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Daughter of the Craft

She soars upon the winds of the east
Engulfing the powers of the cosmos within her
All magic is in her hands at this time
It is the bewitching hour...

The powers of the elements surge around her body
As she receives the gifts of foresight
Exhilaration tears through her soul
Because she knows she will never be the same again.

As the winds caress her body and spirit
The stars seem to change their alignment
Shining with extreme brilliance

Life and death are now one in the same
A continuance of her spiritual path
Each level more intriguing than the next

She is renewed with the powers of the universe...

A daughter of the craft
Open and awaiting all things
Ready to challenge anything
That threatens her realm.
Mortal or immortal
She is... Magic.

- A. Everette -

Haunted

The night is cold and filled with pain
And a cruel wind drives home a bitter rain
Mebus Succubus — Kiss of Hades

Memory can be a tricky thing. Sometimes I can't remember things I would do anything to recall, and yet there are other things I would gladly give my life to forget. With the abilities I have one would think I could be as selective as I wished about my memory, but the honest truth is that I can't.

Once Malcolm might have said that was because I didn't try hard enough, or he might have suggested I try another seeking. On the other hand he also tried to kill me, so I suppose I should stop thinking about what advice my one time mentor might have given me. I haven't seen Malcolm in a long time, haven't trusted him in longer, but sometimes I wish he were here to help me cope. There are a lot of people I wish were still around to help me out. My mother. Robert. Lizzy. Marcus. My son.

Not that I really need their help, it's just that sometimes I miss them, all of them, so much. I never thought I would end up like this, feeling like an old lady at the tender age of twenty-four. And it's not like I'm all alone in this world, I do have friends, and I have Papa.

Who am I kidding, I haven't been able to go to Papa with my problems since Robert died. If he knew half of the things I've done he'd disown me. Of course if he knew half the things I can do he'd kill me. I show Papa what he wants to see; a god-fearing daughter who avoids anything supernatural as he's told me so many times I should do.

The reality is that I'm a witch.

Magic is real, it exists in more forms than an unawakened person could ever imagine. Most people don't see it, won't admit to knowing about things that happen right under their noses, but that doesn't mean it isn't real. The first time I used magic I was fourteen, and since then I've spent my life developing my abilities. Malcolm Robbins was my teacher for years, but that was so long ago that it almost seems like another life.

But I've rambled enough. There was a reason I sat down and started this dissertation on my life. Things are going to be changing for me very soon, and with a bit of luck I'll be able to forget about the heartaches and pain that fill my past. I'm writing them down here for two reasons.

The first is to convince myself that I'm doing the right thing, that I really do want to wipe my memory clean and start over. I'm not too concerned about that decision, I'd honestly rather forget the memories that haunt me. If that means forgetting the good stuff too, well, nothing's free in this world, is it?

The second and most important reason I'm writing this is to pay a kind of tribute to those that I intend to forget, to record their lives somewhere, if only for a brief time. I may be the only one alive who remembers the good things they did, and I don't want that to be lost forever.

So here's to those I've lost, a eulogy for the past, if you will. I'm sure I've disappointed a few of them, but I'd like to think they'd be proud of me if they could see how I turned out.

Tender Age

But the tide is ever changing
The wheel ever spinning round
Mebus Succubus - Craft of the Wise

The wheel of the year turns. It begins in December with Yule and the birth of the sun. At Imbolc in February we honor the goddess who turns the wheel to spring. March brings Ostara, when the Lord and Lady return from the underworld. Beltain on May first marks the final phase of planting and is most famous for the Maypole.

The Summer Solstice, or Litha, marks the longest day of the year, and the height of the Sun God's power. On August first we begin our harvest festivals with Lammass, when we celebrate the first fruits of harvest. At Mabon we celebrate the coming of fall on the Autumnal equinox. Samhain, the highest holy day of witches, completes the wheel of the year by inaugurating winter.

When I was a child the wheel of the year didn't mean much to me, yet at the same time it meant so much. I lived with my parents and my older brother Robert, and things seemed idyllic to the child that I was. My father was a God-fearing Christian man, and it was important to him that the family attend church, so we did. I thought nothing of the fact that my mother taught me other things, forbidden things, where my father couldn't hear.

I know now that my mother was a witch, a Mage who followed the Verbena Tradition. She could use magic, real magic, and she knew many things about the turning of the wheel. My father didn't know or approve of her magic, so she kept it from him, and taught Robert and I to do the same.

In the days when my mother was alive we were a close and loving family. We took vacations together and ate dinners together, and loved each other. That all changed when my mother died. I was young when it happened, barely seven. Robert at twelve was older, wiser than his years. When mama died, he did his best to replace our parents in my life.

While Papa had survived Mama's death, he simply retreated when she died, left us to enter the world of the Church. All warmth left him, all sense of family and caring. God was suddenly the most important thing in his life, and it wasn't long after that he was ordained as a minister.

Robert insisted that we had to stop believing in the old ways that mama had taught us, but I found that I couldn't. Things Papa's church tried to teach me sounded cold and empty compared to the warm loving traditions that my mother had taught me. It was hard to hide how I felt from my father, but Robert insisted I had to, and somehow I managed.

I think Robert awakened on the day our mother died. There was a difference to him afterward that couldn't be explained by her death or Papa's emotional abandonment. Years later I could look back and pinpoint the day, but at the time I didn't understand why my brother had to spend so much time away from the house, why he had to leave me with the emotionless man that was our father.

Robert and I grew closer with every passing year. In time I became aware that he was involved with magic, but he was adamant that I stay as far away from it as possible. I didn't agree. I believed that if magic and the wheel of the year had been important to Mama, then it should be important to me. No matter how hard he tried to discourage me, I found a way to get around both him and our father.

Of course it was hard at first as a child not yet ten to get my hands on learning material. I saved my allowance and did all the odd jobs I could to have the money I needed to buy Wiccan books. As young as I was I didn't understand most of what I read, but understanding came with time.

My brother was the one who helped me with my homework when I needed it, made sure I had three meals a day and clean clothes. I depended on him for nearly everything, and he made sure I was taken care of. The only thing he didn't do was attend parent teacher conferences at school, but

that was only because Papa wanted to keep up appearances. See, shortly after my mother died, Papa joined the church and became the Honorable Father Strong.

It's hard for me to think about those years with my brother. I remember so many days that I waited anxiously for him to come home so we could do things together. There were also many times that our father refused to let Robert take me anywhere alone, and their arguments were enough to make me run crying from the room.

Eventually the distance between Papa and Robert grew to a chasm, one I tried my best to bridge. It was almost as if they hated each other, blamed each other for Mama's death. I didn't understand, and neither of them would explain.

When I turned twelve my brother gave me a special present for my birthday. It was a collection of plays by Shakespeare, which he knew I liked, but there was more to the present than met the eye. After Papa had gone to bed, Robert came to me and showed me how to open a secret compartment in the back of the book. He said it would give me somewhere to store my most secret things, and I was so grateful to finally have something created with real magic that I cried.

Into the compartment I immediately placed my most prized possessions. An envelope contained two of them; a black and white photograph taken in 1975 of my mother standing near a river, her long dark hair blowing in the wind, and a color photograph of Robert. He was trying to look stern, but there was laughter in his green eyes. On his neck I could see the fresh scar my kitten had given him just a week or so before.

The next item I placed in the compartment was a blue ribbon that I had worn in my hair on the day mama had died. She had tied it in place, and it was one of the last things she had ever touched. The final thing was a charm bracelet that Robert had given me at our mother's funeral. It had been hers and I'd wanted to wear it always, but Papa had gotten upset when he'd seen it and I'd had to hide it away. I was glad to finally have somewhere safe to keep it.

After seeing how much the book meant to me, Robert was a little more understanding about my need to learn more about the things he could do. He still wouldn't teach me any of them, but he no longer hid his abilities from me. I think a part of him hoped that one day I would Awaken, but he was also afraid of what Papa would do to me if I did, or even if he found out I was secretly living a pagan life. He should have been more concerned about what Papa would do to him.

When I turned twelve Robert gave me a gold identification bracelet. He chanted softly in Latin as he fastened it on my wrist, and for a moment the chain glowed.

"What is it?" I asked softly, examining the ornately engraved letters that made up my name.

"I want you to keep this on at all times," he told me. "If you ever get into trouble, it will help me find you."

I laughed with the innocence of a child who believes nothing bad will ever happen. "What kind of trouble do you think I'll get into?"

He didn't share my amusement. "One never knows what the future holds, Christina." I knew he was serious because he almost never called me that unless I was in trouble. "Promise that you'll never try to take it off," he added.

I looked at the chain, but there was no clasp. "There's no way to take it off," I pointed out.

"It can be removed," he corrected me. "But as long as you wear it, I will know where you are."

His concern touched me, and I hugged him. "Thank you for taking care of me, Robert. I love you."

He put his arms around me and ran a hand down the back of my head. "I love you too, Tina. You know I'll always do my best to protect you."

As much as I loved my brother, I wished that he would realize I was growing up. I moved away a little to grin up at him. "Hopefully I'll be able to take care of myself, Robert."

Fathers and Sons

Here comes the Church of Madness
bearing gifts of death and torture
Incubus Succubus — Church of Madness

My father and I were supposed to work at the church the day my brother died. He had a sermon to write, and I'd promised him I'd clean the schoolrooms at the back of the church for some extra money. School had started a few weeks before, and the Autumnal Equinox was upon us. I was fourteen.

Downtown Helena is picturesque and I've always loved the old buildings and wide sidewalks. Last Chance Gulch had been converted from a street to an outdoor mall years ago, and the statues and colorful plants were a familiar sight to us both. We were crossing one of the streets that bisected the mall when the accident almost happened.

Papa and I were talking and laughing softly, walking quickly toward the statue of the gold miner in front of the Whorehouse Restaurant. My hair was long and loose, and I wore denim jeans and a white T-shirt with running shoes. Papa of course wore the uniform of his chosen profession; dark priestly garb.

Just as we reached the curb, a young boy shot away from his mother and into traffic. A large van slammed on his brakes and tried to stop, but it didn't look like he'd stop. The squeal of his brakes echoed through the canyon of stores. I turned and raised my hand, whispering a soft chant, a prayer that the goddess would use her power to save the child, as I had none to save him.

"Safe within the harbor, ancient as a stone," I intoned softly. "Strong as the sea, solid as a rock, safe within the Mother." To my relief, the van stopped only inches before it would have struck the boy. His mother grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the road, bending over to whisper harsh admonitions of caution in his ear.

I turned to see that Papa's face had grown hard with anger. Robert had told me many times to never let Papa think that I knew anything about paganism or witchcraft, but in my concern for the boy I'd forgotten his many warnings.

"When has your brother taught you the devil's tricks?" he demanded harshly.

"He hasn't, Papa," I protested.

"I have told him before he is not to taint you with his evil ways," he declared harshly. "It is time to end this."

"Papa—"

Without another word, without even looking at me, Papa turned and walked away, heading toward the home of one of his followers, one of the men that Robert had warned me never to be alone with.

I stared after Papa for a moment, unsure what to do. I knew he would never forgive Robert, but I didn't know how badly he would punish my brother. I turned and ran up the gulch toward Carl Windel's house. If Robert wasn't there, Carl would know where he was.

I was light on my feet and soon I was pounding on Carl's door. Within ten minutes we were in the parking area of Mt Helena Park and were headed down the trail that led toward where my brother was.

Eagle's Peak was on the north side of Mt. Helena, about thirty feet below the highest point. The ground was rocky and desolate, treacherous to stand on let alone to walk across. A large outcropping of rock loomed nearby, hanging over the entrance to a cave. The outcropping gave the peak its name because from certain angles it did look like an eagle's head.

I ran up the slope toward the cave, Carl trailing closely behind. Terrified that we would be too late, I called out my brother's name. He emerged from the darkness, concern written on his features. A moment later I felt invisible hands helping me climb the rest of the way over the loose rock and gravel. When I reached Robert's side, I threw myself into his arms and he cradled me close to his chest.

"Papa is looking for you," I managed to say through my tears. "He's going to kill you!"

"Tina, honey," he said soothingly. "I'll be fine, he won't kill me."

"Do you promise?" I pleaded, looking up at him.

Before he could answer, angry voices floated up the mountain toward us. We all turned to look, but no one was in sight.

"Tina, you have to get out of here," he told me urgently.

"No," I protested. "I can't leave you, he'll kill you!"

He grabbed my shoulders in a bruising grip. "I promise nothing will happen to me, Tina, but you have to go." He turned to his friend and ordered, "Carl, take her away and keep her safe."

I knew that nothing I said would convince him to let me stay. I didn't want to go, but I didn't want Papa to find me here either. "I love you," I whispered as I leaned up to kiss his cheek.

"I love you," he replied, then pushed me gently toward Carl.

I wish I'd stayed. I wish that I had stood beside Robert and fought my father and his men. If I had, maybe Papa would have stopped them before things went too far. Maybe if I'd stayed Robert would still be alive. Maybe he would have let them kill us both.

Carl grabbed my hand and pulled me toward an area of large boulders that stood like giant sentinels nearby. We had barely reached their sanctuary when a group of angry men emerged from the tree line.

What happened next lingers always at the back of my mind. While Carl held me back I watched as my brother fought with his magic against the hunters that Papa had brought. I gasped when they drove him back into the cave and couldn't stop myself from screaming when the stone that made up the Eagle's Peak above the cave began to fall. Thankfully the sound of the mountain collapsing hid my scream. Carl threw me over his shoulder and carried me away. The shock of my brother's death overwhelmed me, made me too weak to fight him.

