.... Well, it was different. That was all you could say about it.

They looked for the source in the gift and found none. That failing Betty, she looked with her eyes, and there was little Paul.

It was Paul, but there was something about him that was....

Again, she was stuck for any words to describe it. There was something about him that felt good, but it didn't seem to come from him. There was a sense of incredible power, but it most certainly wasn't him. It couldn't be. It didn't seem to come from him, but seemed to hang in the air around him. It wasn't right, she told herself. She poked Carol in the ribs and indicated that they should sit with Paul. People were...well, it didn't feel the same in there.

When they got to him, Paul was obviously animated. Everyone in the room seemed to be unusually high and enjoying themselves. Both Carol and Betty felt it and wondered at it.

As they approached, it was clear that Paul was in the center of the effect.

* * *

Paul felt their interest in him, and looked up. Seeing his sisters coming, he motioned to them. "God it's good to see you two," he burbled. "I've got the kind of news that is almost too good to be true.

"Do you feel it?"

When they nodded, he leaped ahead with what should have been an explanation, but was so disjointed that they just stared at him in utter surprise.

He noticed the wavering of the flow, and broke it off; realizing that he wasn't getting through. He offered them chairs to give him sufficient time to study the flow.

When he looked at it more carefully, the direction to go was obvious. He said, "I have been studying what Jesus taught, and proceeding directly in line with His lessons. What you feel is what happens when I follow those teachings." He purposefully did not mention his new sensitivity as he could see a high potential for that upsetting the flow. They had to understand that it was nothing abnor

mal. The effective message was that it was something that they could also do, and could have. It had to be a witness for the flow, and not a personal recitation of ability.

“I have found that if you really live within those teachings, there is a flow of something which is with you. It is a power such as I have not felt before.”

“Now I remember,” said Betty. “In church; that is where I have felt something like this. It was when everyone was praying together. It was like a psychic concentration that reached out to other people.

“I do remember it.”

Paul felt the need from the flow and reached back behind his chair, catching the back of the chair of some animated freshman who had been leaning back too far, and would have taken a nasty fall. Paul felt the field react with that little bit of improvement. It had been right. His attention returned to find two very concerned looking sisters.

“How did you do that?” Carol demanded. “How did you know just when to reach back to catch him? You didn’t even look”

Paul didn’t miss a beat. He knew the direction that had to be followed. “It’s easy, once you get in touch with the teachings. It’s so easy that it amazes me.

“All I did to start was to get fully into the lessons, and to start living them. The rest just happened, and is still happening.

“I just follow, doing what is right, and all this seems to happen. It’s almost like magic.”

He looked to the flow; and it had an interesting swirl around Carol, involving a student some tables away. He also noticed that her eyes seemed to stray that way now and again.

What he said was, “Here, watch this.”

Paul got up and went to the student and introduced himself to a rather surprised Mike Stephen. As he did so, he felt the curling of the flow encompass the boy more fully; he knew that he was on the right track.

A minute later, he was introducing Mike to a somewhat embarrassed older sister. Paul had a suspicion, which later turned out to be true, that he had just introduced his sister to her future husband. He

knew it was right because the flow increased ever so little, and it felt right.

Mike had to return to his table for his books, and Carol went with him.

Betty explained that Carol had secretly had her eyes on him for months, but had somehow never found the right time to approach him. “The real question,” she asked, “is how you knew enough to go to that table and to single out that one fellow from among the hundred or so in the room.”

Paul just shrugged as a first answer, “Once you are on the path, it all seems much clearer. You just do what is so obviously right.”

With his natural sensitivity, Paul knew that she was thinking about it. He just waited. He could feel her doubt.

“You’ve got to be doing something else?”

“No!” he answered. “All I am doing is what Jesus instructed us to do.”

He could feel her turning it over in her mind. Could it be that simple? Why wasn’t the world full of people doing it? How could it be that simple, and still be so effective? Was someone playing a trick on her little Paul?

All that came back to Paul in words was, “I’m going to have to think about this.”

Paul, though, was listening though the effect that his revelation was having on the flow. It had increased noticeably with her thinking about it. She would be more effective for it.

What he was doing was in accord with the path that was set before him.

* * *

Dave Dearman watched his marvelous spell die. It didn’t happen all at once, and it didn’t happen from greater forces being applied.

He watched as it died from lack of effect. Strong as he had made it, it had never touched Paul, and had nothing but itself to feed upon.

It was clear now that someone was protecting Paul, someone who had powerful white magic at his or her command. Most depressingly, it appeared to be someone who was fully as effective as Dave, and maybe more so.

It all added to the fact that he was not able to get to Paul Brennen on his own. Someone was frustrating him.

He wondered if it might be the queen of witches, the one who had given Paul the amulet. It held some sort of protective force.

But then he reminded himself that he had looked for it when he had put the spell on Paul and it wasn't protecting him. Paul didn't have it with him when the spell failed either; and yet the spell died from lack of a source of power.

Dave couldn't understand what was so important about that one strange and ungifted schoolboy that would make him the object of such powerful protection.

The one thing that he did understand was that this unknown power, probably the one that had force-grown the rose on his balcony, was challenging him. He couldn't let that go unanswered without losing a great deal of his own prestige in his strongest area.

With that in mind, there was only one direction left for him to go. He didn't have the raw strength to do the job himself, but he did have access to a strength that was considerably greater than his own. It was time to put it to use.

* * *

Space itself seemed to thicken around her as Evelyn awoke. She knew that something was about to happen and that it was wrong. She hoped that Paul would be ready for whatever it was that was brewing.

She automatically checked on him, and was amazed in spite of her knowledge of his growth. It was as if he existed in a sea of psychic power. She couldn't even get near to him. It repelled her at the same time that it attracted her.

She could see him as if from a distance, but could not approach. Just what, she wondered, was this boy becoming?

She was able to observe those around him, and noted exactly what Marcie's girls had seen. Whatever was happening to him

seemed infectious. It was involving everyone, and it had a good feeling to it.

Evelyn knew that it was somehow right, that it was in line with the Path that Paul would walk.

Indeed, she thought, Paul seemed to be even better than his mother when it came to knowing where he was going. There was a fine balance to his effort.

She could feel the tension building though. Whatever was going to happen was going to happen right around Paul. She instinctively knew that he was somehow being prepared to survive it, but she didn't know whether it would protect those around him. Whatever it was that was coming would not be too interested in limiting its effects to Paul.

With that in mind, she looked for the girls. They were spiritually closer to Paul than anyone else, and would be more subject to attack.

She found them through the gift. Betty, she noted, must have spent some time with Paul, because there was a something about her that seemed stronger, and in balance as he was in balance. Carol, of course, was more mature in the gift to start with.

Evelyn was happy to note that Betty still had the amulet. It would provide substantial protection. She insinuated her own gift into Betty and Carol, and passed a suggestion that they remain together for the evening. Evelyn knew that the conflict would spread in their direction if anywhere, and knew that they were stronger together than apart.

Having done what she felt she was able to do, she came back into herself.

* * *

Once more, Dave faced those vicious eyes that stared hungrily at him from the demon face. It spoke, "Well mortal, is it time for you to die?"

Dave knew better than to answer, he had to be in charge or he would be subject to all of his worst imaginings plus some more. "I have some pleasant duty for you."

It cut him off rudely and with such malevolence that Dave stepped back in spite of himself. "I have no need for any pleasantries from you, dead man!"

He had schooled himself well, and resumed as if nothing had happened. That was what the books said seemed to work best. "I give this one to you."

With that he tossed the picture of Paul to the creature.

It barely left his hand before bursting into intolerable flame. A quarter second later, it was a piece of ash floating to the floor. Dave was taken aback by the incredible powers of the creature.

It spoke, "I do this for myself, not for you. All I need from you is permission and an open door. I do this to let you see what will surely happen to you when I get you in my power."

Such was the hatred behind that statement, that Dave found himself shaking as he proceeded with the work.

It was relatively easy, because the Demon itself put its ability to his use. In less than a minute, the doorway was open. There was a demon loose in the world; and it was armed with a terrible purpose.

* * *

Sensitives all over the world blanched at the feel of its eruption into our time and space. It was incredibly powerful and evil beyond human understanding.

The senior sisters headed for their coven, knowing that they might be called to act at any time.

Paul, a very strong sensitive in his own right, and the one nearest the eruption almost skipped a step as he felt something emerge behind him.

He felt it, and it was incredibly powerful and so evil that his knees went weak. It was like nothing he had ever experienced. It made him cold to the marrow. He fought the feeling of terror that suddenly came into being behind him. The evil seemed to be everywhere, leaching reason itself from him and replacing it with madness.

But then he remembered. He had that one thing which no one else had. He could see where he should take the next step.

It took all of his concentration to keep his mind on the flow in front of him. The path went forward one step, and he took that step. The force was still with him. He could feel the something that was coming, and it compressed the forces around him as it came, but the

force remained. Whatever was behind him, it could not yank him out of that flow.

He took the next step, this time faster. Before he knew it, he was walking smoothly. Then he was beginning to run and it felt right. He was running right up the middle of the street as fast as he could go.

He was running with that terror behind him, knowing that it was gaining rapidly. He could see nothing but the force in which he was running. And suddenly the force seemed to leave him.

No, it just took a sharp turn; and he followed it.

He heard the squealing of breaks and the sickening thump of metal against flesh.

Whatever it had been, it was gone. Paul had crossed in front of a truck, and it had run into whatever had been behind him.

What remained was an extremely anxious driver who leaped out of his mangled truck and ran to the front. He had seen Paul, and thought he had hit him.

Paul, however, could be seen holding onto a lamppost.

Then there was puzzlement. What had happened to the truck? Clearly it had to hit something hard and massive to do that kind of damage. It couldn't have been the boy.

The man checked under the truck to see if he had run over whatever it was, but there was nothing. All that remained was the crushed front of the truck and an incredibly nasty smell.

Paul let out a deep breath of relief. The forces in which he traveled had not let him down. He had followed the flow, and the vile thing that followed him had been discouraged.

Now though, the forces that accompanied Paul seemed to have grown. It was even as it had been when others tried to cross the path. The evil that pursued him had added to the flow, and a most significant addition it was. He could feel the increase. He was still on the path. He was shaking and out of breath, but he was alive and doing what the Lord had taught him to do.

* * *

When the demon left the sorcerer, it opened a doorway to Paul. At last it was free to glut itself on the blood of a man.

The demon was loose, and it had Paul as its purpose. It had powers and abilities that rivaled all that existed in the world of men. To this, it added a command of evil that could not even be understood by humans. It had no basis for anything human.

The demon could understand psychic power, and it erupted in a flow of it that was quite surprising. Its victim was in sight but surrounded by something that made Paul difficult to see. Still, the demon charged after him. No power on Earth would dare to deny it the victim that had been given into its hands. It had permission to be there.

As it reached out to seize the fleeing youth, the boy dodged. The demon followed, exerting all of its powers to strip away the cloud that still seemed to separate it from its prey.

No sooner had the demon swerved, than the truck smashed into it, tearing its magical flesh, breaking its psychic bones, and sending it skidding down the roadway.

A demon cannot be killed by physical forces; but it can be mangled and hurt. It knows pain as no creature of earthly flesh and blood can know it; and it doesn't like what it knows. This pain was unthinkable. The demon's fury was beyond human description.

This chase was done, but there were other ways to hurt the victim. The demon slipped back through a door into the nether world and moved to a new place.

* * *

Betty and Carol were nearing their rooms when they felt something coming. One instant it was coming. The next it was there; and it came with terror.

Betty felt the cold hand of death reaching out for her, but then the amulet seemed to spring into a new and more powerful life, living off of her fears and radiating hope in spite of the evil that approached.

Carol reached instinctively for the cross that she wore around her neck, and reached down into her own source of power to meet what was coming.

It was hideous, it was evil, and it was coming for them. In those few moments, they saw something that is rarely seen by any person who survives the instant. They looked full into the face of a demon, and they knew the horror that awaited them. One swift stroke from its claw laid Carol open from her shoulder to her thigh in a fatal wound.

Betty grabbed her as she fell, and felt the amulet gain even more power; but she knew it was not enough. The raw strength of the thing was incredible and it was about to kill her too.

Chapter 10.

Betty held her sister's suddenly lifeless form and waited for the blow that would surely take her life too. The feel of evil was so powerful around her that the air seemed to burn her lungs.

But something else came. The air between her and the monster seemed to thicken, and she was looking at the back of an old woman. Then it happened again, and the woman was joined by robed figures who stood silently between the demon and his victim. There was a sense of immovability to them.

They carried great power in them. The thing that had attacked retreated from them, snarling and spewing such hate that Betty still feared. And then it was gone.

The robed figures turned around, and Betty saw that it was Evelyn and what must have been the entire Senior Sisterhood. They had come to the rescue.

Betty looked down at the torn body in her arms, ripped so badly down the front that the backbone showed where the heart should have been. It was too late, and a sob of pure grief exploded out of her. Carol was dead.

The hand of the Most Senior Sister upon her shoulder brought her back. "Do not fear, little sister. All is not lost yet. Hold her tightly, and we will help you get her somewhere better to work."

The senior coven laid hands upon her, and Evelyn joined them. Then they were somewhere else, a place of steam and vile smells, a place that revolted her human senses. A moment later, they were back again. But now they were in Carol's bedroom. Betty had her first experience of travel through the netherworld.

The Most Senior spoke to Betty, "Lay her on the bed, but do not release her hand. While you hold her, the amulet will preserve her life.

"Sisters, attend me. We must decide on what is to be done."

The senior coven, and Evelyn, retreated to the next room where their voices came back muffled and indistinct. All Betty could do was to cry, but even her tears seemed to desert her.

“This is not going to be easy,” the most senior stated. “We don’t even have the name of the creature.” Evelyn replied, “We have its work, and I can key on that. I don’t see getting in touch to be that great a problem.

“What worries me is that it seems to be so strong, and was operating so freely while it was here. I think someone gave it permission.”

Another spoke, “I sensed its freedom also, we may have trouble binding it to a purpose. Do we have something that can be used to direct it?”

Amray Cham added, “Demonology is not my area, but I know of no force stronger than the combined sisterhood. How will it resist us?”

The most senior answered, “I have dealt with these creatures before, and they can only be compelled once. When they have permission from one of this world, they are free to act. They cannot be compelled beyond that except to stop what they are doing. Permission can be removed, but not taken back.”

“So I have observed,” added another, “and I hate to think what might happen to the senior coven if we should try and fail.”

The Most Senior Sister answered, “We will fail only if we fail to try. The dark creatures cannot be permitted access to our plane without opening a door that could destroy us all.

“If some fool has given authority to one of these, then we must act to remove that authority or to make it ineffective. We cannot allow such a presence to be effective in this world.”

“What of the fool?” asked Amray. If we bring him, then perhaps he can be compelled to remove the permission.”

Evelyn responded, “If someone is strong enough to summon one of these, how are we to compel him. And if we call the one who started this, he will be in with the demon. The demon will then either destroy one of our own or they will join forces, leaving us in worse condition.”

“That is true,” she replied, “and it would sap our strength to give another life to the creature, even a black witch.”

“What do we do then. We can call it up, but what then?”

There was a period of silence, and then with one accord they looked to Evelyn. She was getting that look on her face which most of them knew to indicate her exceptional ability at seeing into the future.

She said, “We will try then, sisters, and we will fail. But the failure will not be for always. I sense something coming that will be a change.”

After a period of waiting, Amray asked, “Do you know what it is, can you see it?”

“No, but I feel the outer fringes of it, and I know that there is change in it for the better.”

The Most Senior Sister ended the discussion, “Then if this is the way that we are to go, let’s get on with it. Our little witches in there have already suffered this longer than they should. Let’s get to work.”

With their concern for the sisterhood, they returned; and the Most Senior spoke to Betty with far more hope than she really felt. “That which magic has done can be undone by magic. As long as your sister lives, the powers that have harmed her can heal her.

“We will summon this foul creature.”

Chalk was produced, and the circle drawn. Amray herself drew the runes with all of her considerable talents, setting them so that the Creature could only leave after its link with Carol had been resolved. With so many accomplished practitioners at work, it was only a matter of minutes before they were ready to call out their summons.

* * *

Marcie suddenly broke out in a cold sweat. She was too sensitive not to feel it. Something was wrong, she had to talk to her girls. Something terrible had happened.

She was on her way home at the time, and it seemed to take hours to get there. And all the while, she knew that something terrible had occurred. She knew she had to be home and to call.

Her last few steps to the phone took an eternity. Why was it so far away? She noticed that her hands were shaking as she dialed. God, how she hoped that they were in.

The phone only rang once before it was answered by a shaky but familiar voice, one that had always been a comfort for her.

“Evelyn, is that you?”

Evelyn replied, “You are right to be worried, Marcie; but I am here, and others with me. I will be very busy for a time, and will not be able to talk with you.

“But I can tell you this. Carol has been attacked by foul magic, and we are here to do what can be done. I will get word to you when all things are completed.”

It was a dismissal, and Marcie put the phone back on the hook. If Evelyn were there, then it was all right, she told herself. There was nothing that she could do that Evelyn could not.

Black magic was being used on her girls. The curse that came from within her toward the author of that magic was not pretty to hear, even though there were none there to hear it. Her family had been attacked.

With that, she resolved not to worry. Her resolution made no difference. Her daughter had been attacked, and was badly hurt, or Evelyn would not be there.

* * *

Evelyn wondered why it took so long to summon the demon. The creature was coming as summoned; but it seemed able to resist. They knew it was a demon, and that meant that it was powerful, but just how powerful was it when it could resist even their combined summons?

Finally, it came, snarling and raking at the limits of the magic circle with razor sharp claws. Venting its foul humor with vile sounds that defy description.

Finding it could not reach the witches, it settled down and looked around. It almost seemed to smile when it saw Carol on the bed.

It indicated the two on the bed and said to all of them, “I will have you all in the end. Look upon your fate.”

The most senior spoke to it with sure strength. “Look again, creature.”

The demon did, and then fixed its demon eyes on Betty. The sure evil in its voice was obvious, “Next time, I will get you too. When I come again, they will not be able to protect you from me. You are mine.”

The most senior spoke again, “You are called to undo what you have done.”

The wicked laughter of the thing filled the room. “I had permission, humans. There is nothing you can do. You will not find healing for her this side of Hell.”

One of the coven started to chant softly, and was soon joined by the others.

The room filled with such psychic energy that the sensitive Betty grew dizzy, but she held fast to her sister’s hand. It wasn’t just the strength of the senior sisters, but the force of the sisterhood itself. Surely, she thought, they would be able to force the creature to do their bidding. This was the senior coven.

The creature seemed to shrink back into itself, but did not move or take any action. And so it continued for many minutes that seemed like days. The compulsion that they threw around the creature was such that the world had not seen its like for a thousand years.

But in the end, the beast seemed to get back some of its energy. It finally laughed on breaking through the spell they tried to weave about it. The demon knew that they could not compel it against the original permission. It had done no wrong in its own world; it owed these mortals nothing. All they had power to do was send it back, or to send it to do more harm. Perhaps they would send it after the sorcerer, and that would be little more than sweet revenge.

The chanting stopped. The senior sisters were quiet for a time, knowing that they had failed. The creature had not defeated them, but they had been unable to compel it to do their bidding.

It was a standoff; but that standoff was temporary with a creature that could wait forever.

Finally, the most senior called to the rest, “Come sisters, we must discuss what is to be done now.”

The demon called after them, "Why leave, you know I can hear you wherever you go. Why don't you tell the little girl that you have failed, and soon I shall have her sister's life."

When they did not stop or pay any heed, "So then, leave me with the little sister; and pray that she is here when you get back!"

* * *

Paul had barely recovered from his initial fright when he felt the terror somewhere else. Something had happened to Carol. He didn't know how he knew it, but there was no question about it.

With his mind still filled with his encounter with the demon, he had a good idea of the source. He knew he had to find out what happened.

For one sick moment he thought Carol might be dead, but then he reached out to her with his natural sensitivity, and found her. It was as if she was far away, as if she was at the bottom of a chasm so deep that he could only hear some faint echo of her rising from the blackness.

Thank God for that, he thought. And he used his sensitivity to find Betty. He could feel her strongly, and feel the wooden amulet throbbing with its hidden power in her purse.

He silently thanked whatever providence had urged him to let her have it. No doubt, it had been a protection for her just like it had been for him.

But there was something to be done. He felt the flow with him as it had not been before, and this time it seemed to carry him along with it. It flowed with him as he walked. It took him where he knew he needed to be.

By common sense, he knew that it was taking him to Carol. As he walked, the power seemed to gather ever more strongly around him. It was almost like a physical force, which directed his footsteps instead of simply going with him. There seemed to be an urgency in it, and yet the pace was measured.

It was a feeling, almost like a voice that was inside of him. It told him that he needed to be where he was going. And with him went the flow.

The flow seemed to be taking him toward his sisters' rooms, which were on the far side of the campus. It was a long way to go, and he began to look for one of the school's bus stops.

The flow, however, did not go there, but continued on. He went with it on foot, trusting to the path upon which he walked.

It had protected him to this point, and he had no reason to doubt it now.

And as he walked, it seemed to grow with him. He was walking the path that the Lord had laid down for people to walk, and even thinking about that made the flow increase. He was going in power.

Then he realized why he was walking. He needed time to think. He needed time to know more surely that he was on the path, and was following the way. He needed time to be sure that the actions he was going to take were in accord with those specific instructions laid down thousands of years before.

And the flow with him swelled, sweeping him along as easily as a flood carries an unresisting leaf. He knew with sure knowledge that the path he was on was marked and true. In keeping with it, he was led to where he needed to be. He was doing the work for which he had come into being.

It was a good feeling. It was security. It was rightness.

* * *

Back in his own apartment, Dave Dearman was both troubled and satisfied by the taste of blood in his mouth. It was not his own, but that of some victim of the demon. He thought that it was probably Paul's.

Well, he told himself, if the power guarding Paul could not protect him, then that was it. If it could, then it was probably the protector's blood; and that was even better.

One way or another, he was coming out on top.

He reached out with his senses to find the demon, but it was nowhere to be found. Perhaps it had completed the mission and returned to the other world. Perhaps it had not, and was waiting for a better opportunity. Whatever was going on, Dave knew that it was for his betterment. No one was going to deny his magic this time around.

The creature was the personification of magic and would stand up to any test.

Unlike his own spells, this was a living magic creature, one that needed no source of power beyond itself. It would not die out or go away until it had been satisfied.

True, it was evil in a sense that was difficult to even describe, but he had only used it as a last resort. He had tried everything else in his power without effect, and only this was left.

If only it weren't for the destructive capability of the thing. It bothered him that he had let it loose.

Chapter 11

It was almost half an hour later when Evelyn felt something of the change itself. There was a shift that changed things, but had not changed them yet. Her hope was renewed in spite of the coven's inability to do anything with the creature. There was something coming.

"Have hope sisters," she said, "the change that I felt is on the way."

Only one or two of them were sensitive enough to feel it then, but soon it was obvious to them all. There was a flow of power approaching that was almost frightening in its strength.

Then there was a knock at the door. Evelyn went and let Paul in.

As he entered, Evelyn saw that Paul was aware that something was definitely wrong. He obviously sensed the terror in the other room, but turned his attention back to her. Her calm attitude would tell him that the beast was contained. Evelyn knew that her presence there would indicate some sort of serious problem, and leave him wondering what was going on.

At least she thought he would wonder. She knew that there was something that she didn't know about the boy, and he might know a lot more than even she suspected.

Evelyn took him aside immediately, and gave him a nutshell description of their situation before telling it to him again in detail. It took some time to relate their efforts and the details of the situation to him. Evelyn had to tell him that his sister was grievously injured, and would surely die if the harm was not be reversed by the creature that had caused it.

While this was progressing, the Senior Sisterhood said nothing, but waited to see what this unusual young man had to offer. He was not like anyone known to them. Evelyn could feel them thinking at him and wondering at the puzzle that he had become. He had no gift,

but walked in such a concentration of power that their combined strength could not match him.

She could almost hear them thinking; perhaps he could...but then, no he could not. It wouldn't work because he did not have the gift.

* * *

Paul finally had an idea of the situation, and he went in to see how Betty was holding up. Looking at Carol brought tears to his eyes. It was only through magic that she could be alive with such a hideous wound. Betty was there, and that seemed right.

The next thing he felt was anger, a blinding rage that rose up from somewhere within. He turned and looked full in the face of the demon, with its eyes of purest hate. It spoke to him, "You escaped me for the moment only. You have been given to me and I shall teach you pain that you cannot even imagine."

His nature as a sensitive told him to run, but he did not. This was the only thing standing between him and his sister's life, and he was there for that purpose.

Reaching into his own stubborn courage, he looked the creature full in the face using his new sense of the flow.

He saw the strong bands of benefit potentials coinciding with the magic circle that held it fast in the world. He saw the bands that reached into some other place. And he also truly saw the creature.

There was something about it, something that connected it with Carol, the life that it would take.

Somehow he knew it. The demon could not be free until Carol was dead, or the harm reversed. It was a captive so long as she lived. It had to kill her, or give her up. There was nothing in between.

He looked deeper into the creature, following the flow of potentials back into the heart of all that made it what it was. He saw the almost endless possibilities for harm that it held. He saw its hatred and vile nature in opposition to anything that might be beneficial to others. He looked, and saw a demon for what it was.

And then he looked at it another way, seeking for its source of power.

What he found surprised him. The Demon's beneficial force came through the bands of potential that connected it to somewhere else. It survived and continued on benefits carried from that other place. That is why it was so strong. That is why the senior sisters had not subdued it. Its source of power had not even come under attack.

He felt the creature watching him, and knowing that he was seeing something different than other mortals. Its fury was incredible. Its hate washed out at him like a physical force; but he stood his ground unflinching. It obviously wasn't able to get at him.

He just withdrew his vision from it, and went back to speak to the witches. Perhaps they could use what he saw.

* * *

Evelyn listened while he related his vision of the creature, and that its source of life force seemed to be something that could be tapped, or even cut.

Keeping him with her, she called the coven to encircle her, and there was some heated discussion as to the best means for proceeding. It was decided to partially cut the cord and divert the creature's own power to their purpose. To cut the cord through would be to destroy the creature; and the power to reverse the magic would be gone forever.

They also decided that a second senior sister, Amray, should also be removed from the entire proceedings to watch their efforts from far away. With what Paul had told them, they were going to try working with something that witches had never had before; and they wanted to make sure that the record of their actions was preserved for future use. This was something entirely new, and there was always a chance for difficulty when dealing with a creature as dangerous as this one.

None of them could see the beneficial flow that fed the creature, but they had reason to believe that Paul could direct them. They could see the doorway between the two worlds, but had never really known why such a hole could not be closed. Through Paul, they had a new understanding of the nature of the problem facing them.

They started to chant, and Paul felt them come into alignment with the flow of force that flowed with and through him. It was a very

good sign. Their psychic energy seemed to merge with and become a part of the flow, making it even thicker and stronger.

And as they chanted the start to the spell, he saw a swirling start to form, an eddy in the flow. He watched it, and knew that it was a knife to reach into the Demon's very life. He watched, and the flow seemed to respond to something in him as the sensitive witches directed their energy.

There was a period of experimentation where the witches would respond to various directions that Paul gave, and he observed the results. He was an excellent logician, and soon had a good understanding of the approach he would have to take.

Little by little, he urged the witches to move their tool into the area of the demon's lifeline. They were rewarded by the hideous and frightful sounds of the creature trapped in the circle.

They touched the cord that connected the creature to the other world. It cried out in such an unearthly sound that the swirl of their spell seemed to waver for an instant before going forward once more.

As suddenly as lightening, the creature was gone.

For an instant, Paul wondered if it had been destroyed, but they hadn't cut the flow. No, whatever had held it there had failed, and it had escaped.

Paul glanced toward the bed, and there was Betty, still holding Carol. There was one great difference; the wound was gone. It was not healed; it was just not there. The magic that had made the wound had been annulled.

Paul felt the presence of the Senior Sisterhood depart. Their work was completed and they left.

He heard Evelyn's voice, for she alone remained, "What magic has done, short of death itself, magic can undo. Once the creature had withdrawn its effect on Carol, it was no longer bound. It is gone for now.

"Isn't it odd that an intelligent creature that has so little respect for the life of other creatures would cling so strongly to its own."

* * *

Suddenly, Dave felt the most amazing pain of his life. It was as if he had been ripped apart, and was just as suddenly jammed back together.

He found himself on the floor; and something wet oozed from his nose, ears and eye sockets. What could have happened?

Getting up, he found himself to be extremely sore all over, and with a terrible headache. He stumbled to the bathroom to get an aspirin, and to see if he looked as severely damaged as he felt.

Clearly, something had happened, but what?

The only possibility seemed to be the demon that he had set free on the Brennen kid. What had the creature done to cause this?

There was a taste in his mouth that...well, that could not be described.

One look in the mirror told him that the wetness he felt was blood, and that it was his own.

That seemed odd. In magic, blood was life; and this was clearly not the life of some victim. It didn't make sense.

The bleeding from the ears and eyes had stopped almost immediately, and the nosebleed was coming under control. It just didn't make sense. What could have happened?

He cleaned up and eased himself to bed. He felt horribly pained. It wasn't a curse, but he still ached all over. It had to be something to do with the demon.

Still, it was not good practice to make any contact while he was hurting like this. He might make mistakes, and the price of a mistake with that creature would be his very life.

He had to correct himself. Eventually, it would be his life, but only after the creature satisfied itself that it could no longer torture him without killing him anyway. With that in mind, Dave knew he could wait.

* * *

Carol sat up, wondering how she had gotten into bed, and why Evelyn was there.

Then she remembered the terror, and the feel of the thing's claw raking through her. She almost fainted from the memory of the pain.

But then she reached to her chest. It was as it should be. There was no wound. She looked puzzled up at Evelyn.

The old witch responded with a touch on her shoulder. "It is all right, child. You have survived what should have been your worst nightmare, and you have returned."

"There will be a time for other things later. For now, be thankful that you have been called back into the world."

Carol wanted them to know what she had seen. She had to tell them. "But I was somewhere else. There was a bridge and I wanted to cross, but this creature of fire wouldn't let me. I wanted to be on the other side, but I couldn't go there."

Evelyn spoke softly to her, "It's all right, Carol." Evelyn seemed to look inward for the moment, "I have been there too, and spend quite a bit of my time there now in my dreams."

"You were very near death, and what you saw across the bridge was a garden well known to us all. The wooden disk that Betty carries is what held you back, and preserved you for the rest of your life in this world."

"You are back with us now."

Carol was obviously disturbed by this, "But I wanted to cross over."

"I know, child. We all want to cross that bridge." And then with a bit of mischief in her aged smile, "The difference is that I will soon make it. You, on the other hand, have a lot of living to do right here."

Paul watched in fascination as Evelyn set to work without his sisters even knowing that she did. Little by little the flow about them thickened, and began to twist and swirl, until they existed in a little whirl of flow.

And then they nodded, and were asleep.

She turned to him with a smile. "I wouldn't try to put you to sleep, young man. We have things to do."

"First of all, we need to pool our knowledge on what happened. There is much to be learned."

"Can you tell me what you sensed?"

He proceeded to do so, in as great a detail as he could, describing the appearance of the spell they made, and the appearance of the cord.

He told how the spell had just touched the cord, and it was over.

"That's it?" she asked, "You must have felt or sensed something after that."

"No," he assured her, "that was it."

He could see her thinking on that one; and then her face lit up. "It's even better than I could have hoped.

"The demon is a creature of magic, and its only existence is its power. When we touched its supply of power, we threatened to unmake it. Any disturbance can destroy it. Just touching this source as we did must have hurt it terribly. It either had to run or die."

Then Evelyn looked up and away, "Amray, were you listening?"

The voice came back to both of them. "I have it all. I don't think we'll ever have that much trouble with demons again. We finally know where they are vulnerable.

"I will carry it back to the coven, and I deliver the thanks of the Senior Sisterhood for your efforts in this.

To you, Paul I speak on behalf of the entire Sisterhood. We recognize a debt that is owed to you. You have performed a service for us that will not be forgotten."

And then the voice was gone.

Evelyn knew just how seriously the Senior Sisterhood took such a promise, and wanted to make sure that Paul understood its full impact. "She really means what she said.

"You will be able to ask one boon from the Senior Sisterhood; and they will grant anything that is in their power to do. Choose what you would ask carefully."

Paul replied, "I don't have to ask now, do I?"

She laughed at that, "No, of course not. But I feel that there will come a time when you will have something important to ask of them as an organization.

"Now give me a moment. I have to call your mother. She will have felt the end of the threat, and will be expecting to hear from me."

* * *

Marcie had tried to keep her thoughts on something else, but it did not work. No matter what she tried to do, there was a feeling that welled up inside her and brought tears into her eyes. Her daughters had been attached by black magic.

Finally, she could stand it no longer. With an effort beyond her own vision of her strength, she reached out with the gift in a way that she had promised she would never do again. She reached out to Carol in spirit, calling upon all that was holy to aid her.

Still, it seemed to fail. The lively spirit that was Carol was not to be easily found. Betty was there, but Carol was not with her.

Then she reached deeper in her search and found what she sought. Carol wasn't with her other daughter, but in some gray place. She silently cursed herself for not practicing what Evelyn had shown to her those many years ago. It was like a place she half recognized, but this was somewhere she could not remember clearly.

Carol was there but could not be seen as usual. She was alive, but something was still very wrong.

Then Marcie remembered what it was that was so familiar about the scene. She looked again with a moment of panic that cleared the grayness before her, and there was Carol.

Her panic was justified. She looked at the scene again, and her worst fears seemed to be coming true. It was the gateway to the afterlife, and her Carol was moving resolutely toward the bridge.

She tried to call out, but could not. She was not really there. She tried to reach out in the gift, but her gift was not equal to the task.

Then she prayed, as only one in deepest despair can pray, with her whole being wrapped up in it. She prayed to the one force that would be able to do all things. She wanted her first born back!

In front of her daughter, a wooden disk appeared, and Marcie recognized it as the one she had passed on to Paul. It had grown, and rapidly became a fiery figure. It upraised its flaming hands to hold Carol back.

She stepped sideways, and the figure moved with her. It would not let her cross.

Marcie watched and prayed for what seemed like an eternity.

Always Carol tried to get to the bridge, and always the figure was before her barring her way.

Then came a flash, and Carol was gone.

While Marcie watched, the fiery figure turned back into the disk, and then shrank down to its original size. A few moments later, it had faded and was also gone. Marcie was alone in the land of gray.

She looked at the bridge, and across; and she felt that terrible longing to go there. It was so beautiful.

But there was something in her that sensed the wrongness of it. It was like some inner sense of balance; and she made the effort to return.

Marcie came to her senses in her own room bathed in sweat. It was all right, Carol had not crossed over. She whispered a prayer of thanks to God for preserving her child.

Some minutes later the phone rang, and Evelyn spoke, "It is done for the time. Betty and Carol have been through a harrowing experience, but all things are returned to normal."

"I want to talk to them," she replied.

The voice on the phone said, "Later, Marcie.

"Knowing a little of what they suffered, I put them to sleep. They are both quite safe for now, but will need time to get on their feet again."

"But Evelyn," she said, "I was there. I saw Carol by the bridge into the afterlife. She was trying to cross!"