I don't know how we got down the mountain, but the next thing I knew Carl was running a cold washcloth across my face. The sorrow in his eyes told me that I hadn't imagined what had happened on the mountain.

When I went home hours later it was with the knowledge that I couldn't tell my father that I'd witnessed Robert's death. I also knew that no one would believe me if I went to the police. See, all of the men on the mountain had been 'pillars of the community'. I think even the chief of police had been among them. My only choice was to pretend I'd never been on the mountain that day.

Papa assumed that I'd heard about Robert's death from someone else, and did his best to comfort me in my grief. I let him try, but I knew that nothing would ever be the same between us again.

Eventually I moved back into the remains of my life. I returned to the friends and pastimes I had enjoyed before, but nothing seemed the same. Papa was still as withdrawn as he'd been since Mama died, but I no longer had Robert there to look after me.

As the years passed it became easier for me to find and get books on the old religion. Wicca and the pagan religions drew me more than ever, and I still used much of the spending money I had to buy books on the subject. It was hard hiding them from my father, but somehow I managed. I also did what I could to investigate the life that I thought my brother had led.

I lived a double life through most of my teens. To my father and the community at large I was a perfect little girl. I did everything my father asked, attended church three times a week, studied the bible, and volunteered to help whenever the church needed something done.

The real me was nothing like the girl my father saw. I read everything mystical and metaphysical I could get my hands on, spent hours walking through nature to attune myself to Her, and practiced rituals in the most unlikely places. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't do magic the way that Robert had been able to.

Don't Let Go

you were the gift of joy
you were my light
Mentibus Succubus — Vlad

The only bright spot in my life during those years was my growing friendship with Marcus Thorpe. Of course Papa didn't approve, but then he never approved of anything I did.

One night he showed me just how much he didn't approve. "Christina! Come down here!" I heard him yell from his study in the tone that he only used when he's really upset with me.

"I'm coming papa," I called back in my best 'daddy's little girl' voice while running through a list in my head trying to figure out what he thought I'd done wrong. I was glad that I was still wearing my school clothes. Although he didn't always like the clothes I chose to wear, he hated the clothes I wanted to wear.

When I entered the study, I could see the anger written on his face but he motioned for me to sit down instead of yelling right away. The reprieve didn't last long.

"What did I tell you about socializing with lowlifes?" he asked with a sour look on his face. When I opened my mouth to answer he continued. "I just got off the phone with Mrs. Lansky, and she said she saw you on the back of a motorcycle last night with that Thorpe kid. You told me you were going to your friend Jane's."

"I did go to Jane's, Papa," I insisted. "Marcus is a friend of Billy, her boyfriend. We were going to get some pop and chips, it was—"

He raised a hand to stop my explanation. "Save it young lady. If Jane wants to waste her life that's between her and her parents, but you are my responsibility. Your brother died because he was hanging out with scum and got mixed up with something he couldn't handle. Do you want the same to happen to you?"

Although it had been nearly two years since Robert's death, it still hurt when I thought about it. To hear Papa use the memory to try and frighten me only made it that much worse. I couldn't help the tears that came to my eyes.

"I'm sorry," I managed to whisper, although I didn't really know why I was apologizing. The trip had been innocent enough, we'd just run to the store for pop and chips. Marcus was a nice boy, really. He'd been in one of my classes the year before so I kind of knew him.

"It's okay, this time. Just don't let me catch you hanging out with that type again. And if Jane wants to go with them, well then you just come right home. You don't need her type as a friend anyway," he said with a serious look on his face. "Now get back to your homework."

I hurried back to my room and closed the door quietly. I still didn't understand what Papa had against my friends, we were all on the honor roll at school and had never been in any kind of trouble with the law.

It was true that Billy and Marcus had motorcycles and wore their leather jackets to class, but there was no law against that. Of course I had to admit that they did look good in them, and Marcus had asked if he could see me again. In fact, he wanted to see me later that night. I'd shyly told him that I would, but in all honesty I didn't know if I could get past Papa. I shouldn't have worried, for Marcus had plans of his own.

Shortly before seven, my father came to my room and told me he was going to Mrs. Pearson's house. She was a widow that lived in our neighborhood, and she'd called Papa and told him she needed spiritual counseling. I assured him I'd be all right on my own, and he left me to my homework.

I remember sitting in my bed and wondering if I had the nerve to leave the house. I'm not sure I would have in the end if I hadn't heard the motorcycle pull into the driveway. Within minutes my homework was forgotten and I was riding behind Marcus through the streets of Helena on our way out of town.

We were going so fast I found it hard to breathe, but I was having the time of my life. I didn't pay attention to where we were going until he pulled into the parking lot for the Mt. Helena Park. I hadn't been back to the mountain since the day Robert had died, and I would have been happy to never have gone up there again, but I bit my tongue. Marcus didn't know about my brother, and I didn't want to spoil our night with ghosts from my past.

When he parked the bike I got off and walked to the edge of the lot. I found myself staring up at the section of mountain that was once Eagle's Peak, and closed my eyes in despair at the memories that washed over me.

"Someone told me there used to be an outcrop over that way that looked like an Eagle," Marcus said softly, unaware of my distress.

"It collapsed a few years ago," I whispered.

He moved up beside me and looked down at my face. In the bright light of the moon I'm sure my expression told him my every emotion.

"What's wrong?" he asked, concerned.

Turning away from the mountain I tried to smile at him. "Nothing."

"No, there's something," he insisted, touching my arm.

I shook my head and took a tighter rein on my emotions. "Just a ghost from the past. It's okay."

He glanced back up at the mountain thoughtfully, but to my relief he dropped the subject. "I'm glad your father had something else to do tonight."

I looked at him in surprise. "How did you know that?"

He smiled. "I have my connections."

"You know Mrs. Pearson," I said thoughtfully. "Did you ask her to call Papa?"

"No," he replied as he walked closer to me. "She volunteered. She thinks your father has entirely too much time to bully you."

I might have been offended at his words if they hadn't been the truth. As busy as my father was with the church and his flock, he always seemed to have the time to tell me what I was doing wrong. "So you took advantage of her opinion and came to take me out?"

"I did," he confessed, putting a hand on the side of my neck under my hair. The warm touch of his hand sent goose bumps up and down my skin. "But I won't take advantage of you."

"You won't?" I asked breathlessly, looking up into his dark eyes.

"I won't," he repeated. "I just want a kiss."

"A kiss." It sounded lovely, and when his lips touched mine it was.

Before and After

Air and water, earth and fire
Give to me my heart's desire
Mecubus Succubus — RUNE

Buddha was asked, "Are you a God?"

"No," he replied,

"Are you a man?"

"No."

"What are you then?"

"I am Awake."

-- Unknown Author

I Awakened, perhaps ironically enough, on Halloween, the old pagan day of Samhain. The day began much like any other. I went to school and worried about my homework and missed my brother. The air was chill here in the mountains, but all everyone could talk about was the take they'd get that night in candy.

Everyone but me, that was. Papa, being the God fearing man that he was, didn't approve of the pagan holiday, so I'd been sent to sit with Mrs. Pearson as she had been uneasy about spending that particular evening alone. When I'd arrived at her house she hadn't seemed frightened at all. In fact she had let me pass out candy at her front door.

By seven all the children had gone home and Mrs. Pearson offered to drive me home. I refused, preferring to walk the few blocks to our house. It was also my first chance to be out on Halloween, even if I didn't actually get to trick or treat.

Mrs. Pearson had sent several books for my father home with me, so my arms were loaded. I remember that my mind was occupied with upcoming Driver's Education courses and the impatience to get my license. In my naivete I was convinced that being able to drive would set me free. I could leave Helena and my father and do whatever I wanted to do. What can I say, I was young.

My thoughts of freedom were interrupted when a car pulled up behind me, its lights piercing the darkness of the empty residential street. "Hey Chrissie," I heard from that direction.

I didn't have to turn around to know that it was Shane Schroyer, the school bully. At fifteen he was a year older than me, but he'd failed once so the two of us were in the same grade. I knew he liked me, but I did my best to politely turn him down whenever he asked me out. Lately he'd started taking his frustrations out by being particularly mean to me.

I decided to just ignore him and hope he went away, but he pulled the car up next to me. A quick glance showed that the car was packed with him and his goons. I almost moaned aloud; an audience usually made him meaner.

"You sure you don't want me to give you a ride?" he asked as he leaned over to the passenger side window. I could barely make out his face in the dim streetlight, but I could hear the others in his car making rude comments and laughing.

Somehow I managed to be nice. "No, thank you. I'll be all right." I hoped against hoped that he'd get the polite hint and leave me alone. I should have known better.

"Ah, come on honey! I promise you'll like it!" There was a meaning beneath his words that I couldn't help but hear, and I didn't like it one bit.

Robert had warned me about situations like this, and I knew I had to get away. I started walking faster, but he easily paced me with his car. I began to cross an intersection, but turned the corner instead hoping he wouldn't follow. Unfortunately he cut off an oncoming car to stay with me.

"Now that wasn't very nice. I am beginning to think you may not like me." Everyone in the car laughed loudly at his wit. He sped up and pulled into a driveway in front of me. Without turning the car off, he and his friends all piled out. I tried to go around the car, but his friends stepped in my way no matter which way I went. I turned around to go back, but they'd surrounded me.

I didn't start to get really frightened until Shane stepped in close to me. I could smell the beer on his breath when he spoke. "I don't think you understand what I'm offering you, Chris. Being a preacher's daughter, I bet you're a heavenly piece of ass!" He knocked the books out of my hands for punctuation to his words.

I tried to back away, but his friends were standing right there and wouldn't let me go. I might have called for help, but the neighborhood was deserted, and I knew that no one would come to my aid. "Shane, you don't want to do this." I pleaded. My voice sounded meek even to me, and it prompted a new round of laughter.

"You're right," he drawled. "I want to do this!"

Before I could do anything to react, he closed the distance between us, grabbing my left hip with one hand and groping my chest with the other. He pulled me up hard against him and kissed me, trying to stick his tongue into my mouth. Despite my struggles, he drove his tongue into my mouth, but I immediately bit down on it and tasted blood. He reeled back in surprise, but anger and outrage quickly filled his eyes.

"You bit me, you little bitch!" He lashed out with his hand and caught me across the side of the face, sending me spinning to the hard sidewalk at his feet.

He squatted over me before I could get back up, and his friends grabbed my arms and legs to hold me down. I fought the terror that rushed through me as I frantically sought some way to escape the nightmare I found myself embroiled in. I tasted blood in my mouth and wished I had my brother's abilities so I could get out of this mess.

"Now you're going to find out how nice I can be." His hands were on the button of my jeans when I felt something snap inside of me.

"NO!" I screamed.

It took me a second to realize that no one was touching me anymore. When I finally opened my eyes, Shane was lying a good fifteen feet from me, flat on his back and blood flowing freely from his nose. The others were scattered around as well but some of them already getting up. A couple were bleeding too, or shaking their heads as if trying to clear them.

As I sat there watching Shane slowly sit up with a dazed look on his face, I realized that the world was totally silent. Looking around, I could that see a few of the others were yelling, one was even crying, but I couldn't hear anything. Slowly I noticed that I could taste something bitter, and when I wiped my mouth my hand came away red with blood. Gradually it occurred to me that my nose was bleeding too.

Scared, I tried to stand on shaking legs. After a few tries I finally managed it. Shane was up to one knee and staring at me with a stunned look in his eyes. I hastily picked up the books that were scattered around and started running for home, crying.

About halfway home my hearing returned so suddenly that it almost made me fall again, but I kept going. The side of my face throbbed from where Shane had hit me, and the pain made me cry all the harder.

When Papa got home that night I was already in bed. I told him that I didn't feel well to avoid him seeing the bruise on my face, and he let me be in peace. I cried myself to sleep that night, and the event on the sidewalk haunted my dreams.

Some how when I woke the next morning my bruised cheek looked as if nothing had ever happened to it. Immediately I wondered if I was like Robert, if I could do magic now. Maybe the

horror Shane had inflicted on me had brought the magic to the surface. Those thoughts gave me a little more strength to face going to school.

Once there, I purposefully sought Shane out. When he saw me he practically backed into a locker. Seeing the look on his face just egged me on and I stepped up until I was right in his face before speaking.

"If you ever try that again, asshole, I'll blast the skin off your bones. If you tell anyone what I can do, I'll grow claws and cut your balls off. Understand?" He nodded vigorously and I continued, turning my face so that he could see what wasn't there where he had hit me. "As hard as you hit me, you didn't even leave a bruise." With that I turned and walked away.

As I continued through the halls I passed a couple that was dressed in black and leather. I'd seen them around before, but never paid them much mind. On that day when my awakened senses seemed almost overwhelming, I took a closer look. As I walked by the guy nodded his head to me as if in recognition. For some reason I couldn't stop glancing back at him as I walked on down the hall. Each time I did he met my eyes and nodded. Before I turned a corner out of sight, they both looked back at me and smiled.

Marcus caught up with me in the cafeteria at lunchtime. "I heard Shane was giving you a hard time this morning," he said after we'd been talking for a few minutes.

"You heard wrong," I told him.

"I can talk to him if you want," he offered. "I know sometimes he bothers the girls."

I shook my head, barely able to hide my smile. "Shane and I have worked things out."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

I shrugged. "He won't be bothering me again."

No matter how much Marcus bugged me, I didn't tell him what my secret was.