Evelyn seemed to know the answer that was needed. "We all want to cross, and she had been horribly treated in this world. It is only the gifted who can even resist for a little while.

"Don't fear, Marcie. She is not suicidal, the reason for her need to escape has been removed, and she is back as she was. The foul magic around her has been completely and finally annulled.

"I will assure myself that what has happened to her will not be threatened again. Rest easy, and thank God that all has turned out as well as it has."

They terminated the call.

* * *

When she put the phone down, Evelyn changed tone, “Now back to business. We have the problem of the demon to consider again. It is still out there, and it still has permission to act in the world until it has harmed you. We did not upset that permission which had been granted, and it will attack again as soon as it dares. “What we need to do now is to go to the source, and to get the permission removed. While I don’t fear for you, there are others who will certainly suffer unless we can bring this to some sort of conclusion.

“I take it that you have a good idea of who is responsible.”

She could tell by looking at him that he did. “And I take it further that this is a personal matter.”

He replied, “I really don’t know, except that we both are interested in the same girl. That might be behind it?”

To herself she said, “It would have to be a witch.” Then to him, “I don’t think it would be wise to bring her into this any more than absolutely necessary, but we will have to visit this sorcerer together, and as soon as possible.

“Before that, though, I need to have some sort of understanding of what is going on with you. I only know that there have been changes, I don’t know what they are.”

She listened then, as Paul related the story from the beginning. It was fascinating.

For most of her life she had known that the really powerful magic was white, but had not expected such a simple way of getting in touch with it. No wonder she had been so able. She had always striven to follow those same directions.

It made her a little jealous that she wasn’t able to see the way Paul did, and probably made a lot of little errors. Still, she knew she had had more power than could be called strictly her own.

It made good sense, and she was genuinely happy for Paul that he had been able to discover his path so clearly. It was something that she vowed to share with Marcie, if she ever got the chance. Paul’s mother would appreciate both that it provided a sense of balance, and that it was a step in the development of her boy’s faith.

Paul finished his story with the strange direction he had received. He was to walk to his sisters' apartment instead of taking a conveyance, even though time seemed terribly important. Evelyn accepted this as half expected. Paul would now be able to take directions that would be invisible to everyone else.

She almost had to laugh at that. There was no way that anyone else could follow what he was doing. His direction was so specific that even the slightest advantage would be open to him. It was no wonder that he had the flow of power going with him. He was coming perfectly in tune with the ultimate source of power in the universe.

Chapter 12

Paul remembered the way to Dave Dearman's apartment, and Evelyn was just as glad to let him arrange transportation. It gave her time to prepare herself for what would certainly be a trying experience.

She knew that anyone who summoned up the demon originally would be one very powerful magician, and she would need to have her wits about her at all times. She would be dealing with a man who was extremely strong in the gift.

At that, she had to laugh a little at herself. What did strong-in-the-gift mean in the presence of someone like Paul? What was her gift relative to what Marcie's little boy had going for him?

She once thought that she had been gifted, but her gift was little relative to what Paul would have when he came fully into what he was.

Still, she would need to be in tune with Paul if she wanted to share in his ability. It was a situation where she would be able to lean upon him, and follow his lead instead of having to take charge of others.

She felt of the space about her, and it was charged as she had never experienced it before. When Paul went with his vision, then those of the gift would have to beware. No level of magic would ever again be a threat to him.

She calmly recognized that this was exactly the situation. The boy had been given a sort of favor that was denied to others.

He had been chosen for something, and was empowered to fulfill whatever it was.

That gave her a moment of pause. The strength of a tool usually follows from the harshness of its formation. As she remembered the training, "The colder the quench, the harder the steel. The greater the malformation, the tougher the product."

What Paul and his sisters had just gone through was such a baptism in trouble and power that she could only guess at what they would become.

Paul had called a cab.

* * *

The aspirin was starting to have an effect, and Dave Dearman's headache was down to a dull throbbing. He needed to know what had happened to him? He had to struggle in getting his aching body off the bed and into the bathroom. He needed to see if there were any effects, he couldn't go anywhere if he looked as bad as he felt.

The worst of all was the memory of that horrible taste in his mouth. It was something that could not be forgotten.

With a start, he realized that it had to be the taste of blood. The teachings were clear on this. It was the way of the manifestation that appeared when demons were set on a path. The originator felt what the demon felt, killed where the demon killed, and took responsibility for all that was done.

Surely, he thought, this was not blood as he knew it.

Then a horrible thought struck him. It was the demon's blood that he tasted. It was the demon's wounds that he felt.

Something impossible had happened, and even that powerful creature of magic had met its match.

He had to wonder, had it been destroyed?

That was not right, he reminded himself, he had accepted the burden of the creature, and would be dead himself if it had been killed. It had merely been horribly defeated.

But that just didn't make sense. How could you defeat something that lived eternally on magic? It was not subject to the limitations of the world, but only to those of magic itself. It did not make sense.

Did the white magician make a magic creature of his own? But that would be black magic? It just did not make sense.

Dave's sense of outrage was so great that he almost forgot the pain. It was happening again. He was being frustrated by some sort

of magic greater than his own. Someone was playing with him, and that was intolerable. It was unthinkable. He couldn't stand it.

The physical discomfort meant nothing. What really hurt was that someone was playing with him, doing magic on so high a level that even such a practitioner as he was could not know what was happening. It was an outrage.

With the feeling of outrage came the ability to overcome some of the pain. He was beginning to think clearly again, and to feel the power flowing through him once more.

He sampled the feel of the air, and there was something coming. It was a long way off, but it was thinking about him and was heading his way. He automatically looked for the source, but there seemed to be none.

Perhaps he was finally going to meet the mysterious workman who was causing him so much trouble. If he found him, he promised himself, there was going to be one sorry magician. No more working behind a screen; no more hiding and working at a distance. He would have to be faced directly.

He waited with some anticipation. And the force seemed to come toward him, growing as it came. Dave had to admit that even he was impressed by what he felt.

It approached, but he couldn't tell where the center of it was located. Whoever was making the force was certainly a master at disguise.

He felt the flow thicken as someone entered the building, someone he didn't know. It had the feel of a witch, and a very powerful one, but she wasn't at the center of the force. The power didn't seem to have a source.

He looked again with the gift, and she was alone. It was definitely puzzling.

Knowing that she was nearing the door, he called out, "Come on in," and he waited.

The door opened, and Paul Brennen stepped through.

* * *

Evelyn felt the searching of the gift while they were still some distance from the sorcerer's lair. This David Dearman was indeed

impressive. There was an ease in the monitoring, a sureness that did not have to expend great power for a small task. The young man would be very sure of his gift.

She felt the probing as it looked for the center of what was the flow around Paul, and imagined how surprised he would be. Paul could not be seen through the gift, and the power did not come from him. It would be a new experience that would probably leave Mr. Dearman a little off balance. That could be valuable.

The feel of his looking through the gift continued throughout the rest of their trip, but Evelyn was careful not to look back. She didn't want to announce herself, or provide any more information than was absolutely necessary. It would be better if he were uninformed when they first met with him.

She felt contact being made when she neared the door. It was the first time that he had actually felt of her to see who she was. He wouldn't have a lot of time to prepare himself, but someone of his gift wouldn't need much.

She heard the voice that beckoned them in, and she watched through the door as Paul entered. She found the momentary surprise in the eyes of the sorcerer to be most satisfactory. Paul was a puzzle not easily to be solved.

David Dearman appeared to be a young man, but obviously very capable. He was waiting for something, and something had come. It was just a very different something than he was expecting.

She slipped in behind Paul.

Dave didn't miss anything, and asked her? "Surely you aren't the force behind this boy?"

His delivery was somewhat condescending, but she ignored it. He would learn better soon enough, and there was little that she had to do in that regard.

Dave waited for a second and continued, "I feel the power around you, and I know that it is not yours. I will know who I am dealing with."

It was a command to that unknown person, but it was Paul Brennen who replied. "There is no one else with us, only the two of us have come to speak with you. We do not come for a contest in magic."

Again, Evelyn had to marvel at how fast the sorcerer recovered from the surprise of the situation, and set to work along a different path. “Then I would expect some sort of explanation for the force which surrounds you. I know it is not from you.”

As agreed, Paul was the spokesman, so Evelyn contented herself with being there as a backup. He replied, “You are not dealing with magic, but the flow of the world itself. There is no magician, just a following of the teachings of Jesus, and the attendant concentration of benefits for people. That is what has crossed your efforts in the past and continues to cross you.”

Again, Evelyn saw the unusual versatility of the sorcerer; he did not accept it as true, but was perfectly willing to work with it as a premise subject to later verification. He was fast.

“I find it difficult to understand how the flow of the world suddenly came around you. What did you do to gather it?”

Paul was open, “I told you, I just followed the teachings of Jesus. The flow is in the world, and I have taken the effort to align with it. Jesus is the lord, and this is His world. How else could I have what you now feel?”

Dave answered, “I suppose it is possible, but I know several means by which such power can be generated.”

Paul had an answer ready, “You know that I am not gifted, and you know that I am not the center of the effect.

“Look to the effect itself, it has a power that I could not amass from any source except the one I have presented to you. Look to the energy, and the fact that even now I am only partly in tune with it.”

“We’ll let it ride,” said Dave, “and get to the question of why you are here.”

Paul intentionally let a little of the Rancor he felt creep into his voice. “Much as I question the immediate value of it, the path I walk leads here. You have been taking actions that are ultimately harmful, both to yourself and to others. This is in discord with the teachings of Jesus.”

Dave was scornful, “You came here to warn me off?”

“No,” replied Paul, getting control over his voice again, “I am here because I am compelled to be here to keep with the flow. I am

here to tell you that you are putting things into motion that can only lead to harm to you.

“In that sense, I am here to be of service to you. I am here to demonstrate a love for you exceeding what you have shown to yourself. I carry the message that there is someone who loves you this much.”

Dave let it sink in before answering, “That is all very nice I am sure, but what’s in it for you. I hardly think that you and the old witch would come here for my benefit.”

Paul replied, “Silly as it may sound to you, we are both here for that same general purpose. I grow by fulfilling the teachings. I cannot prosper without being of service to you.

“You, on the other hand, will not prosper at all along the path you now pursue. To continue will bring serious harm; and it is most likely that it will be harm to you. I gain by bringing this knowledge to you; and you gain by accepting what is offered.”

Evelyn noted that this was beginning to drift, and brought it back in line with her purpose in being there. “We still have the problem of a demon loose in the world. It is loose in this world with permission.”

Dave knew how to deal with that, “Ah, little sister. Now we come to the heart of the thing.”

Evelyn continued, “I once thought it had to be the central theme too, but have learned better. It is a peripheral issue, but still one of great importance. For such a creature to be unleashed is a threat to our entire existence. It has great powers for destruction, and they are currently focused on the son of an old friend of mine.”

Dave took another look at her, both with his eyes and with the gift. “Yes, it is you. The former queen of witches.”

Evelyn continued, “I take it personally that you directed the vile thing to attack any other human. The danger of doing it was unwarranted, and you take the risk of allowing yourself to be destroyed and your considerable gift incorporated into the foul creature.

“The Sisterhood exists only to preserve, never to destroy. We met your creature, and saved one sister from its violence, but it is foolish to think that we can continue to do so forever. If you let it continue, you risk losing your own self to it.”

He replied with unhidden sarcasm, “And you care for me too, little sister?”

She was far too skilled a hand to let anyone get to her. She just replied evenly enough, “Not so much as Paul seems to. But I do respect your ability too much to want to lose it to the other world. I would see it preserved.”

Her honesty seemed to break the tension of the moment, and he actually laughed. “How like a sister. You are so concerned for everything but the person. And Paul here cares only for the person.

“Perhaps the two of you need to go somewhere and get together on what you want.”

Again, she took the direct path, “It’s not that we want different results, only that we want the same result for different reasons. My interest is, as you must know, in the welfare of the sisterhood. Paul is seeking something higher. You are a currently the same problem to both of us.”

“You wish to remove the problem, little sister?”

She replied, “I would rather that there was no problem. I am not in a position to remove one, but you are.”

Paul sampled the flow, and interrupted, “I see a problem for you that she probably does not. There are other forces at work here. There are not just the interests of yourself and the creature; the flow of powers are not just with me; they are everywhere in the world. They will work to your harm unless you get in line with them.”

Dave was attentive, “Well then, what do you see?”

“I see a flow in the world that rejects the interloping power from another plane. In time, the beneficial forces will reject the demon, leading to the creature’s return to the other plane or its destruction. To continue after this, you must have broken free of your relation to the thing.”

“And where do you see this force from?”

Paul wasn’t sure how to answer that one, except by example. “The same source as the flow of energy which now surrounds me.

“Even as I am able to align with it, the creature must oppose it. The more it acts in the world, the stronger the flow’s opposition

becomes; and your demon will be forced back by a reaction to its own effectiveness. Its return or destruction appears inevitable.”

Evelyn saw Paul turn deliberately to her, “We have done what we can here. No one but Dave can do any more.”

He turned back to the sorcerer. “I did not come here on my own, nor do I leave that way. I follow a path that is laid before me; and take actions that can be predicted.

“My own personal wishes are not so governed. I owe you nothing, no debt to be paid or service to be rendered. I have warned you of the destructive potential you face because it was necessary for me to do so to stay on the path.

“This is not the end, nor does it express my feelings. I feel an immense hostility to you for what your demon did to my sisters.”

Evelyn saw an unexpected effect that this had on Dave, he seemed not to know what his creature had been doing, and to have some real feelings for Betty and Carol.

“They are all right?” he asked.

“No thanks to your creature,” he replied.

Evelyn figured as much. Damage to the sisters could easily spell the end of the coven that Dave was leading. Witches would not follow him if his actions lead to harm to the members. Witches could be gullible, but they were rarely stupid. The attack on the girls had been a mistake, an unforeseen result of Paul’s ability to resist the demon.

Dave was formal, “I will carry my apologies to them myself, and would appreciate it if our conversation remains with us.” Evelyn couldn’t help butting in with, “Paul has told you the situation. We owe you nothing. If your actions harm those around you, you cannot expect people to respect your wishes.

After a moment’s pause for obvious introspection, she continued, “This, I believe, is a minor example of what Paul has been addressing. If you buck the flow, then you are likely to be the ultimate recipient of the harm that results. This includes problems with those whose company you have been enjoying.

“If you wish to get back to the position you have held before, please consider putting things back as they were.”

She could see Dave thinking about it, but not accepting it at face value. She knew that he might do so later, but for the time being he was pursuing other lines of thought.

He replied, "Coming from you, sister, I will certainly think about it.

"But there still remains my situation with Paul. I want to know how you stand in this."

It was her turn to laugh, "He needs nothing from me. Look, to the force in which he travels."

Dave kept to the point, "Yes, but is he under protection from you?"

She turned and looked at Paul before answering, "He once was, but no longer. I would not burden him with my efforts, as it would only weaken him.

"I strongly suggest, young man, that you concentrate your thoughts along the same line. You cannot use the gift against him without bucking the natural flow of force in the world.

"Great though you may be in the gift, that would not be something to undertake lightly. Again, I urge you to call back the permission you have set into place so that the world can return to a calmer state. The creature will be unlikely to attack Paul again without compulsion, and that will only involve you more fully in its failure.

"I can assure you that the demon will not succeed against Paul, though others might be injured. There is no guilty party to this point, no one who can properly be blamed of any true wrong. What you do from this point forward, you do on your own and after warning."

With that, Paul and Evelyn turned and left, and the flow was with them.

Chapter 13.

Paul was elated. He had met with the sorcerer without just turning and running. He knew that he was outmatched in ability to perform, but it hadn't mattered. He had been able to get in, do what had to be done, and leave without harm.

He was also keenly aware of the support and help provided by Evelyn, that wonderful old witch who had always been so supportive.

He turned to her, and the flow responded to let him know that he was following a proper path. "I feel that I owe you so much, but a late snack is all that I can afford."

He was rewarded by her wrinkled old smile. She looked so tired. Paul wondered how old she was, but hesitated to ask. There were rumors of the more powerful of the gifted people reaching great ages, and retaining much of their youthful zest for living.

When she nodded her assent, they got back into the cab that had been waiting, and away they went. There was a pizza place that Paul frequented near his dorm.

Evelyn looked around. It was a typical little restaurant catering to a college crowd. It had inexpensive food, minimal service, and was not terribly clean. But it did have quiet, and she felt a need for that.

She looked at Paul; what a strange vision he must have to actually see the flow of possibilities in the world. It must be both a blessing and a burden.

"Tell me, Paul. What do you see when you look about you."

There was no reluctance in the answer, "Do you see that fellow out front; he's bucking the flow over a girl whose path does not run with his. She will eventually reject him. I see the two boys over near the bar in intimate relationship, their lives intimately intertwined but the relationship is against the flow; one of them must leave, but it is not immediate. I see so much more, but there is so little that I can do to bring out the best effects."

Then he turned his attention back to her, “I have always known that you had unusual vision. What do you see that might be of help to me in sorting this all out.”

She knew better than to put her visions on him. They would only be a burden. Instead, she asked, “And what do you see when you look at me?”

She saw the hesitancy and knew that he saw the coming end, perhaps more clearly than she did. Bless the boy, she thought. He didn’t want to cause me any grief.

To stave that off, she added, “Don’t bother to predict long life, I have already seen the end, and I know where I go. What I need to know now is what you see.”

Her candor seemed to bring him comfort. He looked at her with renewed intensity. “You are a very complex person when seen through benefits, your flow is intertwined with so many others.”

She just waited until she was rewarded with more observations. He continued, “I am one of the last people you will see. The actual last one is a witch, one with a tie to you that is unusual but very strong.”

That, of course, would be Amray. Evelyn wondered if Amray really would be there when her old companion and adversary left the world behind? It was an interesting thought, and she pursued it through the gift.

Her vision was clear, she would be alone in her room. That wasn’t it. Her vision was clear, she would be returning there after this outing, and she would not leave.

“Where then?” she asked herself.

She looked again, this time focusing on Amray herself. And then it was clear. She could see Amray standing silently by as she crossed over that final bridge. That powerful wonderful woman would be there to see her final moment of life, to clasp her elder sister’s hand, and to provide her a final salute that only one of the sisters could provide. The kindness of it, the dignity of it brought tears to her eyes.

Paul continued, “I must say that there isn’t a great deal to be seen except that your effect will continue with others for a long time to

come. I can see your continuing effect on me, and your life is twined with Mom's. You will not be forgotten."

Evelyn knew that time was short, and got out pen and paper. She would have to get a note to Marcie while she still had time. She owed her that much, letting her know of the situation with the children, and that they would succeed in life.

She saw so much, and could tell so little. She was incredibly tired. The efforts of the day had exhausted her old body. She accepted that it was the final effort that put her aging shell into a state from which there would be no recovery.

She finished the note while they ate.

"I have to leave, Paul," And she handed him the note.

"I know," he answered.

She reached back into that which made her a witch, and stepped into the other world, popping back into her own room and onto her own bed. Soon, she knew she could begin really living once more.

* * *

Dave watched Paul and the aging witch go with considerable irritation. They had seemed reasonable, and were certainly sincere in what they were saying, but something in him rejected their concern for him.

He wasn't just any fool; he was one powerful sorcerer. He didn't need to have some old witch and an ungifted boy giving pronouncements.

"The witch is nearly dead anyway," he spoke to himself. "She must be older than Methuselah."

The marks of the coming end were so clear than no one could have missed them, and yet she was there giving him advice. She wouldn't give him any problems, she would be too busy just staying alive.

Dave was beginning to feel a little better. His headache was just about gone, and the aching of the body was easing. Soon, he would be able to work again.

He sensed his two visitors moving off by the receding of the flow of power that was with them. It struck him as an odd phenomenon,

but there was no arguing that it was effective. Whatever Paul was doing, or was having someone do for him, it was working.

He couldn't help wondering, though, about the warnings from the old witch. Dave knew enough not to scoff at what any senior sister had to say. The history of practical advice from the senior sisters was so well founded that there was no question about it being proper.

He would do well to limit his contact with the demon to the minimum, and to back away from it before it became too dangerous. He trusted his own ability to provide a warning period. He felt he could still use the brute up to that point.

That even gave him a few moments of pleasant thoughts. If the demon was forced back by its own failures, then its hold over him would be considerably weakened or even broken. If he timed everything right, he could have his cake and eat it too.

To get to that point, he would need to be fully sensitive to the creature, and that meant an even closer alliance. He would also have to have the tools at hand to cut the relationship with minimal lead-time. The spell would have to be half formed, and in a state of readiness.

He knew that what he was planning was extremely dangerous, both for himself and others, but he trusted to his own skills and ability to keep it from getting out of hand.

He decided that he was too tired, and still too distracted to do any great work in the art. He would need a full night's rest, and would have to spend most of the next day at work. Tomorrow night he would be ready to work magic again, and this time he would know considerably more about what he was up against. It would be a different outcome than his last disaster.

* * *

Carol woke up just before the night started to lighten. She was still dressed, and draped across her bed with Betty.

"That witch," she whispered to herself in admiration, "she put me to sleep and I didn't even know it. What a skilled worker she is."

Then her memory of the early evening came flooding back to her. She really had been very near death. She remembered the demon, and the nightmare that the creature was.

Somehow it seemed far away, like something that happened years ago. She realized that Evelyn had been wise to give her time to recover. It allowed the memory to fade. She didn't retain her longing to cross over into death; she wanted to be alive.

She sensed the air of the place, looking for what had happened. Paul had been there. What was her little brother doing there? He couldn't have helped with what they were up against.

She looked down at her sister who was beginning to stir. She could feel the amulet in Betty's Purse, and it had retreated back to its original power. Even that was impressive, but there was the memory of the real strength that seemed to sleep in the thing. It had kept her from doing something stupid.

Betty was almost awake, so she gave her a quick push. "Get up, slug. You've been slacking off long enough."

As Betty protested, Carol headed for their one bathroom first. Neither of them would be prepared for their classes, but what the heck.

* * *

Dave had thought about his situation throughout the day, and had prepared himself carefully for the evening's tasks. He was a supreme magician, and at his peak of his powers.

He started with the spell that would cut his relation with the demon. It was a complicated and tricky thing to produce due to the nature of the magic relationship that already existed between them.

If he had only known what would be needed before he had ever called the thing up, it would have been simple to construct the spell. Now, he had to both terminate the old relation, and to get the new one so that it would not form completely.

He was an artist, and set to work with a will. It took the better part of an hour just to set up the first part of it. A second passed before he had the other in place, and the sum of them poised in the air before him.

It would, he reminded himself, take daily maintenance to keep it alive and ready to go. With the seriousness of the situation, he knew that he would do so faithfully.

When it came time to use it, he would be able to sever the relationship with less than a minute notice. It was still dangerous to deal with the creature like this, but he felt up to the task.

Checking his watch, he saw that it was already late. He altered his plans to do the final work the next night when he was fresh. With a creature as powerful as this one, and one so ready to destroy him, safety came before eagerness.

* * *

Evelyn suddenly felt young and vital again. It was wonderful. But why was it so gray.

She looked around and she knew where she was. The bridge was there, and she felt a longing to pass over it so strong that she could no longer resist it.

And there was another with her, a ghostly figure not clearly seen, but obviously bright with power. That, she remembered, would be Amray Cham. How strange that Paul had seen this when even she had not.

She felt the figure reach out to her, and she did the same. At the first touch, she was aware of the warmth that was in those hands, a warmth that was not in her own. Truly, it was time for her.

The hands squeezed hers lightly, and then withdrew. She was free to go. Amray would never have held her up; what a wonderful and powerful woman she was.

Evelyn turned, and headed for the bridge, and there was something wonderfully familiar about the person she saw dimly on the other side. She had been expected, and would be welcomed.

She stepped onto the bridge, and she no longer remembered where she had come from. She only had her eyes on where she was going. What was behind her no longer mattered.

* * *

The following evening, Dave Dearman was ready. He had it planned, and knew full well what needed to be done, and how to do it.

The magic circle was ready and the door to the nether world was open. He reached into it with the words that would call the demon.

Then he waited. It seemed like a long time, but he waited.

When it was too long, he was furious. He wasn't going to have a balky creature refuse him.

He started the original spell, the one that had reached into the other world and dragged the creature in the first time. He would summon the beast if it would not come when called nicely.

It was only when the poker was vibrating in the circle that the manifestation finally appeared.

It spoke with its inimitable vehemence, "So you can still do some magic, human. I had thought some little witch might refuse you the ability."

That stung. The creature seemed to have the inside track to his feelings.

Dave caught himself, and corrected his own thinking. He had joined with the thing to that extent. The Creature would share many of his thoughts. He would have to be even more careful than he had foreseen.

He stuck to the business at hand. "You know why you have been summoned. I don't want to ever have to summon you again."

The evil in the eyes was most disturbing, "You won't have long to worry about it, mortal. I can almost taste your blood now."

Dave returned some of the creature's own treatment, "I have felt your failure, and I have need to know what happened."

"If you had watched, you would not need to ask. I am not a servant to make up for your weaknesses." Dave said nothing, but waited. There was no way that the creature could avoid answering in its present position. He waited, and the report was forthcoming."

He learned about Paul being almost out of the demon's reach because of the power that was with him. He had deduced that much from his meeting with Paul and the witch. He learned about the failure of the attack, and the accident with the car. The creature dwelt upon the pain, knowing that Dave was sharing this with his own body memory.

Then it gladly shared its encounter with the sisters, noting with glee how it had permission to harm some of the members of his own coven, and how it had enjoyed the attack on Carol.

"Did you like the taste of her blood?"

He knew better than to rise to the bait, and just waited. He knew the creature would continue.

Then came the first encounter with the witches. They had arrived between it and the victims, and had driven it off by sheer power. When it realized that it could not get to the girls again, it left, and returned to its own place.

Then, with considerable howling and violent curses, it described how the witches had dragged it back into the world, and forced to give up its prey.

This part was greatly abbreviated, and Dave wasn't going to accept that the witches had forced it to do anything without a lot of particulars.

The demon would not speak further without compulsion, meaning that it was embarrassed or so hated the memory that it would not recall it. He had to compel the monster to continue, and interrogate it point by point.

This was a long and tedious process, but it was done. Little by little, it had to tell of the failure of the witches to force it, and how Paul had come in and directed their efforts so that it either had to annul the magic or die.

"I hope you suffered with me," it hissed at him.

Dave was finally enjoying the situation a little. It was disturbing that anyone would be able to defeat the creature, but it also had a good side. He told the beast, "I suffered it with you, and I tasted your blood."

The roar of blind hate, and the fury of the lunges the creature made at him, had Dave wishing that he hadn't said it quite that way. It made the creature furious to think that some mortal did to it what it wanted to do to all mortals. Since he had started down that path, he continued, "You left such a bad taste in my mouth that I will do the best I can to see that it doesn't happen again."

Finally the Demon looked at him closely, "It's all Paul Brennen's fault and you know it. I can sense that you still want him destroyed."

Dave didn't have to make a reply, the creature shared his thoughts. "As you know, I can't get at him, at least not by myself."

“Do you follow me human? What is revenge really worth to you that you will help me do your bidding. You are of this world, and together we can do it.”

Dave noted that there seemed to be a genuine longing in the beast. It wanted to get to Paul so bad that it was willing to work with him.

On the other hand, he knew that to really work with the creature would be to seal his own destruction. He had to help it, but not to take part in what it was doing.

He spoke to it, “I will help to prepare him so that you can reach him, but I will not help you do what you have already been directed to complete.”

The vile thing laughed at him, “What’s the matter, little man. Don’t you want to lose effect on your little cut-off spell.”

Then it sounded angry, “Do you think you could do that without my knowing it, fool. You’re really quite insignificant.”

Dave managed to hold his peace, and turned to make a new circle to work the spell. He did so easily enough, casting such a spell of harm on Paul, that the very air seemed to seethe. It was a cruel thing, but he stuck to it until he had it done and ready for release.

Behind him, the creature just watched, and Dave could feel its eyes upon him, and the hate that seemed to flow freely about him as he went about his work.

When it was done, he heard the voice say, “A second rate piece of work, human. I could do it so much better, if only you would let me.”

Dave knew better than that, for then he would be fully in the creature’s power. He replied, “Enough. All I want from you is for you to finish what you have started. I want you to watch, and to catch him the first time that this unbalances him. “Now go!”

He cut the spell loose, and released the demon into the world once more.

But it didn’t move. It just sat where it was and laughed at him with a maddening cackle. He could feel the blood rising to his face; what had he done wrong, it should be leaping out to get Paul.

Still it laughed, and reaching down with one razor sharp claw, it jammed it into its own scaly calf. Dave felt it in his own, and the claw had something on it that made the wound burn terribly.

Still it laughed, ignoring the pain that it must have caused for itself, and continued to tear with the claw until it had opened a huge gash in its own leg.

Dave watched in horror as the same gash appeared in his leg. His entry into the situation had allowed the creature to have this power over him.

Still, he was the one in charge, and he wouldn't relinquish it. He couldn't let go without giving himself to the creature. So he did what he had to do, and bore the pain. And it was laughing at him, knowing that he could do nothing but share the creature's suffering. The demon thought that was hilarious.

Even afterwards, when the creature disappeared out into the world, the wound remained. The demon didn't even allow itself to heal.

Again, every sensitive in the world blanched at the eruption of the demon into our time and space.

Chapter 14

Paul found himself in a wonderful situation, a time of both youth and effectiveness. He was able to continue his studies, and work on his attachment to the flow at the same time.

He even considered leaving school to put full time into the new study, but the flow blocked that path. There was something right about his continuation in college. There was something right about being in academia, and he set his sights upon teaching as a profession.

In a worldly sense, this would put him into an excellent position to reach the future leaders of the world. It made sense for him to be able to expose them to the flow during the years when they were setting their own paths. It was a time when they still listened and learned, but when their minds were fully formed and their intellectual abilities were at their peak.

A strong central direction of Paul's life had been set, and he found himself witnessing his faith with great effect. The strength of the flow around him only increased what his words did to others. He saw the effect. Even those who scoffed on the outside listened and took in what he said.

There were some who were visibly affected, and who quietly aligned with the flow. Several other students were glad to share what they felt and believed; and these increased both their own alignments with the flow and the apparent strength of the flow.

Paul wondered at what he saw. Indeed, Christianity was not just a religion. It was a most effective way of life. There was a correspondence between living that life and personal benefits for the one who lived it. It also affected everyone around him.

That was puzzling. The path laid down by Jesus was so obviously right, and was so obviously not used. Everything was clear concerning it, but the message of its effectiveness never seemed to be taken to heart.

Paul was left wondering how many others had really tried the path, and had seen the obvious benefits. Clearly, there were many. His Mom lived her faith, and she had been prospering. He knew several clergymen who were obviously living their faith, and they were prospering. He couldn't think of anyone who was living their faith and not happy with their lives.

And while Paul was following the general directions of Christianity, he was not limited to those few general rules. He followed the flow. He did many things that were incomprehensible to those who were with him, even as they were puzzling to him.

He left an apple where it would be found by someone in need. He did not know who it would benefit, but he knew the right person would come along and would find the apple. The flow was clear, as was the band that seemed to reach out to another person somewhere else.

He did many things that even seemed crazy to him, but yet they were right. He had felt the need to move a heavy concrete block about two feet from where it lay. He didn't know why, but it was important for someone.

He had found himself entering a store where he bought nothing, and witnessed to no one, but there he was. When he left, he was rewarded by a slight increase in the flow. It wasn't something that made sense; it was merely something true.

He also discovered that he had a whole set of new enemies, people who seemed intent on bucking the flow and everything that went along with it. They were easy to avoid, because the flow avoided them. They cursed at him. They tried to get in his way at every step, and yet he just avoided them by following where the flow went. He had no confrontations with them, unless they were actually ready to listen. The flow directed his feet along a line of maximum effectiveness.

* * *

Betty had been thinking very seriously about what little Paul had told her. It seemed right, just like it seemed right what her Mother had told her concerning her faith. There was a balance in it, a sense of direction.

Experience had taught her to trust her feelings, and this was not a time to suddenly turn away from them. She needed to get on board with this.

With that, like Paul, she turned to the scriptures, looking in the four Gospels for what Jesus had taught. She was looking to find power such as her Mother had, but she found something else. She found once more the person who held real power, and a person who had promised to give her anything she needed, and everything that was good for her to have.

She decided that she should be able to heal, and she prayed for it.

This wasn't the first time she had prayed for such a power, but this time it was something very different. She wasn't asking for something for her to use, but something to be used for others. She never wanted to be left holding a lifeless body again. It had been terrible.

She had seen her little brother working with the senior sisters. That was a hard pill for her to swallow. It was a lesson so foreign to her previous understanding that she needed to concentrate to avoid putting her brother back into that nice comfortable niche where she wanted to keep him. He had been working with them, not for them. It had been a relatively equal interchange for a common purpose.

There was something in him or through him that had power. She had looked for that power. What she found was Jesus. He had such power.

She found the power, and she found something more. Not only was there power, but it was given away as freely as one gave away a pencil or a piece of paper.

But this wasn't power in the sense that her Mother had it, or David, or even Evelyn. This was a power that could not die. This was a power that could not be taken away or destroyed.

And it was different in another sense. It was not a power to do what you wanted to do, but one to do what was right. It was a power driven by God's love for people.

She found something behind the power, a sense of faith and belief. It reached through the power and called out to people, healing, forgiving, and freeing them. The miracles of Jesus were a witness to something else, something standing behind the power.

She knew that she was able to call upon that power so long as it was in line with the purpose that stood behind it. But what was the purpose?

* * *

It was quite late when Carol came in to find her sister deep in thought. “Betty, has Paul been here?”

“No,” she answered. “Why do you ask?” Her immediate thought was that she was developing a force around her like that surrounding Paul. What was it that Carol was seeing?

Carol replied, “There is something in the feel of the air. It seems like the influence he had in the Student Union.”

Betty was both relieved and a little disappointed. She didn’t want Carol to think she was a freak, and yet she had hoped that what she was thinking would have some effect that could be gauged. She replied, “I’ve been studying the Bible like Paul said he was. Perhaps there is something to what he told us.”

She felt the renewed hope that she would get some feedback, “Do you notice anything specific?”

Carol answered, “You don’t feel any different, little sister; and you probably never will.

“Still, there is something different in the room. There is a different feel that....

She continued after a surprised look came to her face, “I’ll be damned if it isn’t the same. It’s not you that’s different, but something around you. It is like Paul!

“Just what have you been doing?”

What followed was a frank, even if a little clinical, evening of sharing. It was an evening of faith, and one that saw a slight redirection of two lives.

* * *

Suddenly there was darkness about him, and a feeling of oppression. Paul was aware that he was under attack again.

This time it was very different, more like the spell that the amulet had turned aside. The sense of terror was not as strong, and not as

evil as when the demon attacked, but it was more intrusive and more insistent. It was not really foreign, though it did cross the flow.

Still, the flow protected him, and he was able to proceed along the same path, but with considerably more strain. There was a feeling of impending doom that surrounded him.

No more did his flow impact so widely, but seemed restricted about him. His efforts did not seem to reach so easily to others, and they were not able to respond.

But then there was nothing else to do. All he had learned to do was to follow the path that was before him, to go with the flow of benefits. He did.

Where he could do good for any person, he would; whether or not they could appreciate it made no difference. He did it because it was right, not to earn the respect of others.

* * *

Gretchen called the senior coven to order. “Does anyone have particulars on why we are gathered?”