Benefactors

Welcome to the Underworld
Incubus Succubus — Underworld

A few days after my awakening I was in Centennial Park trying to make rocks move with my magic. I had searched the basement and found one of my brother's books that my father hadn't burned, and was struggling to make sense of the thick volume. Although I'd been trying for nearly an hour, I hadn't had any luck because nothing in the book made sense. Many of the passages talked about drugs and heightened states of awareness, but I'd never done drugs and didn't want to start now. I hadn't realized that magic could be so complicated.

I was about to shut the book in disgust when I felt something strange in the air around me, like a wave of some sort of force washing over me. It didn't hurt, but was definitely something I'd never felt before. When I turned around to look, I saw a girl from my school walking towards me with an odd smile on her face. I remembered that her name was Elizabeth and that the two of us had shared a class freshmen year. I'd seen her and her boyfriend at school the day after I'd awakened, but when I looked around for her boyfriend he was nowhere to be seen. He'd graduated the year before, but usually when I saw one of them the other wasn't far behind.

Thinking that she was just out for a walk, I turned back to the book I'd been reading. I realized I was wrong when she sat down across from me, still smiling.

"Hello Christina. Do you remember me?" Up close her smile seemed even odder, but I didn't feel threatened by it, or her. Her voice had an almost melodic quality to it.

"Elizabeth, right?" I said, making her laugh a little.

"Please, call me Lizzy. Elizabeth sounds like an old ladies name." Her eyes twinkled when she laughed, and I found that I liked her almost instinctively. "We've been watching you ever since that day with Shane."

My face grew warm at the mention of my encounter with the school bully. "Who's we?"

"Malcolm and I," she replied almost as if I should have known before her face grew serious. "Do you know what you are?"

"A witch?" I replied with more than a hint of sarcasm in my voice.

Her outburst of laughter caught me off guard. "I haven't heard us called that for at least thirty years!" she exclaimed.

I was surprised by her casual mention of time and it made me all the more curious. "Thirty years? Just how old are you?" I asked, not sure if she were trying to pull something over on me.

She sobered quickly. "I am sixty-two years old, and the term for what we are is 'Mage'. We are made up of different traditions, and that," she pointed at Robert's book, "is not your tradition."

I didn't know if I could trust her, but if she could show me how to use my abilities I'd learn. "Well then, what is my tradition?" I asked as I slowly closed the book.

She took a deep breath and for a moment I thought she was going to tell me, but in the end she just shook her head. "Let me introduce you to Malcolm, he can answer a hell of a lot more than I can." She stood to lead the way, but I stayed where I was.

I crossed my arms and looked at her warily. "Let me get this straight, you're a 'Mage', and your boyfriend is too? How are you two going to help me?"

"Malcolm first found me when I was your age," she explained, looking down at me patiently. "He took me in and found someone to teach me to use my gifts. When I had learned all I could from my mentor, we set out on our own. Come on, he's waiting for us." She held her hand out to help me stand. Warily I took it and when she pulled me to my feet we walked toward the park entrance.

"Wait." I stopped and turned to her. "You said that this wasn't my tradition." I held up Robert's book. "What tradition am I? What tradition is this from?"

She smiled indulgently. "You are Verbena, and that," she pointed to the book, "is of my tradition. I am of the Cult of Ecstasy. Now can we go?"

A short time later I stepped through a portal that she had opened for us into a large loft apartment. There was a man waiting for us that I recognized as her boyfriend. She went to his side and kissed him before putting her arm around his waist and turning to me. "Christina, this is Malcolm. Malcolm, Christina."

With the introductions out of the way, Malcolm took a few steps toward me and I felt a tingling sensation run through my body. I wasn't sure how I knew it was from him, but I did. When the tingling subsided, he grinned.

His voice was low when he spoke, but it wasn't harsh like I'd thought it would be, it was very smooth. "You could be a great member of our kind. You have the power in you, I can feel it. But you need to learn to control it, to harness it. Ride it, else it will ride you."

I could feel power coming from him, but it was more comforting than suffocating. "Lizzy said you could answer my questions. Can you?" I asked, finally finding my voice.

Malcolm's grin turned into a smile. "Yes Tina, I can answer your questions. I can teach you all you need to know about our kind, about what you are feeling, about your gifts. Do you accept my offer to mentor you?"

I thought about it for a long moment. If I refused there was no one to teach me. I couldn't go to Papa, he'd be more likely to kill me than try and help me understand what was going on. Lizzy had said that Robert's book was from her tradition and that I wasn't the same, so his books were of no use to me. I sighed deeply, knowing I had no other choice if I wanted to learn, and I did want to, more than anything.

"Yes, I accept your offer. When do we begin?"

He took another step toward me, holding out his hand. Lying in his palm was a small rock. "Right now. Use your mind to take this pebble from me."

"I can't," I said heavily. "I was trying to move rocks when Lizzy showed up at the park, but I couldn't do it."

"You weren't doing it right," he told me, then proceeded to talk me through the process.

It took a little while, but I was finally able to levitate the pebble from his hand. I went home a little while later convinced that accepting Malcolm as my mentor had been the right decision. Despite everything that has happened from that day to this one, in my heart I still believe that it was.

Gifts

Isis Astarte Diana Hecate Demeter Kali Mania
Isis Astarte Diana Hecate Demeter Kali Mania
Incubus Succubus — Witches Chant 98

Over the next few weeks I spent a lot of time with Malcolm and Lizzy. He looked over the books I'd been reading and while he told me I was on the right track with them, he also taught me how to use what information they had with the abilities I'd developed.

I spent weeks learning how objects and space relate. Soon I could sense the exact distance between objects, find true north, and sense things in my immediate vicinity without using the normal five senses. Once I'd learned those things I could detect spatial instabilities, know when someone was using Correspondence to view an area. By the time those lessons were done, I knew exactly where on earth I was without even trying, no matter where Malcolm took me with his portals.

Then there were the lessons in Fate. I could sense the current of Destiny and separate was relevant to the preplanned future and what was not. With that came the ability to tell truth from lies. I wasn't very good at finding Destiny in things, but some things I could see. Malcolm had a very strong Destiny, but I couldn't tell what it was and he wasn't forthcoming on the subject.

The interesting thing was that having me for his student seemed to be extremely relevant to Malcolm's future. I knew that was at least one of the reasons he'd taken me on, but I wasn't sure how I felt about it. I couldn't even tell if my role in his future would be good or bad.

My newfound ability to sense the thoughts and emotions of the people around me led me to the revelation that Shane was terrified of me. His friends weren't much better, they all avoided me like the plague. I knew without asking that many students wondered why Shane's group were so afraid of me, but while they didn't question me about it I found that I had more friends than I had before.

Malcolm helped me train my mind so that I could read many times faster and yet still retain everything I'd read. In fact, I could remember large amounts of information perfectly. I could even flip through a book and run it back through my mind later, or replay scenes in my head to find something I might have missed the first time. I spent whole afternoons replaying movies or rereading books in my mind. It made passing tests in school incredibly easy.

Eventually I gained the ability to know exactly what time it was, and to detect time-based phenomena that sometimes shifted through our reality. I found I could instantly react to certain circumstances if I concentrated hard enough. There were even times I could figure out links between two events that didn't look connected at first.

I learned a simple chant to keep warm, even when the mountains were at their coldest. I could enhance my sense of touch to the extent that I never had to open my eyes. With a little effort and a few softly spoken words I could see auras, ghosts and spirits.

Of all the things that Malcolm taught me, I liked learning about Life the most. I could stand in the middle of a field and sense the varied life forms around me, from the insects to the animals hiding beneath the earth. And I could read those forms like a book, know the age, sex, and every aspect of their health.

While I was most interested in learning about life, I also found it the most frustrating. It was hard to look at someone and know exactly what was wrong with them, but not know how to fix it. One of the teachers had leukemia and didn't know it. I wanted to say something, but I didn't know how to explain what I could see in her. In the end I settled for suggesting she see a doctor about the sudden weakness I'd noticed but unfortunately she didn't take my advice.

Malcolm was a good teacher, but a hard one. He had a set idea of what I should be able to do, and he kept at me until I was either able to do what he wanted, or blew up and walked away from him. He pushed me to my limits and beyond, and I loved him for it.

On day he sat me down in front of a small potted plant. He instructed to me to change the plant in some way, any way, but I was having a hard time. He'd been teaching me for nearly a month and said I was progressing well, but I stared at the plant for hours and couldn't change one cell.

"Focus, Tina," he said, standing over me. "You can do this."

"I give up!" I exclaimed, throwing my hands up in disgust. I looked up at him, anger burning through me. "I'm tired, my eyes are crossing from looking at that fern, and my butt hurts from sitting here all day. You said I am doing well, can't we just stop for the night?"

He regarded me thoughtfully for a moment, then grinned and bowed his head. "Yes, Tina, we can stop. Go home get some rest, come back in two days," he added before I could start celebrating the break in my training. "I have something special planned."

At first I thought he was disappointed in me for wanting to stop, but there was a familiar twinkle in his eyes that told me he was happy about whatever it was he had planned.

"Something special?" I asked, my interest peaked. "What is it?"

"You'll find out," he said cryptically as he turned to leave the room.

No matter what I said, he refused to tell me any more. Finally I gave up and went home to relax. I needed the break, he had been working me every spare minute since he'd taken me on as his student. I'd learned a lot in that time, but there was so much that I still couldn't do.

When I went back to the loft two days later, Lizzy greeted me at the door with a joyful hug. She led me into the bathroom where there was a large box sitting on the counter. "Put what's in there on, then come out." She turned and closed the door before I could question her.

I didn't know what was going on, but I knew I'd find out when they thought it was time. I opened the box and gasped when I saw what was inside. Carefully I lifted out the a simple dress of a fabric so dark red that it almost looked black and held it up to me in the mirror. The dark color made my pale skin shine as nothing I'd worn before had ever done. The dress was cut in a Renaissance style, and under it lay a delicate silver rope belt.

Quickly I undressed and when I slid the dress on over my head I was surprised to find that it fit perfectly. As I was folding the clothes I'd taken off, I noticed a small velvet pouch lying in the bottom of the box. When I lifted the pouch it up I could tell that there was something delicate inside.

After sliding the drawstring apart, I spilled the pouch's contents into my hand. The beauty of the necklace that filled my palm struck me speechless. From a fine silver chain hung an elongated triangle, what I knew was the symbol of my Tradition. I put the chain on and it hung perfectly around my neck, like it was custom made for me.

Lizzy gave a low whistle when I stepped out of the bathroom. She was wearing a dress of similar design, a little tighter in some spots and a little lower cut than mine, which was made of a rich blue fabric and had the same silver rope belt. She was wearing a necklace with her Tradition symbol on it as well, a Calla Lilly, and there was a dagger hanging from her belt.

"What is this all about?" I asked, smoothing the dress over my hips, enjoying the feel of the silky fabric against my skin.

Malcolm answered from behind me. "You are going to have your first seeking."

When I turned to him I was surprised by his appearance. I'd never seen him in anything but black and leather, but today he was dressed in loose pants that billowed around him, no shirt, and a long robe with ornate runes stitched into the cuffs and borders. The pants and robe were both of a red so close to blood that they seem to glow with their own light. The Verbena symbol hung from a thick silver necklace and there was a large wavy bladed dagger hanging from a broad black rope belt.

He stepped closer to me and held out his hands. Lying sideways across them was a sheathed dagger sitting on a piece of cloth that looked like it had been cut from the same fabric of my dress. He nodded that I should take it from him. "It is yours. You will need it for further advancement."

Tentatively I took the dagger from his hands and both he and Lizzy smiled. "We must be getting on, there is much to do," he stated as he turned and, with a mere wave of his hand, opened a portal for us to walk through.

We ended up in a wooded glade that I knew had been untouched for centuries. A circle of stones lay on the ground and soft blades of grass tickled my toes. Malcolm led me into the circle and told me to sit in the center. Lizzy found a fallen tree to sit on and watched us anxiously.

"Seekings are very important to our kind, Tina," Malcolm explained as he sat just outside the circle of stone. "We must endure them in order to strengthen our power. I cannot tell you what you will see on this seeking, for every seeking is different. I cannot help you during the seeking, but I will lead you to where you must begin."

His seriousness began to frighten me. "Is it dangerous?"

"I won't lie to you, Tina," he replied gravely. "Each seeking involves trials you must endure, tests that you must pass to continue. Some mages do not return from their seekings. Some return much different from what they had been before. You can refuse to do this, but if you do your magic will always remain as it is."

"What must I do?" I was afraid, but if this was what I had to do to get stronger, I would not hesitate.

He smiled as if he'd known I would not refuse. "We will meditate here together," he told me. "I will lead you to the place where you must begin your journey. From there you will go alone. If all goes well you will find your spirit guide, your Avatar. It will determine what trials and tests you have to pass. When it is satisfied, it will lead you back to me."

I vowed that I would do whatever I was asked to do. "Then let us begin."

He nodded. "Close your eyes, Tina. Say this with me."

I closed my eyes and waited for his voice in my mind to teach me the chant we would speak together.

"My words are one with the oceans and the rain. My words are one with the wind and the clouds. My words are one with the mountains and the trees." As we spoke I could feel magic gathering in the air around me. "My words are one with the lightning and the flame. My words are one with this earth, for I am one with this earth."