Paula, who was one of the most sensitive, responded, “It is that same demon that we dealt with before.

“I felt the invocation that has brought it out of the nether world once more. I suspect that the sorcerer David, who had called the beast up before, has brought it back again.”

Amray spoke up, “I daresay that the creature would not return again on its own. I know that we injured it.”

Gretchen added, “We nearly killed it, which is far from what we had planned. We must be more careful in dealing with such a creature in the future.

But if it is here again, then it will be up to no good. There is no good in it. We should take action to thwart it now, and save us from the predicament we faced earlier.”

Amray added, “It’s times like this that I most miss our painful Miss Evelyn. She always seemed to have an inside track on what was needed.”

Pearl spoke to direction, “I think the first thing will be to work on those who need our protection.

“This David will not accept help, and it is highly unlikely that Paul will need it. I say we concentrate on the two sisters.”

Gretchen responded, “I have had them under surveillance through the gift, and have held them under my personal protection. I invite relinquishing my personal efforts to the greater effect of the coven.”

Amray added, “I have watched them too. What do you make of the changes around them? Surely that is not any effect of your protection.”

“No,” she replied, “It is not. If you check, you will find it similar to that which now surrounds Paul, though in much less measure. We may well be seeing something new in the world.

“My efforts have been entirely passive, just watching and keeping ready to take action. The little sisters have sufficient gift so that any interference by me might have been noticed and rejected. I am sure that the only one who has been aware of my interest is their mother.

“I called to assure her that the sisterhood was involved in the matter, and that Evelyn’s passage in no way leaves her children at greater risk. We owe that much to one who was so close to Evelyn.”

Amray stated, “I am with you then, we will watch over the little sisters. We will stand between them and the demon should it come their way again.”

Being so close to the situation, the senior sisters felt something evil as David’s spell was released. Then the demon itself erupted into the world once more, armed with deadly intent.

Already gathered together, the senior sisters were ready for it.

* * *

Paul was just walking back to the dorm when the demon came, carrying all of its power, its hate for humanity, and its vicious nature with it. It came in a cloud of stark terror.

This time, it also came in coordination with a spell by a human, a creature of the world. Its chance of success had been multiplied.

Paul did not turn and run; the path just lead calmly forward.

He felt the creature emerge, and he felt the terror that the beast raised up in all flesh. Still, he continued on, following the path before him.

Paul sensed the beast merge with the dark spell that clawed at the force in which he walked. It merged, giving the beast awful power and greater potency, but nothing else happened. The flow would not yield to it, and something even seemed to suck energy from the spell to increase the flow.

Following the flow, Paul turned, and looked back into the hate filled eyes of the demon.

It was as he remembered it, but was not trapped in a magic circle. It was free in the world, and it wanted to get at him.

At first Paul could see nothing but the creature, and his own fear nearly overcame him. He resisted running only by noting that the flow around him did not lead anywhere else. It was right that he was there facing the creature.

Little by little he brought himself under control, and looked at the creature through the flow of benefits.

Seen this way, the demon looked much farther away, and separated from him by a swirling vortex of flow. It was almost as if the creature was at the bottom of a deep well.

It clawed at the walls, trying to climb up to him. It roared out its challenge and its hate. It leaped up the chasm wall, only to slide back down again.

Oddly, the more it tried to get to him, the deeper the well seemed to grow. It wasn't any great change, but it was enough to be noticed. Its every attempt to fight the flow was increasing the ability of the flow to resist it.

Paul watched for a time before addressing the demon directly. "You are not where you belong."

The hate that washed impotently up at him was enough to push Paul back a step. "I will not be denied. I will taste your innards."

Paul felt the shifting of the flow, and knew that it was time to continue on the path. "Go while you are able. Your very existence is in threat here among people."

He turned and went his way, and the beast did not follow. It was gone.

* * *

Betty was alone in the apartment when she felt the terror come into her presence, and she grabbed the cross she wore about her neck. Somehow this was not like before. The creature was not as close, and not as strong. The cross in her hand seemed to have another hand on it as well, a hand considerably stronger than her own.

She did not feel the thickening of the air that the senior sisters projected between her and the beast, but she knew without knowing how that they were others watching over her.

What she did know was that the cross in her hand seemed to be more than it had ever been before. She had always looked upon it as a source of power, but that wasn't it. It was like a doorway through which power flowed.

She heard the creature roar out its frustration, and it was gone. It had not gotten to her. She fainted.

* * *

The black spell was still with Paul, and it had a definite dark effect on the world around him. People were hostile, the world seemed intent on getting in his way and frustrating him. Even the air was oppressive.

Still, he was safe enough. He just walked the path. Where he could do good for others, he did it. Where he could do right, he acted with the flow. The flow did not grow, nor did it decrease. And the spell did not die, but was periodically refreshed from some source, perhaps even gaining in its consistency of effect as the days wore on.

Paul watched around him as he went, and the demon never seemed to be far away. He felt it watching him; he felt its frustration when it wasn't able to attack.

Paul just ignored it, going about his business, and treading the path so well marked out before him. He witnessed to the efficiency of Christian practice, and its ability to bring the benefits of living to people.

He was far less effective than before, but there was always something that got through. He might have been held to a standstill, but he was not defeated. He continued doing what was right, and continued traveling with the flow.

Chapter 15

Gretchen was the first to break from their joint efforts. It had almost been too easy.

She spoke first, “I really saw little that needed to be done. The barrier seemed to be enough with the other forces that were in the room.

“I was most surprised by the strength that came from the cross.”

Amray spoke next, “I also was surprised, but I have seen the cross be even stronger. I have noted the same effect in the hands of a clergyman performing an exorcism. It was as if there was another life within the Cross.

“I have thought that it was from the faith of others concentrated through the symbol. There is great power in the coordinated beliefs of many people.”

Gretchen continued, “Perhaps so, but I don’t think this is the same thing that I have felt on such occasions.”

Paula added, “I felt the creature hit against the force and bounce. Also, it felt like the thing was hampered, as if it couldn’t get as close this time.”

Amray added to that, “Paul Brennen said something when he spoke to the sorcerer that might have a bearing on this. He said that the very action of the creature would lead to its rejection by the world.

“We know that it has taken actions, and that it felt weaker this time. Perhaps we are witnessing the effect that he saw coming.

“Would it be well to call him into conference with us?”

This turned into a matter of general discussion. While they felt that he had something unique that he might add, he was not a member of the sisterhood. It would be an improper precedent to call in outsiders to further their art. It was up to them to find out what had

happened according to their own vision, and to take the actions that were most appropriate.

This was no refusal to work with Paul. They would do so gladly for a common purpose; but they would not include him as some sort of unofficial part of their coven. He would have to be an outsider, at least for the time being.

That settled, they went back to their examination of the situation as they observed it. Gretchen continued, "I think we can agree that the energy that the little sister was using was not her own, but came from the cross."

Paula replied, "Perhaps 'through it' is a more accurate description of what I sensed. It was like there was something on the other side of the cross which poured itself through it."

Cecilia, the newest member of the Senior Sisterhood agreed, "That is what I felt also. I looked on the other side, though, and there was nothing there. I suspect some sort of dimensional shift. Perhaps it is something like the doorway to the other world."

Amray said, "Whatever it is, I'd like to know how it was activated. The power in the room was most impressive."

"It is not the power that is disturbing me," said Gretchen, "but the source. It is the first time that I have witnessed such a source of power in the hands of a minor sister. It means that there is something changing. We are entering a time when there will be new things happening.

"To that end, we must be far more observant about the unexpected than we have been in the past. Where we merely reacted to new situations, we must now be willing to study to see what is behind them.

"In fact, I feel that we will be entering a time where we will become obsolete unless we adapt. Something is happening and we will either be a part of it or its victims."

There were several nods of agreement, and Paula added a different perspective. "I have felt change coming since my early years, and have watched more closely than most. I know that we at this table are far better equipped to handle the change than our little sisters. If we do not act on their behalf, there will be great trouble for the entire sisterhood."

Gretchen didn't have to give that much thought before she answered, "I think we are going to have to develop a better system for passing information to the lesser sisters. This will mean more and tighter organization than we have needed to this time and the changes should provide the incentive for any who are serious about the great art."

She turned to Amray, "I would say that the overall setup and institution of the system would be in your area of interest, and I know that your reputation as a worker will add credence to the act of setting it up.

Amray nodded. She knew that she was the best suited to the task, and that was the way that assignments were made in the senior coven.

* * *

Dave was a very competent magician. He knew that his spell was not working. He sensed it dying, and he revitalized it over and over again. He sensed when the demon tried to work with it, and he sensed when even the combined efforts didn't succeed.

Most of all, though, he felt the ripping pain in his calf where the demon had injured them both. It hurt terribly, and was making his life miserable.

He had bound it up to minimize secondary infections, but it was not going to heal until the demon healed itself. Till then, he would be in misery.

In one sense, this was something extremely disturbing. The moment that he cut the demon free from him, or the demon was destroyed, the wound would become permanent. The creature was clever enough to realize that it could make his dealings with it very dangerous.

Dave felt that his greatest need was for information. He needed to know what was happening.

He still had his trips out for any action that could terminate the demon, but had no way of tracking what was actually happening without making himself a direct party to the action. That would put him firmly in the clutches of the vile thing.

Paul had been right. His attempts to use the creature were going badly. He would have to endure the pain.

Still, he wanted to know what was happening. He couldn't just let it drift forever; he might have to bring things to a conclusion.

With that in mind, he set up the magic circle again. Though it made him a little sick even thinking about it, he had to call the thing up once more.

As soon as the final stroke was made, the creature was there; and it was laughing at him with such a vicious sound that even Dave felt despair. He was hurting, and it didn't seem to affect the creature at all. He knew that it had to be hurting too, but it apparently didn't care so long as it made him suffer.

"I see that you are in a hurry to meet me face to face, human. Soon enough, you will be mine. Rest assured that you will not die quickly or pleasantly. Maybe you won't be able to die at all?"

"Isn't that a delicious thought?"

Dave shook himself back to the reality of his situation. He was still the master, he was still in control and had no desire to relinquish anything to this monster. "You have not succeeded."

He made it a statement. "If I am to make up for your weakness, I must understand it."

The wrath of the creature was unimaginable, but Dave stood his ground, and the circle held it easily. "Report on what you have done."

Through the snarls and promises of doom, Dave learned of the utter failure of both his spell and the demon to get to Paul. Whatever had happened to the lad was still going on and he was getting even stronger.

The creature had also made another pass at the Betty, but was rudely repulsed by the most powerful sort of white magic. The senior sisters were also there watching and ready to interfere. The demon had just left, knowing when it was outmatched.

That sent Dave's mind whirling. Perhaps the source of the force around Paul was spreading to other members of his family. Could this be some sort of larger plot? He listened further.

The demon had shadowed Paul for days without result. It was as if he was riding on a high ridge of power, so massive that nothing could reach him. He did not seem to have any vulnerable areas, there was no way to get at him.

Finally the creature summed it all up, “You are just over matched, little man. The other side will defeat you and then you will be mine.”

Dave knew that this was a possibility, and it made him a little nervous in spite of his great gift. He knew that he would have to be very careful due to the magnitude of the power of the demon. If it ever really got its claws on him, that would be it.

It added sarcastically, “Is there anything else that you require, little mortal?”

He replied quite truthfully, “I would just as soon that you were somewhere else.”

“Indeed,” the monster replied, “indeed you would;” and Dave felt the claw ripping the wound up through his knee joint. The pain was excruciating; and he cried out to the obvious delight of the demon.

“For me, mortal, it will only hurt for a little while. For you, it could be the rest of your miserable life. You call me again at your own risk;” And it was gone. Dave looked down at the gash in his leg that now went through his knee, making him a cripple. He would need crutches to get around.

He knew that he was in trouble with the thing, and might need outside help to get out of it. If only he had that witch Evelyn on his side; she had seemed a reasonable sort.

With things as they were, he knew he just had to grin and bear it. He was not fully in control of the situation.

* * *

Ginny had always been a competent witch. On awakening, and looking in the mirror, her worst fears were confirmed.

Ever since her break up with Paul, she had felt the finger of doom pointing to her, and this confirmed it. She looked in the mirror and saw a black aura about her.

It wasn't like a spell, it was something worse. She had seen it before. She didn't know what it was, or what caused it, but she knew that where she saw it, death was not far behind.

It took a few minutes to get her composure back, and to continue with her preparations for the day. This wasn't the sort of thing that she could avoid, and there wasn't anything to do but to continue

living. She put her copy of the New Testament in her purse, and went out to face the day.

No one else seemed to notice, so she said nothing.

* * *

Carol and Betty were in the apartment when they felt the demon coming near. It didn't come to them, but there was no feeling like its presence to anyone who was sensitive to it.

What the girls did not feel was the other presence, gentler and just as powerful, but reserved. The Whole Senior Sisterhood was poised and ready to step into the situation at the slightest hint of personal hostility in the creature.

The demon appeared to them, but carefully stayed at a distance. Betty grasped the cross again, and again there was that other hand on it, and the power that seemed to come from it and to fill the room.

Much to Carol's surprise, she addressed the beast, "What do you want here?"

Its voice dripped venom, as it answered, "I have not come for your life, at least not this time." Her voice seemed to get stronger as she replied, "You have not been summoned here." Then it was a command, "In the name of Jesus, Go."

The apparition seemed to waver, but did not go. It seemed somehow farther away though, as though the name of Jesus had power against it."

It replied, "I will leave soon enough, little sister."

Carol, who had recovered herself a little, opened the Bible to the proper passage, and the two of them began to read aloud.

With a curse, it was gone. It had no power to remain.

Carol looked to her sister with surprise. "I have never felt anything like that, even from a cross! What did you do?"

Betty answered, "I don't know. I didn't do anything different than before, but it seems to be alive.

"Maybe there is something special about this cross or something?"

They both looked at it with their full power in the gift, but there was nothing but a cross and the symbol of their lord. It felt just like any other cross.

Betty said, "I felt something like another hand an it. Do you think I have been getting personal help from our Lord himself, or one of His angels?"

Carol replied after a moment of remembrance, "I didn't feel any other presence."

"It wasn't actually a presence, but like someone else had their hand on the cross, someone who really knew how to use it. I have been getting help."

With that, they both fell silent for a period, remembering and reliving the experience to see if they could learn anything else.

There was nothing. They had to admit that there were forces at work that were totally unknown to them; and these forces were far more potent than they were.

Carol spoke the words that had occurred to both of them, "I don't know who it is, but I'm sure glad that we had help. I had that beast get hold of me once and that is too many times by far."

Betty added, "I didn't much like holding your lifeless body either," and she shivered with the memory. "I was sure that you were dead."

Carol was the first to fear that they weren't the only ones affected. "It must have gone after Paul first."

"Yeah, and its coming here meant that it wasn't able to get to him. He sure has changed."

Betty smiled at that, and meant it. "He's even getting through to me a little. He makes an awful lot of good sense for someone who doesn't have the gift."

Carol asked, "Do you think it went after Ginny too? I haven't heard from her in days."

Betty answered, "Ever since she broke up with Paul, she's been in hiding. I wonder what happened? She won't talk about it to me."

They both heard a cruel laugh from somewhere else. The Demon had been listening in on them, and had just learned another way to get to Paul. They had just given it a new victim.

Carol and Betty both instinctively knew what it meant, and knew that they were unable to do anything about it on their own. Knowing what was required, they both concentrated on the senior coven, trying to reach the senior sisters with their distress. The senior coven had helped before, and this would be the sort of thing where they might be willing to come once more to their aid.

* * *

Paul just continued walking the path as he had before. He seemed to be surrounded by darkness, but he still walked in the light. He realized that he had a unique understanding of the passage that spoke to the way as being one of light. He had a special visual understanding of the powers of darkness. To him, these were really visible.

He had no idea how long the darkness could continue, but knew that it did not matter for him. There was no lessening of the flow, and he would continue for as long as it took.

He walked up to the child in the park and gently removed the stick from the boy's hand. The boy looked at him in puzzlement, but not with hostility, it had been the right thing to do.

A few seconds later, the boy was back to playing with his friends, but without waving the weapon around in his hand. Paul was continuing on his way, following the path that seemed so clearly laid out before him.

* * *

Ginny had returned to her room in a surprisingly elated mood. She had done all that she could, and was ready for whatever happened. Settling in the room's one chair, she opened the Bible and began to read. She felt like reviewing revelations, it had an appeal for her.

When the demon came, she was ready. It found her just as she finished reading.

There was a pause. Her serene state seemed to confuse the beast for a moment, and she spoke to it without fear or rancor. "Your timing seems appropriate. Do what you are able to do."

With a roar that would bring terror to any one of mankind, it leaped upon her. It struck with all of its pent-up hatred and frustration. It ripped at her body with the vicious ferocity of its nature.

It tore at her flesh for all the pain that it suffered where it had to injure itself to hold Dave in line.

And as her life sped away, it sent a howl after it that was heard by sensitives all over the world. It was a yell of triumph, and a sickening indulgence in gloating over its own victory in the world.

It screamed its defiance of all the powers that had tried to thwart its purpose, and then it was gone again into its own place.

* * *

The taste of blood in his mouth was strangely unsatisfying to Dave. He knew that the beast had finally killed, and that meant that it had found some way to get at Paul, either directly or indirectly. It meant that his need for the beast was over.

It was time to sever the relationship between them.

Blast it, he thought, if only his leg didn't ache so much. It was difficult to think clearly with such a wound.

He knew that it was time to cut his relationship with the thing, but he hesitated. If he cut the cord now, his leg would never heal. If he called it back, maybe they could work something out.

It had a hopeful side. The creature would be momentarily satisfied by its kill; perhaps they could sever the relationship together and without causing further harm to each other.