Suddenly I felt the sun on my face and realized that I was standing on rocky uneven ground. I looked up to see the face of Eagle's Peak looming above me, an Eagle's Peak that had never collapsed to kill my brother. Images of the rock tumbling downward filled my mind and I was blinded by dust and tears.

Altered States

Through death's door guide us to the light
Through the pain set us free
Incubus Succubus — Dark Mother

"Why here?" I demanded as I looked up at the mountain looming over us, the mountain that had killed my brother. "Why have you brought me here?"

"Here is where your greatest pain lies, Tina," Malcolm told me. "Here is where you must begin your journey."

While I didn't like the idea of starting here, I knew he was right. I had suppressed memories of the day my brother had been murdered, but still his death haunted me. Not a day went by that I didn't think of him if not once than many times. Carefully I made my way across the gravel and loose dirt toward the cave hidden beneath the eagle's head, leaving my mentor behind. Small stones cut into the soles of my feet and I felt blood well into the cuts and scrapes they left behind. I put the discomfort out of my mind, telling myself it was a small price to pay for what I hoped to have happen here today.

The cave well illuminated near the entrance, but the further I moved inside the darker it became. I'd been inside the cave once or twice before Robert had died, but this seemed different in a way I couldn't identify.

When the light was gone, I put my hand out and felt for the wall of the cave, but there was nothing within reach. I forced myself to move forward, hoping that I wouldn't fall into any holes in the cave floor. After what seemed like forever in the darkness, I lost patience and held out my hand. Malcolm had sent me into the cave alone, but he had not told me that I couldn't use magic to get through this seeking. That was what seekings were for, after all, to increase one's magical ability.

I closed my mind and expanded my consciousness, reaching out for the edges of the cave around me. I chanted softly, hoping to bring light upon the darkness I found myself in. "Bright light, soul light, candle light quickening. Shadows falling, I am calling, Brigit light my path."

Instantly I knew that I stood inches from a crevice so deep that I couldn't feel the bottom. If I had taken one more step forward, I would have fallen to my death.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I turned to my left and started walking again, feeling the space around me for any dangers that might be lurking. I was concentrating so hard on *feeling* my surroundings that it took me a minute to realize I could *see* them. The cave had transformed from one I was familiar with to one that might have been deep in the earth.

The air was heavy with moisture, but it was cold. I could see my breath as I walked toward a waterfall that cascaded down the wall in front of me. I wasn't sure where I was supposed to go, or what I was supposed to be doing, but I knew that something would happen to show me the way.

From my left I heard a soft purr and when I turned to the sound I saw a tawny mountain lion lying on the cave floor. She was nursing several kits, but when she saw that I was watching her, she stood, disengaging their hungry mouths. She nudged each of them in turn and gave one a soft lick before walking away from them.

A part of me was a little frightened of the big cat, but I had known coming into this that I would be tested so I held my ground. She circled around me once and then again before sniffing at my feet, smelling the blood on them. Finally she sat down in front of me, studying me. She was so close I could feel her hot breath on my face, but still I didn't move.

What are you seeking? she asked into my mind.

I nearly jumped in surprise, but somehow I managed to keep my composure. "I am here to learn," I replied softly.

You are not happy with the magic you have? She seemed to be regarding me questioningly, watching my every reaction, my every move. *It is not enough?*

"I want to learn more," I told her, wondering what the correct form of addressing a mountain lion was. "I want to be—"

Like your brother, she finished. *He too sought great power soon after his awakening.*

I blinked away the tears that filled my eyes. "I don't know, he never told me much about his magic."

He sought to protect you, she told me. She leaned forward and nudged my wrist where I wore the bracelets that Robert had given me. *He seeks to protect you still.*

"He died because of me," I admitted brokenly. "Papa thought Robert was teaching me and killed him."

He is still with you, she corrected me. *As long as you remember him with love, you will always have him near.*

I nodded and wiped away the tears that had fallen. "I think he would have wanted me to follow in his footsteps."

Follow in his steps you cannot, she cautioned me, *for you follow another path. Your path has led you to me, and I will guide you to where you need to go. Will you trust in me?*

"I will," I promised, grateful to have such a strong animal for my spirit guide.

She stood and led me toward the waterfall. As we got closer I saw that the ground near the water was covered in mushrooms. She nuzzled a few of them for a moment, then looked up at me. I bent and picked one up, recognizing it as one of the more poisonous varieties that grew in the area. The lion was looking at me expectantly, but I didn't understand what it was that she wanted me to do.

Eat it, she told me.

I looked at her in surprise. "But it's poisonous," I protested. "I can't eat it."

Then I cannot help you, she said sadly, turning to go back to her babies.

"Wait!" I called urgently.

She stopped and looked back at me.

"You're saying that I have to die to gain more power?"

Silently she looked at me, unmoving.

I sighed, not sure what to do. If I didn't eat the mushroom, the big cat wouldn't help me. If I did eat it, I would die. She had asked me to trust her, and I had promised that I would. Malcolm had told me that I would be tested, and this was obviously a test.

Slowly I lifted the mushroom to my mouth and took a bite. The bitter taste filled my mouth and I fought the reflex to gag. Swallowing, I took another bite and then another until I had eaten the entire thing.

The cat walked back to my side and nudged me toward a narrow ledge that jutted from the cave wall a foot or so from the ground. At her urging I sat down and was grateful I'd done so when the cave started to swirl.

From the corner of my eye I saw movement but I couldn't seem to turn my head to look. My head was spinning and I could barely make out the shape of the lion as she seemed to greet someone who had joined us. I heard whispering voices and suddenly I knew what I was supposed to say now. I lifted my arms over my head and reached to the heavens.

"Stars whirling through the inky round, power hiding from the light," I cried. "Black curling on the darkened ground, secrets biding in the night! Daunting courses that you keep, come to me with your magic power! Haunting forces of the deep, be here at this mystic hour!"

A wash of energy filled me and I screamed at the sensations flowing through me. In an instant I felt that I knew all of the secrets of the universe, yet at the same time I felt as if I knew nothing at all. I could feel where I was on the earth, knew where everything else was. I could see more colors than I'd ever seen in my life, even here in the darkness of the cave. The mountain lion seemed to glow with an energy I hadn't noticed before.

I saw the faces of gods and goddesses that I had learned about and each seemed to touch me in my soul. I felt more loved than I had felt since my mother and brother had died. I knew in that moment that while it might seem that I was alone, I would never be alone, for I was one with the universe.

I felt the scratches on the soles of my feet and knew immediately how to heal them. "My cells and my body are healing now," I whispered. "The Goddess is in me healing me now." Instantly the pain eased and I knew my feet were healed.

You have done well, Tina, I heard, and in my delirium I thought it was Robert's voice come to guide me. *Tiamat will guide you out now. Can you stand?*

I moved to rise and felt a hand on my arm steadying me. It laid my hand on the back of the mountain lion, and I dug my fingers into her fur and held on as best I could. I thought I felt the light touch of lips on my forehead, but I couldn't be sure.

Take care, Tina, the voice told me as the cat led me away.

I thought I would have difficulties walking through the cave, but I never stumbled, not even once. Even as spaced out as I was, I knew where every rock and pebble was, every obstacle in my path that might have tripped me. Tiamat led me through the darkness and as we walked I began to chant once more.

"Back to the river, back to the sea, back to the ocean, one with thee. Back to my blood and back through my veins, back to my heartbeat, one and the same. Back to the forest, back to the fields, back to the mountains, her body revealed. Back to my bones, back to my skin, back to my spirit, the fire within."

By the time I'd finished the chant I could see light in the distance. Together Tiamat and I walked out of the cave and into the sunlight. The cat's fur gleamed like gold in the bright light, and I think she expected Malcolm to be there waiting, a proud smile on his face.

"You did it, Tina," he congratulated me.

"Tiamat helped," I told him as my head finally started to clear.

I will be here when you need me, the cat said in my mind. *Do not forget the lesson you learned here with me.*

"I am never alone," I said softly, looking down at her.

Fare well, apados, my disciple, she said as she turned to go back into the cave, back to her babies who would drink from her magical essence to grow strong and wise.

Malcolm held his hand out to me. "Let us return."

I nodded and the instant I touched his hand I was back in my body in the middle of the stone circle. I opened my eyes and looked at where he sat across from me, my mind and senses still awlirl from the seeking.

"How do you feel?" he asked gently.

"Like I could do anything," I told him with a joyful grin. "Anything at all."

"Show me," he urged.

I smiled and turned to look at the vegetation around me. Taking the athame that he had given me from its sheath I held it to the sky for a moment, feeling the power of the moon shining down upon us. I spoke words of power as I ran the knife across the palm of my hand. "Herne, who hears

all living things, hear my call to you! Herne, whose name all nature sings, hear my call to you! Moon Stag, Horned One, Green Man, God, draw near, and from life, let life bloom!”

When I sprinkled the blood dripping from my hand onto the ground around me the results were wondrous to behold. Tiny flowers grew to large ones. Small trees on the edge of the clearing sprang toward the sky, their trunks thickening as they rose. The grass thickened and grew taller until I could barely see the stones surrounding me. Lizzy laughed with delight as a lightening bug landed on her outstretched palm. She watched it glow alone for a moment before it was joined by another, and then by another until the air around her was awash with their light.

“Good, Tina!” Malcolm crowed.

My laughter rang out as I used my fingertips to clean the blade and return it to the sheath at my side. I looked at the cut on my hand and spoke again the words of healing that I’d learned in the cave. The cut closed leaving my palm unmarked.

“You have done more than well,” my mentor told me, standing.

I took his offered hand and he pulled me to my feet. The vegetation around us continued to grow, and I could hear animals moving toward us through the undergrowth of the forest.

“We should go before we find ourselves knee deep in rutting deer,” he said dryly, reaching for Lizzy’s hand.

“Rutting deer?” I asked as a portal opened in front of us.

“That particular spell makes everything in the area fertile,” he explained with a wry smile. “It’s a good thing you don’t have a boyfriend.”

I blushed and stepped through the portal to his apartment.

Later I sat at home looking through an encyclopedia of Witchcraft trying to find my Avatar’s name. The entry I eventually found was a surprising one.

TIAMAT: This Mesopotamian goddess of “the primal abyss” was believed to be half good and half bad, thus representing the concepts of light and dark in one entity. She took it upon herself to whip the newly born gods into shape since they were a rowdy, undisciplined bunch. To that end, she gave birth to an army of dragons, sphinxes, storms, demons, scorpions, lions and other grotesque monstrosities. Frightened by this bizarre rogues’ gallery, the gods petitioned Marduk to battle Tiamat in their behalf. After a fierce battle, Marduk finally defeated Tiamat by cutting her into two sections which were to become the heavens and the earth.

I knew that my Avatar wasn’t the actual goddess she was named for, but her choice of names was an interesting one. It reinforced what Malcolm had taught me about magic being neutral. One could use it for good or one could use it for evil, but the magic itself did not know the difference. Only the intent made it good or bad, and it was the mage’s responsibility to see the magic used only for good.

Judgment Day

Forget not the days of old
And recall the stories told
Incubus Succubus — Burning Times

"We have a party to go to," Malcolm announced one night near the end of December. "You will wear the dress Lizzy made for you, and come with us."

I looked at him in surprise. "What kind of party?"

He smiled. "One the likes of which you have never seen."

I was used to his cryptic comments by now, but I was still curious about the party. On the night it was to be, I managed to convince Papa to let me spend the night at a friend's house and quickly made my way to Malcolm's apartment.

In the last few months I'd taken to keeping most of my magical things at the loft so that Papa wouldn't find it. The dress was there too, waiting for me to put it on. Within minutes of arriving, I was ready to go.

Malcolm and Lizzy had also worn the clothing they had on the day of my seeking. With a last glance at my outfit to make sure I was clothed properly, he opened a portal large enough for the three of us to walk through.

"This is a Yule celebration," he said softly, looking at the portal. "Everyone has been waiting to meet you. Make me proud." Without any further explanation, he led the way through the portal.

We found ourselves just outside of a cabin high on the mountain. The air was cold and crisp, and snow lay on the ground all around us. From inside the cabin came the sound of music and laughter. Candles were lit in every window, and on every bush that lined the walk to the door.

When we walked inside, I was surprised at the number of people gathered in the room. I hadn't thought there were half a dozen mages of any tradition in Helena, but from the looks of things there were at least two dozen Verbena gathered here for the Yule celebration.

Lizzy stayed at my side when Malcolm kissed her cheek and began making his way through the crowd to the fireplace. Everyone moved aside as he approached, and turned to watch him walk past. A hush followed him until the only sound in the room was the crackle of the fire.

I watched as he greeted the crowd and thanked everyone for coming. He spoke as if he was in charge of the gathering, and they looked upon him as if he were a god.

"What is going on?" I whispered to Lizzy.

"This is Malcolm's party," she explained softly. "He is greeting his guests."

I might have asked her more questions, but I realized that Malcolm was talking about his new pupil. Me.

"I would like to introduce Tina Strong, of Helena, Montana," he said warmly, holding out a hand in my direction.

Shyly I walked toward him through the crowd that was studying me like a mouse under a microscope.

"She awakened only a few months ago, yet she has already survived her first seeking," he continued as I reached his side and he took my hand. "In time I believe she will be among the finest of our tradition."

Heat rushed to my face as I blushed at his praise. I looked out over the crowd and realized that they all seemed warm and welcoming, accepting me into their ranks because Malcolm had done so. I vowed I would prove him right.

One by one the candles around the room began to go out until only one candle on the center table remained to light the house. Even the fire in the hearth sputtered and died. Malcolm led me to the table where everyone else gathered around us.