If not, then Dave knew that he would have to do it on his own and take the consequences. He had started the thing, and it would be up to him to finish it. Damn, he thought, maybe someone could still kill the beast. Perhaps if he just waited for a day or two. He could stand the pain that long.

He considered calling the beast back in again, but did not want to face any further injury at the demon's hands. The risk was not worth it.

* * *

The senior coven arrived too late. They found the remains of the body that had been left half eaten, and it was enough to make any human a little sick. Ginny had literally been torn to shreds with the only mercy being shown to the face so that it was recognizable. It only suffered a few deep and festered gashes.

Ginny was dead, and there was nothing that could bring her back into the world of the living.

At least, thought Gretchen, there was nothing that they knew of. Perhaps this Paul Brennen, who had something totally different than they had, might be able to bring her back. It was worth a try. If only her life could be brought back, the magic could be reversed like before.

Chapter 16

Paul was surprised to hear his name paged in the dorm lobby. It was always curious to receive a call just as one walks into some place. But he went and picked up.

The voice was familiar, one of the witches in the senior coven. That was enough to make him nervous all by itself. Their last involvement was necessary to save Carol's life. It wasn't a good memory. The quaver in his voice attested to his feelings."

"This is Paul Brennen."

"We need you at Virginia's room. Is it all right if we come and pick you up?"

When he assented, the line went dead. He barely had time to hang up before he felt a hand on each shoulder, and he was in the girl's dorm with the senior witches.

What he saw on the bed was a shock. He caught himself only as he started to crumble. It was ghastly.

There was no question about what had happened. The demon had done its worst. She was gone.

He forced himself to look through the flow, and saw it move around her. There was no life left in her. She was completely gone.

His eyes watered as he looked back up at the ladies who stood about the room.

For a moment, he could say nothing, but let his feelings speak for him. These were marvelous sensitives, they would know what he felt.

Then he asked, "What can we do about this?"

Gretchen answered, "By ourselves, we can do nothing. It has gone beyond where we can reach.

“But your abilities and limitations are not known to us, and that is why we sought you out. Working together, we might be able to do things that have never been done before, even as we did the last time we were together.”

He looked at the mutilated form again through the flow before answering. “I see no flow at all. She shows no animation through what I see. I see no possibilities for beneficial action. I see nothing that either you or I might do that could restore possibilities to her. I think she is really gone.”

“What else do you see that might have a bearing on this? I have learned that we often miss things because we do not look for them.

“I am urging this because this was done through magic, and the magic can be reversed if she can be brought back. I need you to look to every avenue available to you.”

Paul was thinking aloud, “Jesus said that He was the resurrection and the life, and He is certainly with us. But then He also stated that even those who had gone continued to be alive to God.”

Paul thought about it for a minute, “Ginny is one person who I am sure is now in God’s hands, and Jesus told us that no one would wrest her from there. It would seem that only prayer can help in this situation. She is where we cannot reach to her.”

Amray spoke as the supremely competent witch that she was, “I can reach her.

“There is even a chance that I might be able to take you with me, but I would not encourage attempting it. The problem is after that. Bringing a soul back is outside of anything that witchcraft has been able to do.”

Then she paused and obviously thought about it for a few moments. “No, it would only work if she was sent back, and that is to be performed by prayer or not at all.

“Your thinking seems sound.”

Gretchen picked it up, “If this then appears to be what can be done, I suggest that we be about our business.”

So saying, they huddled in a small circle, including Paul, and they prayed with all their combined faith, imploring God to deliver their little sister back to them so that she could be returned to continue her life. They prayed to the Father to return His child to life and health.

They prayed to Jesus to be her resurrection. They prayed to the spirit to breathe life into the body so that it could be restored.”

When nothing happened, they broke off of their concentrated efforts to continue privately. They feared that they had lost their little sister.

Finally, Gretchen called them back together. “We have done what can be done in this arena. I think it would be good to work with the demon at this time. If we cannot get the thing resolved to the life of the girl, we can at least resolve this sad situation as to the living.”

Amray asked, “What do you hope to do? I see no clear direction.”

She replied, “That is what spells our next action. We need to go to the ones who know in order to find a direction.

“In this case, that means bringing the demon here and examining it. If it must be compelled, then we will compel it. The creature’s life is now within our reach.”

Paula entered a comment, “I am nervous about such an action. Remember what happened last time. I would want to make sure that we know what we are doing before we get too far along.”

Gretchen replied, “Your comment is well taken. Last time we nearly destroyed it instead of reversing its effects. We will have to be careful. We are dealing with things beyond our present knowledge. We are feeling our way along.”

Amray continued, “That is really of no consequence in this case. There is no worse result than the death that has already occurred. While I will be very cautious of the welfare of the living, I will not willingly withhold anything from my work on the beast that did this deed.

“What do you ladies say to this?”

Gretchen replied for the rest, “Even I support you in this. The problem is that we don’t know what effects we might have by our tampering with such a creature’s life. We may still be doing more harm than good.

“Indeed, we must go forward boldly, with all our senses on the trips for any need to back away from the work. I will not be held back by the creature; but I will be very sensitive to the welfare of those around us.

“Where do you stand in this, Paul? You are as much a party in interest as any of us. It is the creature’s will to harm you that has been the cause of this tragedy.”

Paul replied, “I bow to your experience in these matters. I have only seen such a being twice, and it nearly killed me one of those times. I will do what I can to help.”

Amray spoke to the scope of their efforts, “There is little doubt that the sorcerer has been drawn into this so deeply that he cannot escape without aid.”

Gretchen responded, “It is a point well taken, our summons should be to both.

“I still recommend that we keep them separate. I have dealt with these creatures before and suspect that it would merely kill him if we put them in the same circle. It will make the summons a little trickier, but we should be able to manage it.”

Paula asked, “What if the magician resists. He is very strong, and he is not subject to us.”

Gretchen spoke to that with a question, “If you found yourself tied to such a beast, what would you do to get free? And even if he resists, his involvement is a rope around his neck. We can always use that to pull him in.

“If he’s half as able as I think he is, we should have no trouble in getting him to work with us.”

Amray added, “I monitored Evelyn’s encounter with him, and he seemed a most able young man. I expect that he is already looking for a way to get free. My guess is that he is even now trying to figure some means of pulling out without suffering great loss in the process.”

“To work then,” said Gretchen. She widened the spell on the room and it was suddenly even larger, plenty enough to support their work.

In a matter of minutes they had prepared two circles to contain those summoned, and they were ready to begin. It was decided that the best approach would be to call the demon first, and to have it in place when they took on the larger task.

It was only a matter of seconds before the demon was there, howling and cursing at them in a rage made impotent by the binding effect of the circle.

“That seemed a little too easy,” said Amray, “I suspect that there is something wrong. We should proceed with great caution.

“It might even prove beneficial to question the beast before going forward.”

Paul had been taking a hard look at the creature through the flow of benefits, and the effect of distance had been greatly increased. The creature was at the bottom of a depression, with the vortex of forces making a deep well above it.

He spoke more to himself than the others, but they heard, “It has very little power to resist. Its resistance to the flow in the world is such that it has little strength to spare.”

He turned to face Amray, to answer her directly, “The world itself is rejecting the demon, its effectiveness here is almost gone.”

Gretchen said, “Easy or hard, we still must proceed.”

* * *

Dave had reached a point where he was almost willing to activate the spell and make a clean break with the demon. The waiting was extremely hard.

He got on his crutches, and hobbled to the kitchen for a cup of coffee.

He had to admit that the demon had been very clever in its approach, showing a surprisingly high intelligence. It had blocked his calling of it by the pain it caused him, and would certainly increase the wound if he called it again. At the same time, it had drawn him more into the effect by upping the ante required for him to get out of the game.

It was the sort of thing that Dave could appreciate, even as he hurt from its effects.

Coffee in hand, he carefully worked his way to the dining-area table. No use spilling any more than he had to.

If only his leg didn't throb so. It was so damned hard to concentrate when it felt this way. Again, the thought of going through life like this was wholly unacceptable. He had to do something about

it. The demon had arranged the situation as well as could be done, though, and he would just have to suffer it out for the time being.

Then there was a tugging, a drawing feeling very much like a moment of dizziness, but not the same. Dave recognized it as the feel of a summons.

For a brief instant, he thought the summons was searching for him, but that didn't make sense. You couldn't summon a person, especially one who would be resistant in the gift.

But then he realized that this was something slightly different. It wasn't a summons for him, but for someone else. He was just feeling it as if it was...

That had to be it. Someone was summoning the demon. It was probably the senior coven sticking their noses into the situation again.

It was surprisingly short as a summons went. Dave was even a bit jealous. It had taken him much longer to force the beast to come. The coven working together, he thought, must have some pretty terrific power resources to draw upon.

He tried to analyze what their approach would be, and decided that they would be working generally in accord with his own wishes. They wouldn't want the beast to have any unnecessary ties to the world either. While they would be unhappy with him and his part in the situation, they would not be in any position to do anything but kill him or help him.

Killing wasn't their way, so they would be helping him.

That decided, Dave reached out in the gift, seized the spell he had prepared to free himself from the creature, and bound it to himself. When they came for him, he would carry it along.

What he felt was not a summons, but an invitation with sufficient power attached to make the transportation. It was a most admirable job of construction. He was impressed.

There was something in him that resisted, something urged him to make them summon him. It wanted to see them to demonstrate their power.

A more sensible part of his thinking told him that he wanted these ladies to have all of their powers and intellects ready to do what he wanted them to do, and that was getting rid of the demon.

With that, he accepted the invitation.

* * *

Paul saw the sorcerer pop into existence in the second magic circle, trying to maintain as much dignity as he could. It was clear what the demon had done to him and the hold it had produced. The bandage on the leg and the corresponding wound on the demon were unmistakable evidence of the situation.

Before anyone could act, the demon jammed another razor sharp claw into its own face and raked sharply down. The cry that went up from Dave attested to the effect that it had on both of them.

It was Gretchen who put a stop to it with a command that Paul could not catch. The effect of it was to hold the demon fast where it was, and then to remove its ugly claw.

“You are not free to do more,” she said with finality to the demon. It was about to make response when she slapped at the air and the blow landed with crushing force within the circle. “We will not tolerate such behavior.”

There was no mistaking the hate in the beast’s eyes, but it was not willing to risk getting corrected again. It just watched with those hate-filled eyes.

Dave had collected himself the best that he could, and had regained some of his composure. He addressed Amray Cham, who remained off to the side, “I sincerely thank you for that, Most Senior Sister. I half think the beast would rip himself to shreds to do me another unkindness.”

She laughed at him, “I am not the Most Senior, just the strongest. The Most Senior is the one who performed this minor service for you.”

Dave kept his composure in spite of the pain that he had to be feeling. He turned to Gretchen, “I both apologize and thank you Most Senior Sister.”

She did not acknowledge this, but went right to the heart of the situation. “I see that you have prepared a spell to close out this sad chapter.”

At that point, Dave’s eyes swept the room until they rested upon the pile of meat and bone that had been Ginny. He went white as a sheet.

The demon hissed a laugh through its teeth, obviously enjoying his discomfort, but unwilling to earn another slap from the witches.

Dave said, "And all I had wanted was to be near to her." Then he fainted.

"This will never do," said Gretchen. "Paul, what do you see when you look at the two of them?"

He complied. "I see the bond between them, and a swirl that surrounds the bond. This, I would guess, is the spell that would break the connection between them.

"I see the demon as if it was at the bottom of a deep well of force. It is obviously too deep for it to climb out. There is a power in the well that is hard to describe, but it is in total opposition to the flow of benefits in the world.

"I would say that the creature is trapped, and could do little even if it were not in the circle. The only reason that it is able to harm David is that he is also in a strong depression in the flow."

Then Paul noticed that there was a new and different direction in the flow that moved about him. Following it, he asked, "Could I ask you ladies to bring my two sisters here? They must be a part of what we do."

Gretchen replied, "They have been a part of this almost from the first, and I had considered bringing them in myself. The only reason I did not was that you might have found their presence distracting, and we need your vision."

She turned to Paula, "Could you bring them?"

She turned back to Dave, who had just struggled back onto his crutches, and was staring at the mess that had once been an attractive young lady. "I don't know what we can do for you, young man. We may just have to cut the cord."

Dave did not look away from the body, and his eyes filled with tears. Paul saw him swallow hard before answering. "It was a risk that I took, and if there is a price to be paid, then I will have to bear it.

"If there is no other way, I would appreciate your using the spell that I have already formed; I doubt that I have the strength of will to use it myself. It will minimize the damage."

Paula popped back into the room with Betty and Carol. They seemed to take in the situation with a quick glance. Neither of them could bear to look toward what they saw on the bed. Instead, they looked at Dave, who had two horrible gashes in his face. He was a terrible sight.

Gretchen gave an expert stare at the spell and ignored the entrance of the sisters. She concluded, "It seems a proper piece of work. We will certainly use it if we can do no better."

She turned to the creature in the other circle.

Chapter 17

Gretchen addressed the demon in a voice so cold and unfor- giving that it might have come from another of its own kind, “You know what we want, monster.”

It was issued as a command, but the creature just huddled in the circle and watched.

After a few seconds, she continued, “We wish things to be put back as closely as they may. This is a condition for your release from this place.”

Still there was no response.

After waiting for several seconds, the witch began to chant. The others soon picked up the chant and a spell formed similar to the one that would free the creature from Dave.

This one, though, was directed to the lifeline of the creature. That finally got a response.

“You dare not harm me. If I cease, what of the sorcerer?”

Gretchen answered reasonably enough, “He loses nothing that you would not take from him anyway.”

“He would share in my death.”

Gretchen replied, “I think not. And I do not consider even that to be so important that I would permit your existence here to continue.”

She tightened the spell, and the creature huddled down lower. Its eternal life was in threat.

As the spell tightened, she told the monster, “Reverse it or I will end your miserable existence now.”

There was genuine panic mixed with the usual loathing in the voice, “I cannot do it. You know that her life is beyond where even I can reach it. You would kill me for nothing.”

The coldness in her voice was a match for the demon, “I would kill you just to watch you die. Restore the body now or I will do to you what you have tried to do to us.”

Paul could hardly believe his own eyes. There was Ginny on the bed; her body still dead, but completely restored and at peace. At least there would be something fit for burial.

“Restore the sorcerer.”

Paul could see the creature stiffen at this. “No, he is mine by his own choice. You will not deny me.”

I am not here to deny you, but I will destroy you. And you will never address me in that tone of voice again.”

She slapped at the air again, and once more a powerful blow racked the creature’s head to the side. “It is not for you to tell us what will be done. This is our place, not yours.

“Heal yourself, interloper.”

The beast quivered, but did nothing else.

After several seconds, Dave spoke to Gretchen, “I fear that its thirst for vengeance against me is great enough so that you will not be able to force it.

“You might as well do it. Sever the connection with me and then you can be done with it.”

Paul had watched this closely, and nothing had happened in the flow of benefits. All action had been on the level of magic that he could not see. There had been no effect upon the flow of benefits by anything they had done.

But what he did see gave him some hope. He saw that the creature was not the same as the flow that surrounded it. The flow was much like a spell, wound up with nowhere to go. It was a well of power and if that power could be made available, there was no telling what could be done.

He also saw that much of the beneficial flow around the creature was borrowed from the creature itself. A large part of its life force was sucked up into the vortex and was part of the flow that held it captive.

He spoke to Amray, “Do you think we might be able to send it back without the energy that surrounds it?”

This seemed to take her completely by surprise, “Do you see something around it that might be separated?”

He responded, “I see the same effect that I noted earlier. It is as if the demon is at the bottom of a deep well. My interpretation is that the flow in the world has reacted to the creature’s presence and actions, and this has resulted in a barrier being formed. The demon is here only by being opposed, and that is part of the benefits that I see. Its possibilities are opposed, and are part of what holds it.

“The well of force contains the world’s reaction to the beast, and the beast’s determination and force to remain. There appears to be a great deal of power in that barrier that might be used to good effect.”

Amray asked, “Is there some way to separate the thing from the barrier?”

He answered, “The demon has no part in the flow, but is everywhere opposed. All that is in the flow is its life force. They are separate already. What I asked is if we can send the creature back without having it take back the reaction to all the harm it has already caused here.”

Gretchen looked around for some sort of information from her people, or at least a consensus. Finding none, she said, “We have never tried anything like this before.

“You are the first to see the barrier as a source of energy. If we are to be able to identify it in our spells, then we may be able to work with it. The major problem is that we have no vision of it.

“Will you be able to guide us like you did with the spell for cutting into its power source?”

Amray added her own observations, “If you can push it through the bottom of the well, that should be enough to separate it from the energy it has set in motion. Can you direct our efforts to that end?”

What could he say but “I’m willing to try.”

They decided on focusing their efforts as a sphere of force directed toward the creature at all points and as close to it as possible. This would leave its only exit through to the other world.

They applied the spell, and Paul watched.

There was a little pop, and it was gone. The well of force remained.

Amray said, "It was too easy. Something isn't right"

Gretchen reminded her, "That was your first response to the ease with which it was brought in.

"Paul has given us the key. Its very activity in the world had been curtailed, and it was no longer able to act strongly. It had no power to resist. We called it and it had to come. We sent it, and it had to go. I gave it a slap and it had to take it.

This appears to be a part of the balance of nature that limits the creature's effectiveness. The fact that we sent it back like this, with its work still in the world, took much of its existence away from it.

A lot of its life force still seems to be here. I believe that it will never be a powerful demon again."

Dave had just been waiting without saying anything. He had been watching, and knew that he was not the primary problem to be solved. With the departure of the demon, he finally spoke. "Is there something in that energy which can reverse the effect the demon had on me?"

Gretchen replied, "It is not of the gift. We cannot even see it. Paul can see it, but has no gift for its use. Also, the creature is gone from this continuum, and cannot be compelled. I think that we cannot help you reverse the magic."