"For half the year, day by day," he said with great ceremony. "Slowly the world has gone dark. For half the year, night by night, slowly the dark has grown longer." He leaned over and blew out the final candle, plunging the room into darkness.

"But the darkness was never complete," he told us. "A spark was always waiting." Once again the candle sprung to life before him. "To return and turn the dark to light once more."

In the dim light he turned expectantly to me. Suddenly I understood why he had been so insistent that I learn the Yule ritual he had given me.

"Tonight the dark time ends," I said softly. "It is Yule, the Solstice. The Wheel has turned, bringing our land back to the light, and now the spark will grow greater and greater." As I spoke, I saw one of the younger women passing out candles through the crowd. Even Malcolm and I took one from her. "The light will come back," I continued, my voice gaining conviction, "the cold will go away, and soon we will celebrate Spring!"

Malcolm lit his candle from the sun candle placed it near the center of the table. "The wheel is turning," he called gently. "The light is returning."

I followed his example, repeating his chant. One by one, everyone in the room did so, each calling out that the light was returning.

For a long moment we stood silently, basking in the glow of the candlelight. Then the youngest among us began running through the house, turning on all the lights and lighting the abundant candles in every room. It took only moments and when they had returned, everyone looked once more to me.

"Winter is a time of darkness," I said reverently, looking up at my mentor. "We all have moments like that, when you feel lost or scared or unsure. The Earth understands us because it is alive too. That is why the Earth teaches us that no matter how dark it gets, the light always returns. The night will always end and a new day begin."

My words meant so much more to me than a simple ritual. From the time of my brother's death until my Awakening my world had been a dark place. Malcolm had changed that for me, shown me that there was still light in the world, and hope.

He seemed to know what I was thinking and draped his arm around my shoulder. "Let us celebrate the return of the light," he proclaimed with a smile.

"The Yule Log!" someone cried out.

"The Yule Log," he confirmed.

Two men threw open a set of doors that led to a deck on the back of the house. They stepped outside and returned a moment later with a large log that looked much too big to fit into the fireplace. I swear they did some kind of magic because they did manage to make it fit.

With great ceremony Malcolm went to the log and after studying it carefully approved of the log. Cries of joy filled the room as with but a thought he lit the log and fire filled the hearth once more.

A girl who looked a little few years than me came over and introduced herself as Dana Henry. She had been studying with her mentor for nearly six months, but this was the first Sabbat celebration they had attended. She was obviously excited to be at the gathering, but even more excited at the chance to meet Malcolm.

"You are so lucky to have him teach you," she gushed. "What's he like?"

I shrugged, not seeing the reason for her exuberance. To me, Malcolm was just a man albeit one who knew a lot about magic. "He's difficult sometimes, but he makes learning fun."

"You make him sound so... normal," she pouted.

"He is," I assured her. "Why are you so spaced on him?"

"Don't you know who—"

"Child," a stern voice interrupted. We turned to see an older woman had approached us. She was very small, almost childlike herself, but her eyes shown with a force of will that was stronger than your average grandmother. "I think you have better things to do than gossip about your elders," she admonished the girl.

"I'm sorry, teacher," she said quickly, her eyes downcast.

The woman looked me up and down, making me feel uncomfortable with her questioning gaze. I could feel the force of her magic probing me and I did my best not to panic. She had great power, but not as much as I'd felt from Malcolm. I met her eye and nodded respectfully to her, but I wasn't about to kowtow to her as Dana was doing. To my surprise, she smiled.

"I am Lady Snowfalcon," she said softly, her voice brittle with age. "You are the Tina that Malcolm has spoken of."

"I am," I replied calmly. Inside I was nervous, wondering what he had told these people about me and my abilities.

"He is right about your gifts," she murmured, reaching out and lightly touching the base of my throat. "One day you may rival me with your power."

Remembering the force of her power washing over me, I smiled wryly. "I'm afraid I don't have half your strengths, lady."

"Not now, but perhaps in time," she told me. "You must trust in the goddess and follow the path she has chosen for you."

"I will do my best, lady," I promised.

She moved as if to lead Dana away, but turned back to me at the last moment. "I knew your brother," she said sadly. "He has been missed."

For the first time I looked away, blinking to clear the tears I suddenly felt flooding my eyes. "Thank you, lady. I miss him every day."

With a final pat on my arm she led her charge into the throng of people near the buffet.

The food was magnificent. Lizzy made sure I got plenty to eat and that the younger apprentices didn't overwhelm me with questions about Malcolm. She seemed to be the only non-Verbena at the gathering, but everyone accepted her presence without question. In fact, some of them seemed to be in awe of her, treating her with an almost reverence I didn't understand and she refused to explain.

More than one of the eldest among the group made it a point to have a word with me. Each touched my hand or arm lightly, and each sent a wave of power over me, testing the boundaries of the magic I was capable of. I remained motionless and relaxed through each encounter, knowing without being told that the test was commonly done to newcomers among their ranks. In fact I saw several of those who tested me touch Dana and a few of the others in the same way.

Lizzy kept an eye on me while Malcolm was talking with his guests, but I often felt his eye on me. Each time I turned to smile at him, and each time I saw approval in his eyes. I was grateful for his approval, grateful that he had brought me to a place where I could meet others who believed as I did, grateful that I had finally found a home among people who would never tell me that magic was wrong or evil.

I had lost track of the time, but it must have been nearing dawn when Malcolm approached me once more.

"It is time," he said softly.

I smiled and led the way to the center table. Within a few minutes, everyone had gathered around it once more.

"May the light of the Yule candles burn in our hearts all throughout the coming year," I said softly. "Blessing of the Season on you all." With my fingertips I reached over and put out the candle I had lit earlier.

For several minutes the room was filled with the echo of my words as everyone followed my lead. Soon all of the candles on the table had been extinguished, yet somehow their light still remained.

Taboo or Not Taboo

BEEN sleeping with the Devil
SUPPOSE YOU KNOW HIM WELL
Incubus Succubus - in defense

One afternoon in the spring I had just gotten off the phone with Marcus when my father came to my room.

"Who were you talking to?" he demanded.

I gathered my courage for the argument I knew was coming and stood to face him. "Marcus Thorpe."

He nodded as if I'd confirmed his suspicions. "I've heard that you've been spending a lot of time with him, Christina, and I want it to stop."

"Why?"

"I don't want you to hang around with that type of boy," he insisted angrily. "They're nothing but trouble."

"Papa, he's not a bad boy," I insisted, fighting for calm. "He's got a job and he goes to school. What do you have against him?"

"I don't want you hanging around with a bad element," he argued.

"I'm not." I walked closer and put my hand on his arm. "Papa, Marcus is a good boy. Just because he wears a leather jacket and rides a motorcycle doesn't mean that he's doing anything wrong. Can't you give him a chance?"

He looked at me broodingly, his blue eyes seeming to burrow right to my soul. "I suppose I could give him a chance," he said at last. "Invite him to church on Sunday and dinner afterward."

I smiled in relief, but it was short-lived.

"If I don't like him, you will not be seeing him again," he added sternly. "Is that clear?"

"Yes, Papa," I assured him. I knew he'd like Marcus, how could he not?

Thankfully, I was right. On Sunday Marcus wore a dress shirt and tie under his leather jacket and sat decorously through Papa's pointed sermon on pre-marital sex. They sat in the living room while I made dinner, and I heard them discussing what Papa had preached about. To my surprise, Marcus seemed at least familiar with Christianity, and by the time we finished eating, he had Papa's reluctant approval.

Later I walked him to his bike and we stood for a few minutes in the drive talking about how well things had gone.

I glanced back at the house to make sure Papa hadn't come outside. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Anything."

"Did you mean what you said in there?" I asked. "I mean, when you were talking about his sermon?"

He grinned. "Tina, I'm a teenaged American boy. What do you think?"

I smiled back, not sure if his answer had made me more or less nervous. "I know he can be intimidating, and sometimes it's easier to agree with him than to argue."

"Exactly." He leaned forward and laid a light kiss on my cheek. "You should go in now before he starts changing his mind about me."

I watched him get on his motorcycle and start it before winking at me and driving away.

Papa was more accepting of my relationship with Marcus after that. He made it known that he expected Marcus to be at church every Sunday and to have dinner at our house at least once a week. During those visits Papa went over at least one of the deadly sins, and they would discuss each topic while I made dinner. He didn't always agree with Papa, but he was always able to pass whatever moral tests that my father put to him.

We Gather Together

We are at one with the tides of the land
We are wild and we are free
Incubus Succubus - Craft of The Wise

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

A few months later Malcolm and I were sitting around a design I had drawn on the floor with salt and sulfur, chanting. The room was filled with nearly a hundred candles in various sizes and lengths. Some produced barely any light while others were shooting their flame several inches in to the air. My dagger was held loosely in my left hand, extended to the heavens point upward. With my right hand I was drawing symbols in the air with a gnarled oak branch. Malcolm was moving in response to me, answering where appropriate, chanting in echo to me as I led the ritual for the first time.

Malcolm had told me where to set each of the nearly hundred candles about the room, and with some concentration I lit them all with but a thought. Because of the magic he had showed me how to instill in many of them, some of the candles barely produced any light while others were shooting their flames several inches in the air.

Carefully I mixed the salt and sulfur in a bowl before pouring it out on the circle of chalk I had outlined earlier. Malcolm stepped to the center of the circle and as I walked its perimeter I spoke soft words of magic. "The Moon is high at the witching hour. We come here to this place of power, our hands are raised to four directions. Spirit force is born again."

Once the circle was complete, Malcolm moved to stand near the inside edge of the circle. He turned and looked at me, pride and affection shinning in his eyes. He lifted his dagger from his belt and held it out to me. I walked closer to him until my toes barely touched the circle, my neck now touching the point of his dagger.

"It is better that you should rush upon this blade than enter the circle with fear in your heart," he said softly. How do you enter the circle?"

"With perfect love, and perfect trust," I replied calmly.

"Then enter, and join me with perfect love, and perfect trust," he told me.

I stepped over the edge of the circle and immediately felt magic wash over my skin.

Stand facing North and draw an Earth invoking pentagram

With our bodies

Stand facing East and draw an Air invoking pentagram

minds,

Stand facing South and draw a Fire invoking pentagram

wills,

Stand facing West and draw a Water invoking pentagram

and hearts

Turn to face north again, and start drawing a circle, envisioning energy flowing out your athame/wand/finger to enclose a sacred space, chanting:

We cast a circle where time itself parts

At a point of Power between the worlds

Where infinity shifts and whirls
To be reshaped in love and grace
Within this space that is not a place.

At this point the first circle should be complete.

Spiral your circle up making three loops, the highest a small one at arm's reach above your head, chanting:

Where all we are and all we see
And our highest dreams

Pull the energy down in front of you and send it down into the Earth as you complete the line:
May come to be.

Spiral upward to shoulder level again, chanting:
In a sacred spiral of ecstasy.

End facing North, and draw a final Earth pentagram to seal the circle, chanting:
The circle is cast now. Blessed Be.

Invoking the Goddess

Light the white candle upon the altar and raise your hands to the sky. Say:
Gracious Goddess, Queen of the Gods
The creator of all that is wild and free
Lover of the Horned God and protectress of all is
Descend upon our circle here with Your Lunar ray of power

Invoking the God

Light the black candle upon the altar and cross your hands over your chest. Say:
Blazing God, King of the Gods
Master of all that is wild and free
Lover of the Moon Goddess and protector of that is
Descend upon our circle here with Your Solar ray of power

Magical Work or Celebration

This will vary according to whether we are celebrating a Sabbat, doing various magics at an Esbat, or performing a rite of passage. When the various spell work is complete, hold your hand or dagger over the altar and say:

By the powers of the Ancient Ones,
We bind all power within this circle
So mote it be.

Thanking the Goddess and God

Stand before the altar, facing east and say:
Lord and Lady,
We are blessed by Your light
Watching and guarding us and guiding us
We came in love and we depart in love

Releasing the Circle

Cut the circle with a backward movement of the dagger or sword to release all remaining traces of power for manifestation. Say:

Between the worlds we made a circle,
Never ending, universal,
We are filled with Spirit power,
Send it down, complete the chain.

"Blessed be," I said softly.

"Stay behind me, Christina," Marcus ordered.

I shot him a disgruntled look, but he was too busy looking at the mugger to see it. "Relax, Marcus," I said softly. "Let me handle this."

He ignored me, concentrating on the mugger.

"Give me your money," the man demanded angrily as he waived the gun.

Slowly Marcus reached for his wallet, but I knew the mugger wouldn't wait for his cooperation. I felt his intentions and saw his finger tensing on the trigger. Without thought for the vulgarity of using magic here, I held out my hand and the gun lifted out of his hand. It flew upward until it had reached the roof of the building, then moved out of sight.

"What the fuck!?" the man gasped.

Looking to the side I saw a rock lying against the alley wall. I pointed at it and it rose, moving silently toward our attacker. With a violent movement it hit the man in the groin and he fell to his knees.

"Maybe next time you'll think twice about mugging someone," I growled as Marcus grabbed my hand and pulled me away from the mugger before I could do any more damage. We ran out of the alley toward the lights of Last Chance Gulch.

"What the hell just happened?" he demanded as we reached safety.

I tried to give him an innocent look. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't give me that, Tina," he warned me. "I know what I saw."

"What did you see?" I asked softly.

"Magic." His eyes were sure, and I knew I couldn't lie to him.

"I told you to let me handle it," I reminded him. "He was about to pull the trigger, I had to do something."

"How do you know he was going to shoot?" he demanded.

"I felt it," I told him simply, honestly. "The same way I know that this is not the first time you've seen magic."

"No," he agreed, pulling me into his arms. "I just didn't expect it to come from you. When did you...?"

"Start doing magic?" When he nodded against my temple, I said, "Last Halloween. I was walking home, and Shane showed up. He—I ended up throwing him and his friends about five feet."

Keeping an arm around my shoulders, he led me toward the parking lot he'd left his motorcycle in. "How did you learn what you did in the alley?"

"I found a mentor," I admitted.

"Malcolm." It wasn't a question.

I looked up at him in surprise. "How did you know that?"

He smiled. "It's pretty obvious that he's a mage, Tina. I wondered why you've been spending so much time with him and Lizzy. They don't really seem your type."

I'd been sitting under a tree in Centennial Park, the chill wind of early spring blowing hard around me. I might have been cold if I hadn't been wearing Marcus' leather jacket. If I bent my head and closed my eyes I could still smell his cologne on the collar.

I had more important things to do than daydream of my boyfriend. Giving myself a mental shake I forced my mind on the book I was holding. A few days before I had found another of Robert's books in a cubbyhole in the attic. I might never have found it if it hadn't been for the most recent topic my training had turned to, Forces.

While most of the passages in the book were complex, I knew enough about magic now to try and follow them. I knew it would take some time, but eventually I would be able to decipher the complex subject that was Hemeomancy. From what I could tell, it was something to do with a supernatural being's abilities.

After a half an hour or so I felt the vibrations of magic being used behind me. Without turning I knew that Malcolm was now standing behind me. He didn't realize how fast I'd been advancing and I was beginning to like the look he on his face when I picked up something he was trying to show me too quickly for me not to have already known it.

"Touch not lest ye be touched," I said in my best mocking voice just as he was about to lay a hand on my shoulder.

I knew he was startled, but he laughed and the sound soon filled the near empty park. After he calmed down and took a seat next to me, I pushed the book toward him.

"Help me out, would you?" I asked. He knew a lot more about magic than I did, and I felt it was a safe bet that he'd be better able to make sense of the passages that confused me.

He took the book and studied it for a moment. I could tell that what he was reading interested him, and I actually had to bump his shoulder to get his attention away from the text.

"What? Oh, this is... some heavy shit, Tina," he told me gravely. "Have you been able to do anything with this?"

"No," I replied honestly. "I just found the book a few days ago."

"I don't even know if this is something you should be messing with, but I'd like to read it more closely. Would you mind?" he asked, gesturing toward his bag.

"Sure," I shrugged. I hoped that he'd be able to understand the complicated text and share his findings with me. Most of the book dealt with Robert's tradition, but Malcolm seemed well schooled in the traditions of others.

"See you then," I told him as I stood up to walk home. I had a date with Marcus, and I didn't want to be late.

Behind me I felt a portal open as Malcolm started to sing his favorite song. "There's a crack in the mirror and a blood stain on the bed..."

Hold on Tight

A hunger grows inside me
I need your fiery kisses
Incubus Succubus - Incubus

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

The breeze up on the side of the mountain had a slight chill to it, but I didn't feel it. I had Marcus's leather jacket on to keep me warm, and the blanket he'd brought with him. It was our one-year anniversary, and even a blizzard wouldn't have driven me away from our late afternoon picnic.

He had packed a picnic basket on the back of his bike and driven the two of us up to Lookout Point to enjoy it. The view was breathtaking as the sun began its descent over the city, but neither of us was really watching the view. School didn't start for another few weeks, and with Malcolm and Lizzy out of town until Sunday, we had spent every free moment of the last week together.

Marcus hadn't been pushing for a more physical relationship, but I knew he wouldn't complain if we became more intimate. Tonight we I was thinking of doing just that. If Papa were to find out what I was thinking of doing with my boyfriend, well I refused to think about that.

After a few moments of cuddling, Marcus got up and headed to his bike saying that he had something for me. When he returned, he was carrying a box wrapped in sparkling silver paper and tied with a red bow.

"Happy one year, Tina," he said with a smile playing on his lips. I know we said we wouldn't get anything, but I had some extra cash and knew you'd like this."

"Marcus, I can't believe you." I couldn't help but smile at how sweet he was. When he handed the gift to me I realized that it was quite heavy. I started to open the gift carefully, trying not to rip the paper.

"Just rip it," he exclaimed in mock irritation as he sat down next to me. "God you're annoying."

I stuck my tongue out at him playfully and deliberately took my time. When I finally got the paper off, I discovered a brand new camera with telephoto lenses, variable shutter speed, the works. I'd been eyeing this model for quite a while, so I knew exactly how much it had cost him.

He interrupted my silence with, "Do you like it?"

I responded by knocking him down and kissing him until we were both breathless. "Of course I like it, but you shouldn't have done this," I told him. "It's too much. Take it back." I tried to hand the gift back to him, but he just held his hands up palm out.

"No, no," he said firmly. "You're going to need some practice with some real equipment if you're going to get into a good program in college."

I lowered camera, thankful that I didn't have to give it up, but not sure I liked the talk about college. I'd talked several times with both Marcus and Papa about going away, but I wasn't convinced I had to. I already had a job lined up with the local paper that would start when school did, but both of them wanted me to go on to collage and get a degree. It was the only thing they ever agreed on. I liked it better when they didn't agree on anything.

"Fine," I said in a teasing tone. "I'll take this, but we'll see about college." I opened the box and took out each piece, inspecting it in the nearly non-existent sunlight. Marcus's voice cut into my inspection.

"Tina, we'd better get you home before your dad kills me."

"Not yet," I replied with a sly smile. "I haven't given you your present. We're okay, he's at Mrs. Pearson's tonight."

He grinned. "So we have time."

"We have plenty of time," I told him, putting the camera accessories back in the box. I leaned toward him until our lips were nearly touching.

"We can't do this," he whispered hoarsely, pulling away.

I sat up, disappointed. "Why not?"

"Christina, we're in the park," he reminded me. "It's not exactly a private place."

"No one will see us," I promised him. I reached over and took a knife from the picnic basket. When I cut my finger Marcus gasped, but said nothing. I sprinkled blood around us and spoke softly a spell that Malcolm had taught me. Vines rose from the earth and wove themselves into a shelter around us so thick that no one could see through.

"Wow," Marcus breathed.

"Private enough for you?" I asked, running a finger down the side of his neck.

He grinned.

Life's Too Short

NOW IS THE SEASON, NOW IS THE DAY
A TIME TO LAUGH AND A TIME TO PLAY
Mecubus Succubus - Queen of The May

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

Malcolm encouraged my learning and rarely kept anything from me. He answered my myriad questions patiently and thoroughly, always making sure I understood. Because of his openness, his few secrets seemed even more mysterious to me. The biggest one had to do with the Trimuritive.

One night we were sitting in his apartment studying in the soft flickering light. Malcolm had dozens of candles lit, he preferred reading by them to the harsh white light of the modern light bulb. As usual, he had them on every possible surface, even on the floor.

I was sitting in front of a wide bookcase filled to overflowing with books. He wasn't much for organization, but my mentor always managed to find what he was looking for. I had to search to find things in his library, but it was usually worth it. Sometimes I found things much more interesting than what I'd been originally looking for. This was one of those times.

I'd found an old volume of Verbena lore tucked away out of sight behind some other books. As I looked through it, much of the contents were familiar to me. Then I found a section that looked like it had been read much more frequently than the rest of the book. The text was fascinating, but dealt with a subject I'd never heard of before. As always when I had a question, I turned to my mentor.

He was sitting in a corner of the room, an incense burner on the floor in front of him. He'd been meditating so I was hesitant to interrupt him, but then again he always said that if I had a question I should ask.

"Malcolm?" I called softly.

He stirred a little, then looked at me with a smile. "Find something interesting?"

"Yes," I replied, trying to conceal my excitement about what I'd found. Some of the things that fascinated me didn't interest him in the least, and some things he told me I wasn't ready for. "This book mentions the 'Trimuritive', have you heard of it?"

Something dark passed behind his eyes that was gone before I could identify it. "It's a legend," he told me. "Nothing, really, an old superstition."

"It talks about the power of three," I murmured, looking down at the book. "It says it relates to the Maiden, Mother and Crone, but that it isn't as strong."

"Weren't you looking for something on the transmutation of metals?" he reminded me.

"Yeah, but this is much more interesting," I said softly, reading a passage in the tome. "'The Trimuritive is embodied in the three. Each makes way for the next embodiment, each contains the other, all and none.'"

"It's just a legend," he told me with a note of finality in his voice. "Nothing to concern yourself over."

I shot him a questioning look and found him watching me. "I didn't say I was concerned," I said defensively. "Just curious, this is interesting."

"So is the transmutation of metal," he replied with a smile. "Lead into gold, remember?"

Gold didn't interest me as much as what I'd found, so I shrugged and turned back to the book. "The Trimuritive is the essence of— "

The book lifted out of my hands, cutting off my reading. It floated across the room while another book settled in my hands. I looked at Malcolm in surprise.

"The Trimuritive is not on your reading list today, Tina," he told me with a playful smile as he grabbed the book out of the air and put it down on the floor beside him. "Transmutation, remember?"

I laughed and opened the book in my hands. "Okay, transmutation." I made a mental note to read up on the subject later and started learning how to turn lead into gold.

Love and War

FOR TIME WAITS NOT FOR WOMAN OR MAN
AND DEATH RIDES OUT ACROSS THE LAND
INCUBUS SUCCUBUS — DARK MOTHER

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

He reached up and lightly brushed her cheek with his fingertips. There was a gentleness to his touch that I hadn't seen before. Color flooded her face as she looked up at him through her lashes, longing written clearly in her eyes. Feeling like I was intruding I turned away.

I took my camera from its case and carefully pointed it in their direction. I knew Malcolm didn't like to have pictures taken of him, but I thought in this case he wouldn't mind. The love between he and Lizzy was so apparent, so tangible, I knew I had to record it in the only way I could; on film.

We were in some sort of warehouse when Lizzy felt sick and said she had to go home I was taking pictures. The house the two of them were renting had blown up due to a gas leak. Nobody was really sure how she had survived the explosion itself, but she had.

"Lizzy," he whispered brokenly as he turned to open a portal. He had to step back from the heat of the flames before I felt him build a shield around himself. He stepped through the portal and immediately it closed.

"Come on," I told Marcus. "We have to get to their apartment, now."

When we got to the apartment, Malcolm was kneeling on the ground near Lizzy's unconscious body. Paramedics were trying to push him away, but I could feel the magic that he was using to try and heal her. Immediately I bent down next to him and added my magic to his.

I felt my magic merge with his and enter Lizzy's body, but something was wrong. There was something stopping the magic from working, blocking the healing we were trying so hard to achieve.

Eventually the paramedics pushed us aside and loaded Lizzy's body onto a gurney. Malcolm rode with her to the hospital while Marcus and I followed on his motorcycle.

I couldn't figure out what had blocked our magic from healing Lizzy, but I knew if we couldn't get past it she would die.

Everyone said it was a miracle that he'd even gotten her out of the building.

The next week is like a blur to me. I know that I rarely left the hospital, and Malcolm never left Lizzy's side. Papa visited several times and made no attempt to hide his anger from me. Each time he came we argued about my presence at the hospital, but nothing he said would convince me to leave.

Several times a day Malcolm and I joined hands and tried to heal her. Combining my magic with his own, my mentor would try to force his way around the shield surrounding his lover without hurting her more. He would work at it until he had exhausted both of us and we had to rest to

recover the quintessence he'd used. Nothing we tried worked, we were helpless in the face of an unseen force that blocked our magic.

Malcolm, Marcus and I stood beside Lizzy's hospital bed and watched her waste away. She wasn't alive really, the machines merely made her body go through the process of living. Nothing could save her from death's dark wings, not even the awesome power of Malcolm's magic.

In the end there wasn't much to mark her passing, just a soft sigh and the fact that her chest didn't rise again. The nurses had silenced the screaming machines nearly an hour earlier, knowing that the end was near. Malcolm had been holding her hand and when she passed he put his forehead to the back of her hand and I could see his chest rising with sobs he couldn't contain.

I stepped out of Marcus' arms and went to him, putting a hand on his shoulder. Lost in his grief I don't think he even knew I was there. Tears streamed down my cheeks, but I refused to break down. I knew I had to be strong for my mentor, my friend.

None of us moved until the nurses came in a few minutes later. Malcolm lifted his head and wiped the tears from his face, but the anguish in his eyes was terrible to see. He finally seemed to realize that he wasn't alone and turned into my arms. I held him for a long time lending him what strength and comfort I could. I knew it would never be enough, but it was the only thing I could offer him.

In time we moved down the hall and into the waiting room. Marcus brought over a cup of coffee and poured in a generous amount of whiskey from a flask in his pocket. Malcolm took a long drink and sat back with his eyes closed, tears still seeping from beneath his lids.

I wanted so badly to be able to comfort him, but I knew from experience that there was no comfort from this kind of grief. It was the kind that still tore at me every time I thought of my brother, even years after his death. The only thing I could do was hold his hand and try to be strong.

Later we took Malcolm back to Marcus' house where I managed to get him into bed. Marcus promised to stay with him and I made my way home to finally face my father's wrath.

And wrath it was. The only time I'd ever seen him that angry was the day Robert died. I had barely walked in the door when he started in on me.