Dave said, "Then I guess I must ask you to complete the work and cut the cord. That thing is still on the other end, and I am a doorway for it to come back to here."

Gretchen said nothing, but there was a surge in her influence. Paul felt the snap as the potentials were neatly sliced away by Dave's spell. The magic that had bound them together was broken, and Dave was left with wounds that could not be healed.

Dave said nothing. He had to accept his fate because he had no choice. It looked like he would be living with his pain.

Paul spoke to the Most Senior Sister. "I think I can guide the use of the energy to some effect. The flow of benefits in the world is in direct opposition to that which maintains Dave's wounds. It might be possible to have them cancel each other out, relieving him of the force that maintains the wounds."

She replied, "I hesitate to encourage such an act. If it cannot reverse the damage, it might well kill him. The wounds would remain."

Dave intervened. "What I am doing like this is not living. I am willing to take the risk. Once I am free of it, I may well be able to work to promote the healing myself."

Gretchen looked a little peeved, but replied to him, "I will take this up with the other senior sisters."

With a gesture, she brought them together in a huddle, and Paul went up to Betty.

He had looked into the flow with some unusual results. "Betty, would you be willing to help Dave recover?"

She looked at him as if he was crazy.

He continued, "The flow of benefits for Dave will come through you if you will let it. Are you able to forgive him and be a tool for the Lord's work?"

In that framework, she knew the answer, "I don't know that I will ever fully forgive him, but I will do what I can."

He said, "When we release the spell that maintains the wounds, they will become like any other wounds, complete with bleeding. It is very likely that you will be able to heal those wounds before they do him any further harm."

Carol, who had been listening to this asked, "Do you see this?"

He answered, "All I see is benefits. I see that coming to Betty and asking as I am will provide a flow of benefits to her, to you, to me, and especially to Dave. I assume the rest as a logical implication."

"What are these benefits?" she asked.

He shrugged. It was the best answer he could give. "I see benefits, not specific effects. All I can say is that there will be a general increase in all of our alignments with the flow of the world through this act."

"Alright, you two," said Betty. "I said I'll try, and I will. I'll do whatever I can."

Paul said, "I know."

“When you decided that you would, the benefits flow already began shifting for alignment. I am sure that it will work.”

Paul felt it when the witches made their decision, because the flow was affected. He knew their decision was right before they even announced what it was. Knowing that Betty’s decision had a similar effect indicated that they had decided to go forward.

The elder sister spoke, “It is not for us to deny succor to one of the gift, even though he had certainly earned what he has received. We will do what we can to make use of the available forces to his benefit.

Paul was ready. “The flow is like a vortex, spinning around within the magic circle. We need a spell much like the one that cut into the creature’s lifeline, but designed to scoop into a flow and divert the forces there.

“Are you able to do something like that, and funnel whatever is gathered to Betty?”

That obviously took Gretchen by surprise, and she looked carefully at the two sisters. “Is this something that we should know about?”

Seeing that he had to be the spokesman, he responded. “We are all playing parts indicated by the flow of benefits. I know that once the demon’s spell is broken, there will be a need for the flow to pass through Betty.

“She has agreed to put her efforts along the lines of healing.”

Amray asked Betty, “Have you ever healed someone before?”

Paul didn’t wait for her to respond, “I tell you that this is in line with the flow as it is revealed to me.”

She sort of snorted her lack of belief, but backed off of the subject.

Gretchen asked, “And what do you see of the breaking of the demon’s spell on the wounds. We cannot see the forces that are apparent to you, and it is unlikely that they will become visible to us as we work with them. How will we use them?”

That puzzled Paul, but the flow was clear and he followed it. He reached over to Carol and put his hand on her shoulder. Closing his

eyes, he followed the flow and attempted to move his persona into her.

The results were startling. Carol announced, "By damn. I see some sort of swirling inside the circle too."

There was a pause, then "Yes, I can see something there, though I don't know what it is."

Without breaking his concentration, which was becoming painful, Paul directed, "Look to his wounds."

She said, "Yeah, I see the flow there too."

"What are you doing to me?"

His concentration broke, and he was in a cold sweat. "That is a strain."

He turned to the senior sisters. "Can we work together?"

Gretchen, looking around the group and collecting mostly shrugs, just nodded. They were willing to try most anything that seemed to have promise. They would stand behind whatever would reduce the success of the demon in the world, knowing it would also weaken its ability to return.

Then they set to work in earnest. The senior coven put the spell into existence and waited. Paul reached into his sister's persona again and she formed a bridge between his ability and that of the coven, so that there was a siphoning off of the force in the circle, at first a little, and then a substantial flow. Carol was new to his vision, and had a little trouble understanding what she saw; but she learned. Soon she was able to redirect the flow with the gift, bringing it into total opposition to the flow around the wounds.

To say that it worked would be an understatement, As soon as the two flows got near each other, they sucked together and completely disappeared. Shortly the spell was gone.

Carol then redirected the flow to her sister, who had already started praying as soon as the wounds began to take on a normal appearance.

Carol looked to the cross that her sister held in her hand and was startled to see a ghostly hand upon it along with her sister's, and the flow of whatever it was coming from the cross was merging with

the flow from the circle and was directing it. It merged and it flowed into Dave and his wounds.

To say that they healed rapidly would be an understatement. The wounds were scar tissue in a matter of seconds, the edges seeming to flow smoothly together and flesh to reform with such speed that it was like the closing of a zipper.

One by one each wound closed up, and then there were only ugly scars. The open wounds might not have been totally removed, but they were healed.

The spell was broken, and Paul's head felt like it was going to split. The effort had been tremendous, and he could not continue. He just let go, and fell to the floor in a heap.

Carol said, "It's the damndest thing you could ever imagine. I could see something flowing that wasn't really there at all. It was just spinning around like some sort of dust devil.

"I got a chance to look at you and the flow does crazy things around people. You couldn't imagine the way it spins and swirls. I don't know how he makes any sense out of it."

Betty obviously wasn't listening. She had her own experience to relate. "Did you see the way he healed up? That was something to be a part of."

Then she turned her attention to Carol, "What did you see with Paul's vision when you watched it heal?"

Carol just enjoyed her sister's excitement. It was the greatest work that either of them had taken part in. "I saw the flow go into Dave, and into the wounds, and it just happened. I've never seen anything like it before."

"What was it like, Betty asked; do you think I could get Paul to let me look?"

She thought for a second or two before answering, "Whatever it did, it really socked him out. She indicated the body on the floor; where he was still unconscious.

Paula was bending over the lad, letting her senses feel of him. She said, "He probably will be out for fifteen or sixteen hours."

Carol added, "I don't think he's looking forward to doing that again, not even for his favorite sister."

“Oh Poo,” she replied. “He worked through you instead of me.”

Then Carol had a vision and followed it, “I think that he will never work through you because of the healing gift that you seem to have acquired.

“I have the feeling that you will never need to use anyone else’s gifts.” Carol realized with a start that she had just accepted what Paul had as a gift, one fully as substantial as her own. She finally let her little brother grow up in her understanding.

“And why not,” she challenged herself, “Paul was her little brother and he deserved to be gifted as much as anyone she knew.” She even felt that her ministrations on the sensitive child for so many years must have helped him along.

* * *

They sent Dave back as he was, for which he was quite thankful. It had been kind of them to treat him well after he had caused them so much work.

He looked down at his leg and the massive scar that crawled from his ankle up to mid-thigh. It had been a very expensive experience for him, but that was the way of gaining through the great art. He had really lost very little considering the forces he had harnessed and the harm he had caused.

He was feeling quite proud of himself.

He put weight on the leg and almost fell. The scar tissue was in the knee joint. The witch Paula had told him that, and she seemed very much in tune with diagnosing ills. She predicted that he would spend the rest of his life with markedly reduced function in that leg.

He tried to bend it, and was rewarded with a thrilling pain. He knew that it would be necessary to work with it for months just to get the scar tissue loose. Still, it could have been a lot worse, and he knew it. He had effectively come out of it ahead. He even had gained the reputation among the gifted community that had been his due.

Chapter 18

It had been many years in the knowledge of men. The low point in the wave had finally arrived. There was stillness in the world. There was little flow left in the world of men, and even that was disappearing.

It was a time of waiting, a time that foreshadowed coming change. It was not a time for magic. The very medium of magic, the flow in the world, was drying up.

Like the soft heat of a summer afternoon before the cool of the evening, the stillness only increased the feel of the impending storm that was to come.

* * *

It had been quite a number of years since Dave had gotten his wounds, and the years had not been entirely kind to him.

He no longer needed crutches, but he would not venture to walk without a cane. The scars on his face did not leave him pleasant to look upon, but he still had reasonable luck with the ladies.

And he still had the gift in great amount, working with a skill that had been out of his reach as a younger man. He had learned much.

One thing that he had learned, with considerable difficulty, was to make use of the few friends that his gift made. He had become a skilled manager, and supervised over the print shop where he still worked.

The voice at the other end of the phone line was saying, "I see your interest in the young lady's progress here, but I can't support her unless she is willing to continue her studies seriously. At this point, she seems more interested in seeking her own way than actually continuing in school."

Dave said, "I know that, Paul; But she has no one to look up to on campus. I feel that she will respond to a professor's personal interest in her need for education. You know what is happening to

those of the gift. Helping students is not my strong point, but I would be glad to support any effort you might put forth to get her on a more effective path.”

The voice responded, “I’ll do what I can, naturally. You know that I always do.”

“I do know it, and I want you to be aware that you have my continuing admiration.”

That ended the call. Dave leaned back in his chair and thought about it for a few moments. Debbie was a valuable addition to the coven; and good witches had been getting harder and harder to locate.

He even considered bringing in some older talent, though he had to admit to himself that he liked the young ladies much better for strictly personal reasons.

But then, even the more developed witches weren’t getting much done. He hadn’t heard of anyone actually traveling in quite some time. He had heard that even the senior coven was traveling by conventional means.

The sensitives had been saying for some time that there was a coming lull to be followed by an exceptional surge of magical influence. He had heard it, but hadn’t given it much credence through the years. Still, when looked at through time, it began to make a lot of sense.

The effect of the reduction in force was becoming more and more obvious. He hadn’t been able to travel in body for years. At first, he had thought that the witches in the coven had been responsible, but it was more than that.

Even the nature of the coven changed. What had started as a power group, had slowly turned into a group of sensitives. Where they had caused things to happen in the old days, now they looked into other places.

David recognized that he had also changed. What had happened was not so much to power as to his viewpoint. There was a time when he reveled in his power. Now, he was proud of his ability to influence people. He no longer worked magic so much as working people.

In fact, the only thing that seemed the same was Paul Brennen. The man had grown up to be much like he had been as a college student. The power he came into when he was a student had grown to be something incredible. Paul had even surpassed what he had been in his youth.

Dave recognized this as a stray thought; and brought himself back to the subject of the change in magic. Just to test his magical force one more time, he started up a remote vision spell and put it into effect. He could clearly see his own house from the vantage of the treetops.

Then he sat down to watch what happened. It had been several months since he had done magic on his own and it felt pretty good.

He just looked at it for a time, and it seemed to fade a little.

Strange, he thought, and he checked it with his sensitivity.

Indeed it was weakening. Automatically, he checked the spell itself and it seemed right. He checked it again, and he knew it was. That spell was something that he had done so many times before that there was no mistaking its proper signature. The problem had to be something else.

He looked again, and the spell was definitely fading. Again, almost automatically, he reinforced it with his own aura and was rewarded by its return to full effect.

Over the next fifteen minutes, he watched as the spell faded and then winked out of existence.

Things indeed had changed. The spell would have lasted for several days in his youth, and even a few years ago had lasted through an entire evening without replenishment. Now it was a temporary thing at best.

* * *

Betty looked through the peephole. The young man at the door was just the sort of handsome stranger she had been hoping for. He was; but that had been a long time ago when she was also young.

She bid him come in and looked at him through the gift. She could see that there was nothing wrong with him. That would mean that his visit addressed someone close to him.

She offered him a seat and went for coffee. It gave her time to get the feel of the stranger. He had been under a strain, but that was normal enough. No one came to her unless they had some serious needs.

As she set the cup in front of him, she looked into his eyes, and felt for him. She had flashes of someone who had features very much like his. His present focus was probably a sister or cousin.

It was only when she finally seated herself that she asked his name and purpose.

"The name's Geriman, Greg Geriman," he announced. "I've come about a healing."

She felt his nature and his Christian background was obvious. She told him, "I am a witch, you know. It is the stance of the Christian Church that you put your soul in jeopardy when you deal with me."

He responded with some bitterness, "I already went to the Church to see what they could do, and that is why I am here. Christian healing didn't work."

She felt of him again, and received the impression of the younger Reverend Markam. Bless that gentleman, she thought; that is how Greg found me.

"Don't worry yourself to that end, Mr. Geriman. I do not heal but pray for healing. I am just a channel through whom the Lord sometimes works.

"Christian healing is not lost to His people, it is just not given to the Church."

He was about to make some protestation, but she stopped him with a raised hand and continued. "Healing is a gift, and it is given to God's people, not to the earthly organization of these people.

"Several hundred years ago, when magic became a strong force in the world, it was obvious to the Church that people were healing outside of the Church and without clerical control or sanction. This put it into the realm of witchcraft and it was looked upon as suspect. With the development of the senior coven, and confusion with the ability to heal magic wounds by magic; healing outside of the Church was declared to be anathema.

“As I mentioned before, healing is a gift. If it is abused, then it is not given. Where healing had been very common in the Church those many years ago, it became somewhat rare.”

“I take it that you have been to prayer circles?”

There was a little bitterness in his voice as he responded, “Several. Where they would pray with me, and laid hands upon my sister, nothing happened.”

“You err in your anger,” she replied. “Most healings are done just as you describe. Healing is not a reward for praying, or for the goodness of many who work as Christians. Healing is a gift that God chooses to give to some who are in need.”

She closed her eyes and focused her sensitivity upon the cross that hung on the wall. The feel of it was right, which indicated a good chance of success.

She continued, “Perhaps our Father will work through me where he has not yet worked through others. It has happened like this before. Sometimes he will answer the hundredth prayer when the 99 were not fulfilled.”

She gave him a smile of hope, “Be of good cheer, Greg. The world has set many barriers between you and me, and you have come through them all. Most of the people who finally come to me get what they come for.”

“And the pay for your services?” he asked.

Even after so many years, it remained a standard irritation at each such meeting. She was inured to the feeling of depression that it gave to her. “Healing is a gift. It was given to me freely, and I ask nothing of someone for whose benefit I have received it.

“If I can be of service, then what reward could you possibly offer me beyond that?”

“Witches rarely make their living at witchcraft any more. I earn my living as a travel agent sending people places where I have never been.”

She stood up, “I feel that your sister is within reasonable driving distance. We should be going to her.”

* * *

Paula, the Most Senior Sister, addressed the coven, "I am speaking to the problem that we had in traveling to our winter quarters.

"It appears that such magical transportation will be a definite luxury for us in the future, and recommend that we choose to remain here as a permanent base of operations.

"In accord with the manifesto prepared by the senior thrice removed, I recommend that we no longer look to transportation through magic at all, but confine our work to the maintenance of the existing system."

Tiala replied, "I have been disturbed by the curtailment of the senior coven's activity since I arrived here those many years back. I know of the collapse of magic, and of its eventual return, but I hate to abandon so fundamental a magic skill simply because we lack ease in operation.

"I would suggest that we back away from it more slowly. While we still have the power, I suggest that we limit ourselves to sending a single representative, and provide power from this base to support her in any actions she must take."

"That would be my second position," Paula continued. "I put the first forward because I know that it is where we will have to go and I wish to minimize the number of policy changes that we will be certainly forced to make.

"I wish to lead the senior coven in advance of the need for change, and not to be seen as merely responding to it."

Grace, the great mediator, entered into the conversation. "Perhaps we should combine the two, and set forth a schedule of changes up front. It would be seen as one plan, much like that one implemented by the former Most Senior Sister. It would also provide for our obviously changing situation without jumping too far ahead."

Paula picked it up again, "I gave that possibility some consideration also, and the earlier plan gave us a long term benefit that is worthy of consideration.

"Note that we will be seen as incredibly potent sensitives when the necessity for the direction is finally revealed. Before then, however, we will be seen as traitors because we will be planning the piecemeal elimination of much of the function of the coven and the Senior Sisterhood.

“My first recommendation is that we take the hit now, and found our action on the lack of need for greater involvement.”

Tiala took the bait she had offered, “Lack of need?”

Paula continued, “You have kept in touch with old Amray Cham, what magic does she do these days?”

After a period of silence, she continued, “We have not really needed to travel for years, and the need is even less now than it was before. If things continue as we ourselves predict, there will be even less need in the years to come.

“Our guidance from past seniors was that we should stay well ahead of the change, and be sensitive to all that will happen so that we can continue the sisterhood during the spare times to come.”

She turned to Kathleen, “How fares our library.”

The response was, “It is becoming complete, much to my own amazement. We have gotten some extremely valuable support from a group of sisters who have been doing independent research in the history of our art. I always thought that the great art had wider scope, and more certain records than it appears to have.

“Also, the history is coming along splendidly. There are a substantial number of personal archives that need to be examined and incorporated, but the fundamentals are well documented even at this point.

“The Golden centuries are marvelously well documented in our collection of spell books as to both the extent and scope of the magical works. The change is so clearly and obviously documented that it will provide a tremendous benefit for generations to come.

“I have to admit that I was shocked that our history was not being documented as it occurred.”

Beth, a moderate witch who was far and away the oldest of them in years added, “Have patience with your elders, Kathy. The time was not right before.

“It was not even considered until the coven realized that we would not be able to continue as we were. There would have been no support for the effort, magic was too much with us.”

* * *

Paul Brennen had aged very well. The angular features of his youth had mellowed some, and were often taken to give his face character. A few pounds had been added to his bony frame that filled him out and left him looking quite handsome.