"How dare you defy me, young lady?" he demanded roughly. "Those people are nothing but trouble."

"Those people are my friends, Papa," I said coldly. "I know you don't approve, but that doesn't make them my enemies. Lizzy was dying, did you really expect me to leave Malcolm to watch it alone?"

"I expect you to listen you your father," he shot back. "You still live in my house, you will do as I say without question."

I shook my head sadly. "Would you have expected me to leave if it had been Robert laying there?" I challenged. "Lizzy was my friend, and she was dying. I had to be there."

"Christina," he began, but I cut him off.

"I don't care!" I yelled, fed up with his hypocrisy. If they had been Christian, we wouldn't be having this conversation. "I stayed because I couldn't leave, Papa, and you had no right to tell me to leave. Malcolm couldn't have done it alone, and with me there he didn't have to. She's dead now, it's over. Leave it be!"

"You're right," he growled, "it is over. You will not go to the funeral, and you will not see those freaks again. That includes Marcus."

"You can believe what you want, Papa," I said softly, "but they are not freaks, they're my friends." I didn't bother to argue with the rest of what he'd said, but I knew that I wouldn't listen to him. Malcolm and Marcus were all I had left, and I wouldn't lose them because of my father's bigotry.

The next day found me at the funeral home with my friends. I was worried about Malcolm, really worried. He sat in a chair near the casket and stared at Lizzy's body with an intensity that frightened me. I hoped that he wouldn't try to find a way to follow her into the grave.

Not Fade Away

Their blank eyes of death tell it all
of shattered dreams and ruined lives
Mecubus Succubus - Kiss of Hades

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

On the day of Lizzy's funeral I had problems getting dressed. Sobs shook me as I slipped on my nice black dress, but deep in some part of my mind I was glad. Now she was in the Summerlands, happy and loved, waiting for the next turn of the wheel to bring about her next incarnation.

I sat down hard on my bed, wracked by renewed sobs. Why had the explosion happened on that exact day? We'd all been together downtown, but she had left us there saying that she didn't feel well. She had opened a gateway home rather than let one of us drive her.

The memory made me look up at my camera case. I had been finishing a roll of film for school by taking some pictures of the four of us that day. I didn't want to think about what was on that roll, the last few happy minutes of her life before the explosion had ripped her life to shreds.

I finished getting dressed and went downstairs trying to hurry. I'd told Marcus to meet me at the funeral home, and I was running late. Papa was sitting in his chair when I came down, but I didn't plan on talking to him. He'd been acting funny all week, and I knew I was in no shape to argue with him.

As I walked by the living room doorway he called out to me. "I thought I said that you couldn't go to that tramp's funeral."

I tried to ignore him and keep walking, but his next statement stopped me cold.

"She deserved to die Tina," he said, the full weight of conviction in his voice.

"She was my friend!" I shouted before I can stop myself. "Who are you to say she deserved to die?" Tears filled my eyes again turning the living room into a blur of light and color. I expected Papa to be mad at my outburst, but instead he just walked calmly over to me.

"She was evil. Evil must be punished."

I was surprised at his calm. What if I had been with her? I could have been killed too, but Papa didn't seem to realize that. He'd known I was going to be with them all that day, we'd argued about it before I'd walked out the door in defiance. Despite everything I had tried to tell him, Papa still thought my friends were all bad people.

I was about to say something when the phone rang. Papa answered it and while his attention as elsewhere I turned and walked out the door.

Marcus was waiting outside the funeral home when I pulled up and we went inside together. I gave Malcolm a hug as soon as I saw him before I went on to speak to some of the other mourners. After thirty minutes or so I heard Malcolm's voice in my mind.

What are you thinking about Tina? he asked me. *There is something else in there.*

Nothing, I replied, but I knew I'd been thinking about what Papa had said before I left the house.

What is going on? Malcolm demanded. *Is it your father?*

I knew he sometimes skimmed surface thoughts so I did my best to think about something else, anything else. Unfortunately I wasn't quick enough.

You told him where we were going? His tone in my head was almost accusing.

Surely he couldn't think Papa had anything to do with Lizzy's death, he'd just been trying to look out for me. Besides, the police had said the explosion was caused by a gas leak. I looked up to meet Malcolm's eyes from across the room. His face was angry and I knew he was having a hard time controlling his rage.

Malcolm I— I began to send to him, but he cut me off with a powerful scream inside of my mind. The world spun around me and I landed hard on the floor. Marcus was by my side before I even knew what had happened, holding me. I pushed up to my knees and looked around, but Malcolm was nowhere to be seen.

"He's gone," Marcus told me softly as he helped me to my feet. "He used some power and just vanished. Come on. Let's get you out of here." He led me out of the room but at the doorway I stopped to take one last look back at the casket holding my friend.

"Do you know why he left like that?"

I looked out the window, unwilling to admit that my father might have had something to do with Lizzy's death. "He was angry, Marcus."

Papa was waiting for me when I got home. "Young lady," he growled as I closed the door behind me. He was standing in the doorway of the living room, an angry look on his face.

"Don't say it, Papa," I warned him. I was tired and I didn't want to argue with him. I was afraid of what I would say to him if he pushed me.

"I ordered you not to leave this house, Christina," he reminded me harshly.

"And I told you I was going to the funeral," I retorted.

"While you live in my house you will follow my rules," he shot back. "You are still my daughter and I expect you to obey me. She was evil, she de—"

I interrupted him before he could say anything I'd have to kill him for. "She was not evil," I insisted. "Magic is not the work of the devil."

"You're young, Christina. You don't know—"

"I do know. Magic is not evil, Papa," I said, my temper finally snapping after years of hiding what I truly believed in. "I do magic to help people, not to hurt them. And I don't worship Satan to do it either, Satan was created by bigoted men like you who wanted to wipe out all of the people who believed differently than they did."

The look of shock on his face almost made me stop, but I took a deep breath and went on.

"The Church turned the Horned God into Satan and wiped every trace of the Goddess from their records," I continued harshly. "They did it to prevent anyone from questioning their doctrine, and then they burned everyone they considered Heretics."

"A demon has gotten hold of your soul," he began, but I didn't let him finish.

"There is nothing wrong with me, Papa," I said calmly. "I am not possessed, I am not evil, and neither was Robert. He never taught me anything about the magic he could use, he told me that something bad would happen if he did."

"He did teach you," he insisted stubbornly. "That was why—"

"Why what?" I demanded. "Why you killed him?" I shook my head in disgust. "You killed him for nothing, Papa. He never taught me anything about magic."

"Then who did?" he replied coldly.

I sat down on the bottom steps, suddenly so tired I could hardly see straight. I could still feel Malcolm's rage and grief shooting through my mind and though I wanted to cry, I knew I couldn't stop now.

"Malcolm taught me," I said in a tired voice. "He taught me that magic can be used for good or for evil, just like any weapon can. The intent is what matters Papa, not the method. I've never used magic to hurt anyone." I looked up at him defiantly. "What kind of magic did you and your friends use to kill my brother?"

All the anger seemed to run out of him at once, leaving a weary, lonely man. "I didn't want Robert to die," he admitted softly.

"I know," I whispered, my heart aching. I closed my eyes against the pain on his face, not wanting to see the guilt and regret he deserved to feel.

"You have to understand that magic goes against God, my child," he said, his voice regaining some of his earlier confidence.

"No, Papa," I countered firmly. "Murder goes against God."

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," he quoted.

"Would you take my life now, Papa?" I asked, half expecting him to attack me at any moment. "Would you kill me like you killed Robert? Like you killed Lizzy?"

When he didn't deny my accusation I knew that Malcolm's suspicions about my father had been right. "I would never do anything to hurt you, Christina," he promised, his eyes begging me to believe his words. "But I want you to stop seeing Malcolm," he added firmly. "Stop learning about magic."

I laughed harshly. "Malcolm blames me for Lizzy's death," I told him, my voice flat and emotionless. "I don't expect I'll be seeing him again."

"Then you'll give it up?"

"Magic?" I shook my head. "I won't, Papa, I can't. It's a part of me. Asking me to stop using magic is like asking me to stop breathing. I can't stop until I'm dead, and unless you're willing to kill me, there is no way you can stop me."

He nodded, resignation in his eyes. "I couldn't bear to see another one of my children die, Christina. All I ask is that you not practice witchcraft in my house."

"I have always known how you felt about magic," I told him, grateful that he wasn't going to press the issue. "I don't practice here."

Fate, Hope and Charity

HOW I FEAR YOUR POWER

HOW I MISS YOU NOW

Mentus Succubus — Sabrina

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

After Malcolm disappeared I got so many calls asking where he was that Papa finally unplugged the phone. I think everyone expected Malcolm to come back, I know I spent a lot of time looking for him myself. Actually I wasn't sure if I wasn't looking for him to make sure I could stay out of his way. The scream he'd sent into my mind had given me a headache that lasted for days.

Together Marcus and I went to the wreck of Malcolm and Lizzy's apartment. While nearly everything had been destroyed, we did find a cache of books that had been protected by magic. I brought them home and hid them in the trunk that sat at the foot of my bed.

With Malcolm gone I wasn't sure where to go with my magic. I knew there were other Verbena in the area, but I also knew that their skill couldn't compare to his. I did the best I could with the books I had and what Marcus and I had recovered from the remains of the ruined apartment, but I'd known for some time that I was at a point where I needed more than just study and practice to improve my magic. I needed another seeking.

Without Malcolm I wasn't sure where to begin. He had always made the necessary arrangements for me, always led me in the direction he knew I needed to go.

Bye, Bye Love

The end has come too soon
And filled the world with pain
Incubus Succubus — Young Lovers

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

To my surprise, I found Mrs. Pearson waiting for me. From the look on her face I knew there was something wrong, and it took an effort of will not to search her mind for the reason.

"What is it?" I demanded nervously.

"It's Marcus," she said softly. "There was an accident."

And suddenly I knew everything she was going to say. Marcus had been driving back from Butte through the mountains and his motorcycle had hit an icy patch. He'd lost control and gone over the side, sliding fifty feet or more down the mountain before a boulder had stopped his fall. A motorist had seen the accident, but by the time rescuer workers could reach him, Marcus was dead.

Mrs. Pearson led me to a chair and with little resistance I sat. What she said to me is a blur and I remember little of it, but she did tell me most of what I'd seen in her mind. What she didn't say was that there were signs Marcus didn't die immediately, that he'd tried to pull himself out of the gulch he'd landed in but hadn't had the strength or the mobility because of a shattered spine.

I tried not to break down, I really did. I wanted to go somewhere and be alone for my tears, to shed them in a sacred place for the loss of my lover. Mrs. Pearson's kindness broke my resolve, however, and I found myself sobbing in her arms.

Much later she called my father and told him what had happened. Papa came over right away and coaxed me into going home. I spent that night and most of the next day in my room, not eating, not sleeping, not talking to anyone.

I felt as if death had claimed me along with my lover. I wondered how the gods could take away the only person I'd had left that I could be myself with.

Putting on the black dress reminded me so much of Lizzy's funeral and the last time I saw Malcolm. I wished I'd had something else, anything else to wear, but this dress was the only appropriate thing I owned. Oddly enough as I eased it over my head it comforted me in a way I hadn't felt since Marcus had died.

Papa drove me to the funeral home for the viewing. We arrived early and only Marcus' aunt was there to greet us. Thoughtfully she sent me into the chapel to have a moment alone with Marcus before anyone else showed up.

The cloying scent of roses filled the air as I entered the chapel. Soft music drifted from tastefully hidden speakers spread around the room. Lamps near the casket pointed toward the ceiling to avoid any direct light falling upon the body lying there.

Gathering my courage, I walked slowly to the front of the chapel dreading what I would see. When Robert had died I'd been spared this gruesome ritual, but at least when my mother and then Lizzy had died I'd had someone to lean upon. This death I had to face alone.

I stood looking into the casket for a long time, studying the face that was as familiar to me as my own. As much as I hadn't wanted to believe that Marcus was dead, simply looking at him laying there erased any doubts from my mind.

While they did had done a fine job of making him look good, I could still see where his neck had been broken. His face was empty of the energy he had always been filled with, even while sleeping. Seeing him like that was enough to make me weep.

Through my tears I whispered the words of the passage ceremony that I'd heard Malcolm say when Lizzy had died only a few months before. "Oh Goddess, there is great sadness for a cherished one has gone. Emptiness engulfs me, loss languishes within. Help me bear this grief. Accompany his spirit and comfort we who grieve, let us rejoice in his life. May his essence be recorded in the Great Book of Shadows. Renew our remembrance with joy."

Slowly I reached out and laid a single white rose on his chest. As I withdrew my fingertips brushed his cold hand. Instantly my mind filled with images.

Marcus, driving too fast for the curves on the road, anxious to get back to Helena where I was waiting for him.

Icy patches in the road that he swerved to avoid.

The bike skidding out of control, falling off the edge of the mountain.

Marcus skidding on the pavement, seeing the edge of the road and trying to reach out for something, anything, to stop his momentum.

His body falling, hitting rocks and tree trunks as he plummeted toward the bottom of the gulch.

The jolt as he came to rest against a boulder.

The panic in his eyes as he tried to move his legs and could not.

I snatched my hand away before I could see any more. I staggered backward as if distance would erase the images I'd seen, but I knew they would be etched on my memory forever.

Belatedly I realized that someone stood behind me. I knew it was Papa before he spoke a word.

"Come child," he said firmly. "It's time to go."