He had married late, but well. He had three teenage children who gave his life both meaning and completeness. Indeed, walking the path had been life itself to him.

The student before him was obviously a witch, though that had lost much of its importance through the years. He had noticed her on campus, but had not taught her. She was reasonably gifted, and had the good fortune to fall under Dave's influence.

He looked and saw the flow of benefits. The bonds that held her to the sorcerer were obvious, and the flow about her was not otherwise remarkable.

Dave had been right, and Debbie would need some redirection to keep her from going into harms way. The flow of her life was beginning to cross the flow in the world.

He followed his path, "I asked to meet with you because I have become somewhat concerned about your fascination with magic."

She replied in obvious misunderstanding, "Oh, Dave doesn't mean anything to me."

Still, the path was clear, he continued, "If you allow your life to continue along the lines of witchcraft to the exclusion of your studies, you will end up with nothing."

She was still resistant, "Is that a personal prediction?"

"The time of magic is coming rapidly to a close. The influence of magic in the world will be minimal for a long time. No matter what you learn in the field of magic, it will soon become ineffective.

"I know of no one who is earning their living by the great art, even someone as skilled as Dave."

She was accusatory, "Has he been talking to you?"

He answered, "Dave and I go back to the years when I was a student here. We talk regularly and to good effect. In this, we are in agreement, that you are of such value that you must continue in your studies.

“God cares for you enough to offer his Christ to you. We care for you enough to urge you to a life of effect. The world needs bright young ladies like yourself. Dave and I are willing to help you be that young lady.”

When she left, some twenty minutes later, she had decided to give more of her attention to her studies, and Paul knew that she had. The flow around her had been partly restored to the flow in the world.

He reflected on that, the flow in the world had undergone some remarkable changes since he had first seen it. What had been an independent flow that was a part of the world had slowly dried up to a trickle.

What remained was a flow generated by people, a flow in humanity that was not greatly different than that which had been the flow of the world. Much of the flow he had seen as a young man was the world’s reaction to many centuries of magical efforts by men.

The logic was simple. The benefits of people had also been the basis for the flow in the world. God’s purpose had not been changed, and the flow continued. It was just different, but it continued.

* * *

The senior sisters had felt something coming for months. They hadn’t been sure what was coming, but they knew it was something powerful.

That didn’t make much sense. They were all sensitives and should have known what it was. But, none of them had been able to focus on the source.

Now it was almost at their very door.

They had gathered in the coven room, knowing that it was coming.

Finally, Paula got a direct feel on it, and she had to smile. No wonder they had been unable to zero in on it. Some of them had never had the experience of Paul Brennen.

But what was he doing here? It would have been a long plane trip to get to them, and he was coming in person.

Surely he knew that their power and influence in the world was on the wane. Could he have something to help them?

Paula watched as the others noted the flow of force that accompanied Paul. The older ones recognized it, and the younger ones had heard of it.

Paul came to the door and entered unbidden. He had known most of the coven personally at one time, and they had kept track of him for many years.

Paula greeted him for the coven, "You are welcome, Paul. Come and be seated."

When he was seated and comfortable, and with a cup of tea before him, she asked, "What brings you all these many miles to us?"

He replied, "I am here because you are wise enough to survive, even in the time to come. I am here because you have been keeping the record."

When there was nothing said in return, he continued, "I have to make sure that I am a part of that record.

"Also, I have to call upon you to fulfill a commitment made to me many years ago on behalf of the coven by your retired sister Amray Cham."

Tiala responded, "She still speaks fondly of you. Your right to a boon is well remembered here."

Grace added, "What was learned through your gift has been recorded, as well as your place in our history. This would not satisfy our debt, as we already are doing what you ask."

Paula added, "Our debt to you is greater than this, what is it that you need? If our survival as a coven is required, then tell us what you must preserve."

He smiled at her in obvious appreciation, "You were always very quick, Paula."

Then to the assembled body, "I have come to realize my own unique position in the flow of things. In time, I will cease from the flow; and there will be a time when there will be no other like me. My work must be preserved through that time.

"I have a unique knowledge of the operation of the world, a doorway into a wisdom that is much greater than my own.

"I find that I am the first with this strange gift, but I am also sure there will be another.

“What I must do is to prepare for the one who will follow when the force of magic returns to the world.”

Paula replied, “Consider it as done, but I feel nothing that you have brought to us. If you had, it would certainly have had power in it.

He replied, “I have not written it yet, but know that I will surely write it.

“When it is written, I will need to deliver it to you for preservation. It will contain all that I have to pass on to my successor.”

Grace asked, “Will you have objection to our use of the knowledge in the book for our own purposes?”

“I would object if you did not. It is necessary that you actually put my work into your own. That is how my successor will know to come to you to ask for the original.

“That which you will write for the preservation of witchcraft will certainly be good and sufficient for that purpose. It will in no way satisfy my successor, but leave in him or her a greater thirst for what lies behind it.

“When that person comes, you must give him or her the book. Once you incorporate it, no other but the senior coven is to be told of its existence. It is not meant for others, and they would not be able to preserve it. Beside that, I do not wish to be a party to your efforts, or to be a direct contributor in an area where I have no real expertise.”

Paula simply said, “Granted.”

And that was the end of the meeting.

Chapter 19

The flow had stopped, and the wave was hanging over the world like a breaker at the shore.

For those of the gift, especially for the sensitives, the shadow of the coming wave hung over like some giant darkness, seemingly held in pause before engulfing the world.

The tension of it was like the calm before some terrible hurricane. What was coming was so powerful, so magnificent, and so incredible that there was no way to escape it. It was so massive that there was no good way to prepare for it.

Those who felt it coming just had to wait, not knowing what to expect when it arrived.

Many of the most sensitive lost their gift because they were afraid to use it. All they could see was what was coming, and that was so obvious that even the ungifted sensed it on some level.

* * *

Paul had to watch for the visitor using effect on the flow. His hearing had been deserting him little by little for years, and he definitely wanted to be aware of her before she got there.

He had to admit that she had surprised him, and he hadn't been surprised in years. The only dealings he had with the magic people had been his own grandniece and her children.

He had come to believe that magic had finally gone out of the world, and that only the kitchen variety worked at all. Yet he had felt it when Dr. Prescott had called. She had to be a truly amazing lady.

Even further, she had his name from the Senior Sisterhood. That was not the sort of thing that they would do for outsiders. He was to be obscure, and had communicated his wishes on the subject to them in several of his letters. They had his book, and that should have sufficed.

Then he felt her coming, and it was strange. She came with the flow, even as he did, but with more direction and concentration than even the clergymen that he knew.

It wasn't like his effect, which had grown to massive proportion as he continued to witness and to care for others. With her, the flow seemed weaker, and thinner, but reached out to a far greater extent. Her ability to work with the flow had to be very different. It was some time before she actually arrived, and he let her in. Dr. Prescott was a woman of indeterminate years from her appearance, but she would have to be very old for the complexity of flow that surrounded her.

She looked at him as she took a seat on the other side of the room, and he knew that she was also a good sensitive. He could feel her polite curiosity, and her searching thoughts.

She spoke in a voice with a calm authority in it, "I see that you are tired, and I shall make my visit as short and to the point as I may."

He noticed that the flow seemed to follow. By some means, she seemed to know what was right, even as he did. Her visit was obviously right for both of them as it was indicated in the flow.

He thought for a moment that she might also have the gift as he had, but the details were not there. It had to be something else.

"Indeed, I am tired. But it has been such a time since I was visited by a sister that I would gladly offer up all the time it takes to hear the news.

"As you must know, I am not of the gift, and am not a part of the communication organization which has been instituted to keep the sisters informed."

She had a beautiful smile, "Your courtesy is appreciated, and I am here to return the great favor that you performed on my behalf."

She actually laughed pleasantly at his expression of surprise. "No, we have not met before.

"I speak of the book that you prepared and asked the Senior Sisterhood to incorporate within their materials. I was asked to do the incorporation."

She seemed to sink back into the chair as her mind obviously shifted back to the time that she had performed the service. "I, and some other very nervous witches and sensitives were once employed by the Federal Government for securing documents and data from

disclosure through magic. We are among the few of the gift who actually earned our living through it.

“The continuing loss of ability to protect and defend through magic went to our livelihood, and the world seemed intent on destroying our ability to continue in our very lucrative positions.

“We had to change direction or we would be at risk. It was clear that we had some time, as there is still plenty of paranoia about the ability of others to continue their efforts at snooping. But this concern was not unlimited. Paranoia cannot last forever, and we needed to find some other service that we could render.

“We noted that sensitivity still existed, and that this psychic ability continued to have effect. We would still need some psychic barriers, but this was not enough to keep us all employed, or to keep any of us employed at the level that we had come to expect.

“We decided to go more seriously into prediction, the ability to understand what was coming in the future.

“We still have the gift, even if it cannot be used to create effects. We still have our natural psychic sensitivity. All we did was to focus these into a different direction, one that did not require power.

“That is where you come in.”

She seemed to be waiting for a response, so he replied, “My book?”

“Oh no. Long before you even contacted the senior coven to take on the preservation and management of your book.

“What we set out to do was to develop logics for understanding what would happen. We collected a substantial amount of information and built an extensive database. We developed an artificial intelligence to analyze it.

“Our research, as a sidelight, was one of the major foundations for the books that the Senior Sisterhood has prepared to preserve the great art.

“What we came up with was a set of rules and approaches for predicting what would almost certainly happen.

“Of personal interest to you, we predicted that you would have to come into existence; and we nearly went crazy looking for you.

“We had a large number of predictions concerning you and your effect on the world, but we could never locate you. All of our ancillary predictions came to pass, but without ever seeing you.

“The effects of your entrance into your gift were seen and noted. The entrance of the demon was noted, and was linked to your existence. We looked for you, but we could not find you. When it was driven out, we looked for you again, but you were not there.”

She seemed to be enjoying her story immensely, “You caused us no end of trouble.”

“I get it,” Paul finally broke in. “You were looking for someone strong with the gift.”

He was rewarded with her smile again, “Exactly. Also, we were looking for you through the gift and you were difficult to see from the beginning. We were even beginning to think you might have been here only in spirit.”

He was a little curious, “You said that you had predicted my existence?”

“We thought that would be a subject of interest to you. It is especially important in our ability to predict when your successor will arrive.”

His eyebrows raised at that.

“To be perfectly fair, we predicted the flow of benefits in the world as a necessity. The artificial intelligence predicted that there was such a flow with a probability exceeding 99% with a sigma variance of less than 1%. We also predicted the reaction of the flow to meddling by magic, and the cumulative effect of the past 600 years of magical works.

“The reaction was necessary, and it was only a question of how the reaction would manifest itself.”

Paul was still an excellent logician, “I think I see your difficulty. You didn’t attach religious significance to the flow.”

She looked at him carefully at that. “You are very quick, Mr. Brennen; you arrived at our problem with very little in the way of logical assumptions.”

“Without religious significance, all we could predict was that it would be a person who would be able to deal directly with the pent-up effect in the flow.

“Even there, we were not totally accurate because you cannot deal with the flow, but only react to it effectively. You were able to alleviate the pressures without actually employing magic. There were the few exceptions where you directed those who had the gift, but your record indicates that these instances were few and far between.

“You should realize that we lacked specific knowledge of your completely different gift. We could not even see the flow itself, or sense its affect directly. We worked from inference. All we could do was to understand that it was there and that it was considerably stronger than anyone else had any reason to believe it to be.”

At that point she shifted directions abruptly. “This brings us to the meeting today, and our payment of a debt owed to you.

“The senior sisters felt that they were not intellectually equipped to enter your work into what they were producing. They went looking for someone of the gift who had sufficient worldly understanding to avoid a serious bias, which would color the efforts of someone who had only the gift.

“Knowing of our work, and being somewhat familiar with the logical research that we had been undertaking, they called upon me, and I agreed.

“When I began to read your work, I knew that I had finally found our missing link.

“I don’t mean the name to imply anything negative about you, but we needed some term to refer to the ghostly person who was there but had managed to avoid us. You were the missing link between the cumulative effect of magic and the necessity of the future when the magic itself would go out of the world. To support other predictions, the cumulative effect demanded a method of preservation.

“I saw at once that this work was exactly that means of preservation. It meant that you had to be the person, and that the preservation had already been arranged.

“Clearly, this would maintain the effect through the time when magic would be dormant.”

Again, she shifted directions, “You will be happy to note that I have annotated your work by an additional appendix with a time chart and additional information concerning your future beneficiary.”

He asked, “Specifics?”

“I won’t be here long enough to give all of the detail, but you should know that the one who will take on the function will have to have both your vision and the gift.

“You have been able to take note of the effects of magic but have not fully resolved the tremendous effect which is already in existence. Time goes forward carrying all of that baggage and your successor will have to make resolution.

“The timing was largely derived from statistical analysis of the effects being achieved now and those that are recorded. Your successor will have to be there to take over sometime between 310 and 317 years from now. He or she is most likely to be a student of the great art following upon the establishment of an educational system that doesn’t yet exist, and will almost certainly be a child between the ages of 13 and 18. The most likely age is 15 going on 16.”

She stopped at that point. He finally replied, “You’re wondering if I am able to add to this?”

“We had hopes, as your gift is not limited by what we expected. It is already clear that it is not subject to our usual analytic approaches. It is only by a considerable extension of our natural abilities using computer analysis that we are able to tell you as much as we have.”

“Is there something additional that you can see in the flow? Is there something that can be logically deduced from what you see?”

He just looked off into the distance for a time. “I hadn’t really thought of that. My use has been so immediate that I have not considered it to be a tool for the purpose of long-range prediction.

“You must understand that the vision I have is a vision for living, for immediate use of the potential for benefits about us. The greater flow does have effects that might be subject to analysis, but the analysis would seem to be better made by the techniques you are already using.

"I trust that your analysis from the past is far more accurate than I could provide to you through my immediate vision.

"I would say that you have fulfilled your purpose in being of benefit to me by providing me with considerable peace of mind. You have told me that I have succeeded in fulfilling my purpose."

She rose from her seat, "You are tired. It is time for me to go."

He rose with her, and escorted her to the door. It was good to know that the some valuable use was being made of the gift, even if only in the negative sense. The future was being protected from her enemies.

* * *

An audience with the Bishop was curious enough for someone of Paul's dubious credentials, but it had been arranged.

Paul, now very much an old man, was speaking, "I know of the proscription against witchcraft, and I have traced the origin of the doctrine to be much as you have outlined it.

"The only exception I note is the marked increase in effective magic beginning about 600 years ago. That was when it became a pronounced part of our world. At that time, the strictures were made far more severe than they had ever been in the past."

The Bishop returned with, "I was very concerned about this visit because of your relation to the black arts. It was partially on that basis that I agreed to speak with you.

"I hope that you are not advocating for the interests of others to whom I must not speak."

Paul replied, "I am not representing any interests of magic or people who practice it if that is your concern. I am very concerned with my older sister, who performed healings for fifty years outside of the sanction of the Church using only prayer, but she is no longer living.

"I am also not representing those who are against the black arts. I am here representing my own interests as a Christian, and am hoping to provide you with a basis for recognizing benefits for my Christian brothers and sisters."

There was a pause punctuated by a nod from the cleric, indicating that he should proceed.

"I have been in contact with a very curious group of magic people who have tracked the passage of magic out of our world, and have determined that we will have no substantial magical influences for at least 120 years.

"My interest is that some of the strictures which were put in place when magic was of full affect are out of place during periods when it is not.

"Of specific interest is the miracle of healing."

The Bishop replied, "That matter was settled some time back. Healing outside of the sanction of the church was determined to be magic, and I see no immediate need to challenge that ruling."

Paul continued, "I am not giving you such a reason, but pointing out that the need for the stricture has been removed. Before the stricture was put in place, healings were primarily matters in which the Church had predominant place. The level of miraculous healings by sanctioned prayer efforts dropped to thirty percent of what it had been after only five years from when the stricture was put in place."

"That has been noted," he replied, "and considerable attention has already been given to the argument you are putting forward. It is not something that we have overlooked.

"The truth is that the church does not accept officially that it has interfered with the practice of faith healing. That one change is not the only one that had occurred during this period; and it is felt that changes to other aspects have also negatively affected the rate of healings, including perhaps the willingness of the spirit to provide benefits to a world which is obsessed with magic.

"It would be hard indeed to say that the church has, through its doctrine, somehow defeated God's will in this matter. If He chose to perform miracle healings, then our doctrine wouldn't stand in His way."

Paul knew he had a point of focus. He passed over the study, knowing that it was new work the Bishop would want to have verified.

"Evidence being gathered now seems to indicate that the rate of miraculous healings from prayer has actually remained relatively constant.

"The only real difference seems to be that the Church has distanced itself from the healings because many were achieved

through the wrong people, people who were able to work magic as well as being effective tools for miraculous healings.

“What I am urging is a rethinking of the situation. With the great drift away from magic, the reason for the Church to distance itself from faith healings now and in the foreseeable future is being removed.

“I cannot see benefit to the Church, or to God’s people, from not claiming His work and proclaiming it to the world? There seems little reason to continue confusing healing with magic works.”

The Bishop thought on that for a few moments before replying. “My instinct is to pursue what you are recommending, but I feel a need for caution. Even you claim that the need will arise again in the future.

“The original ban did impact on the reputation of the Church, and the confusion still causes us difficulties, as you noted. It might be better to maintain our approach with consistency instead of vacillating.”

Paul replied, “That would do well for tomorrow, but what of today? In following the Lord’s teachings, I am trying to live for what we need now.”

The Bishop merely called the meeting to a close. “Your point is taken, Mr. Brennen. I will have to give the matter more thought and seek guidance through prayer.

“You may be content that you have had an effect upon me, but I will leave guidance to one who is more able than I.”