I turned to look at where he stood, dressed in his priest's robes. He looked so much like the caring clergyman that he pretended to be, but I knew different. I knew the hate that lived in his heart and I vowed that I would never let it control my life.

But the fact was that I'd seen enough. I couldn't bear to stay in that cold room and look at my dead lover. I wanted to see sunlight and growing things, to remember that while so many of my loved ones had died, I was still alive.

Refusing the arm Papa offered to me, I walked out of the funeral home. Beside the parking lot was a tall pine tree that looked as if it had been there forever. I went to it and put my hand on the trunk of the tree.

Because it was winter the life force in the tree was dormant, but I could still feel it. I drew strength from the life hidden inside the trunk, used it to ground me back to reality.

I was trying to straighten the hem of my dress as I came down the stairs, carrying my dress shoes in one hand and my purse in the other. When I reached the bottom, I leaned on the banister pole for support as I slipped the shoes on.

Most of the time I liked the color black, but since Marcus' death I found it hard to like anything.

As I headed for the door, my father came up behind me. "Just where do you think you're going?" he bellowed angrily.

"I'm going to the funeral," I replied in a hard voice without turning around. "And you can't stop me, Papa."

"You will do as I say!" he shouted as he took hold of my arm.

I tried to break free, but he had a firm grip and grief had made me weak.

"Haven't you learned to stay away from those people yet?" he demanded angrily. "How many more of them have to get themselves killed before you realize how evil they are?"

If only Papa could accept the fact that I could do magic. I'd continued my studies in the months since Malcolm had disappeared, and it finally looked as though he may have been right about the strength of my abilities. I was almost as good as Lizzy had been, but I hadn't been able to concentrate since I'd heard about Marcus' accident.

I broke into tears again just thinking about Lizzy lying there in that hospital bed for a week before she died. Then Malcolm had disappeared, and now Marcus was dead too. My legs gave out and I would have fallen to the floor but my father caught me.

"Calm down, dear," he said, his voice softer and more kind than I'd heard it in a long time.

I stopped sobbing, although the tears were still running down my face.

"Come on, Christina, let's get you back upstairs." He helped me to my feet and led me back up to my room, holding me close to his side. He laid me down on the bed and I tried to calm down, but I couldn't stop crying completely. Between his behavior and my grief I was so confused I couldn't think straight.

Papa acted so lovingly today, but during the last month he'd been so hard. It was almost as if he hadn't been surprised when Lizzy had died. I pushed those thoughts from my mind as I tried to get comfortable.

Some time later I got up and drew myself a hot bath. As I relaxed in the warm water, I finally started to drift off to sleep for the first time in what felt like days.

Tina, I heard Malcolm say in my mind so softly that I wasn't sure if I was dreaming or not. *Tina, we missed you today. Marcus looked so peaceful, so happy that he wasn't here anymore.* Then his voice changed, becoming harder, filled with hate.

He understood why he died. I explained it to him before I broke his fucking neck.

I sat bolt upright in the bathtub on the edge of screaming, but I quickly realized that I had been sleeping. It had only been a horrible dream. As I laid back, Malcolm's voice came to me once again, still filled with hate.

You killed my love. I killed yours. And he was gone.

I couldn't rest anymore. Rinsing the soap from my skin I drained the tub and dried off. Dressing quickly in jeans and a sweater, I headed for the door. Seeing that Papa was sitting in the living room, I paused in the doorway.

"You shouldn't be up, my dear," he said kindly, coming over to me and tilting my face up to the light. "You should be resting, you look tired."

"I can't sleep," I told him, my voice so filled with grief it was barely audible. "I thought I'd go for a walk to try and clear my head."

For a moment I thought he was going to order me back upstairs, but in the end he simply nodded with a sigh. "Call me if you want a ride home," he told me. "And be careful out there, it's almost dark."

"Of course, Papa." I leaned up and kissed him on the cheek, then turned and walked out into the gloaming.

The sun was sinking over the mountains, lighting the sky with colors so intense I couldn't look at them. It was almost as if nature was giving Marcus a final goodbye, and I hugged my arms across my chest trying very hard not to cry.

My feet led the way toward the Benton Avenue Cemetery where I knew Marcus would have been taken. It wasn't far from the house so it didn't take me very long to get there. Fresh dirt told me where they had put my lover in the ground, and I stood at its edge staring down at it until it was too dark to see. I might have stayed there all night had I not been startled from my misery by a voice behind me.

"Miss?" the graveyard caretaker said softly. He was a tall man I'd seen before from the many funerals I'd attended there. He didn't look much older than Papa, but I knew he'd been working at the cemetery nearly forty years.

When he first spoke I was a little startled, but his familiar presence eased my surprise. "I'm sorry, the cemetery's closed now, isn't it?"

"At sundown, yes, miss," he replied sympathetically.

I nodded and looked down at the earth covering Marcus. If I expanded my senses I could feel his body lying in the casket, decaying. No matter how hard I tried I could find no trace of his essence, his soul, anywhere around the body.

"Can I call someone to drive you home?" the caretaker asked when I'd been silent for several minutes.

"No," I told him, coming back to myself. "Thank you, but I could use the walk."

He nodded and watched as I turned and walked toward the exit. As I turned onto the street I could feel his compassionate gaze following me until I was out of sight.

Death strikes hard at our hearts, but despite our pain and grief life goes on, and so it was for me after Marcus died. As much as I hated losing him, I knew from experience that I would eventually be able to bury the sense of loss and continue with my life.

Papa started pressuring me even more about going away to college, but I wasn't ready to think about the future. All I could see was darkness and pain, and even my magic was no comfort to me. Some of the other Verbena in town tried to help, but I was wary of their intentions. Malcolm had always been our leader, and some of them had questioned me quite persistently when he'd disappeared. None of them wanted to accept the fact that I didn't know where I was and had not heard from him since the day of Lizzy's funeral.

Fear and Loathing

Smile of torment

Eyes of anger

Mecubus Succubus - Soul of Torment

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

I'll never forget the last time I saw Malcolm. Perhaps I shouldn't say never, I have been promised an end to my mortal memories after all. Regardless, I was walking home one night after work in the rain wondering why the weather had to be so horrible the week my car was in the shop. I hated working late at the paper, but I knew that I had to since the Monday edition always went to press early.

The streets were dark, almost eerily so, the shadows seemingly filled with angry creatures ready to consume my soul. I shook my head at such nonsense, it was dark because it was night and raining, and there was nothing going to jump out at me from the shadows. I had to laugh a little at my paranoia.

About halfway home I heard the sounds of a fight coming from the next block over. I hurried toward the corner to see what was going on, but before I could reach it I was bowled over by someone running the other way. I got back to my feet quickly, but the man who had knocked me over was quicker.

"Hello, Tina," I heard a familiar if malevolent voice say. "Come to kill me yourself?"

I looked up into Malcolm's ice cold eyes only a few feet away. "M-Malcolm?" I could hardly recognize him, he looked decades older than he had the last time I'd seen him. His eyes were dark as the night, and his hair was long and stringy. He'd always worn black, but now his clothes looked ancient. "I—but you don't—"

I fell to the ground as the group of men reached me. I recognized some of them from my father's church before darkness overtook me and I lost consciousness.

"Tina, are you awake dear?" I heard Papa's soothing voice as I opened my eyes.

It took me a few minutes to focus enough to realize that I was in a hospital room. My head ached and the lights hurt my eyes but when I brought my arm up to cover them it felt heavy. I could see that it was covered in gauze bandages and I realized that my arm hurt much worse than my head.

My voice sounded raspy and my throat felt unused, but somehow I managed to speak. "What happened?"

"You were attacked, dear."

Malcolm. I remembered the hatred on his face, and the dagger that he drove into my arm.

"You hit your head pretty hard on the way down," Papa said gently. "You've been asleep for over two days."

I didn't understand how the mentor I had once respected and loved had changed so much in the months since Lizzy's death. He'd always been kind to me, always tried to help me, and now he was like a monster with only revenge on his mind. I burst into tears.

Papa sat down on the bed next to me. "Rest now, Christina. You've been through a lot."

Despite having slept so long, I suddenly felt tired and closed my eyes against the pain in my heart.

It would have taken only a moment for me to heal the wound in my arm, but I knew it would have set Papa off, not to mention made the doctors suspicious. I did come up with a handy trick though, I was able to heal the wound, but make the cut appear unchanged. It still looked horrible, but at least the pain was gone.

I was released from the hospital two days later, but the doctor told me to take another week off from work. After dinner on my first night home, I confronted my father about what Malcolm had said regarding Papa's 'followers'.

"You should know what I preach nearly as well as I do," he reminded me. "Evil must be punished, wherever it lies. Whatever form it takes." His voice never changed, it sounded like he was talking about the weather instead of murder.

Damn him, how could he talk about killing that calmly? Would he be killing me next? Before I could ask him, he said something that caught me off guard.

"I called a friend of mine from Berkley. You start school there this summer." Papa had been pushing me to go to college since Marcus' death, but since I barely had the motivation to get out of bed each morning I didn't see how I'd be able to handle college.

"Papa, no," I pleaded, seeing the resolve on his face. "I don't want to go, I have a good job here." I wanted to stay in Helena, where I could at least visit Marcus' grave now and then. It wasn't as good as being with him, but it was better than nothing.

"Do not argue with me, daughter!" His voice had taken an edge that told me there would be no changing his mind.

I stopped myself from protesting again. Marcus would never have wanted me to stay in Helena if he'd known about Papa's involvement in Lizzy's death. I'd had enough of my father's self-righteousness anyway. And now that I knew Malcolm was still alive and obviously wanted me dead, maybe it would be best to get away, to start over. There was safety in numbers, right? This town held so many bad memories for me anyway, so many deaths. And Berkley did have one of the best Photojournalism programs in the western United States.

Naming Names

Then the turning of the tide
From the truth they could not hide
Incubus Succubus - Burning Times

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

Before I left for California, I paid a visit to Lady Snowfalcon. She seemed happy to see me, but the reason for my visit wasn't a happy one. She was the oldest Verbena that I knew how to find, and I knew the elders would want to know that I'd seen Malcolm, no matter what the circumstances.

"I heard about young Thorpe," she said sadly. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you," I replied softly, "but that's not why I'm here."

She looked at me curiously. "What can I do for you?"

"It's not—I don't need anything," I told her honestly. "I just wanted to let you know that I saw Malcolm the other night."

Hope flared in her eyes. "He has returned, then?"

"No," I said quickly. "At least, I don't think he has. I was walking home from work and I ran into him downtown."

She seemed to sense my unease, but I was keeping up the shields Malcolm had taught me so I knew she couldn't read my mind. "Tell me what happened, child."

I told her how he had looked, what he had said. I left out any mention of Papa and his followers, but told her how he had stabbed me and disappeared. She was very concerned about the injury and insisted on looking at my arm.

"I healed it," I assured her. "The scar will remain, but there is no lasting damage."

"Not in your arm," she agreed softly. "What about your heart?"

I looked away, unable to meet her kind eyes. "I don't know what you mean."

"Of course you do." She touched the side of my face and prompted me to look up at her. "It is not easy having the Trimuritive as a teacher. There are many secrets he insists on keeping, and the changes are difficult to deal with at times."

"The Trimuritive?" I repeated. I remembered what little I'd read about them before Malcolm had taken the book from me, but I'd never been able to learn any more about the subject. "Malcolm was the Trimuritive?"

"He never told you, did he?" She shook her head and turned to pour me a cup of tea. As she handed it to me, she said, "Your mentor is very important to our Tradition. In fact, he is the essence of Verbena magic."

"Malcolm?" I asked, stunned. "Malcolm Robbins?"

"Yes," she said, patting my hand. "He has existed for millennia in one of three very different manifestations. Malcolm is but one of them."

"I don't understand," I whispered.

"It is much like the triple goddess," she explained. "Each manifestation exists for a time within the wheel. Each is born, grows up, finds a mate, and has a child. That child is destined to bring forth the next manifestation. Each aspect has to die to make way for the next."

"You're saying that Malcolm was one of those manifestations?" I demanded.

"He was. That aspect of the Trimuritive is called Mithras, and he is the embodiment of light and purity." She sipped her own tea, watching my face to make sure I understood what she was saying. "To put it simply, Mithras represents all that is positive."

She had described Malcolm perfectly. I'd always trusted that he would do the right thing, that he would do good and help others. It was what I'd loved most about him.

"But that is not the only aspect of the Trimuritive," I prompted.

"No, it is not," she agreed. "The manifestation that lived before Malcolm was Tehuti, the embodiment of wisdom and healing. Tehuti is the neutral aspect of the Trimuritive."

"Good and neutral," I repeated in a flat voice. "That means the third is evil."

"Not evil, my child, although some believe that he is evil," she reprimanded lightly. "Evil is a relative term, after all. Ahriman is the embodiment of negativity and chaos. His lives are filled with anger and hate."

"You believe that it was Ahriman I saw, not Malcolm," I said softly.

"I do," she agreed. "While no two incarnation of the Trimuritive are identical, the eyes never differ. Mithras' eyes are always blue. Tehuti's eyes are so light they are almost clear."

"And Ahriman's eyes are always black," I finished, putting my teacup down for fear I would drop it. "You said they must be born and grow, how can Ahriman have attacked me like that?"

"Each aspect has a life they must follow within the wheel," she confirmed, "but there are times that the other manifestations may take over the physical form, usually during a time of great stress and emotions."

"Like when Lizzy died," I whispered.

"Yes." Once again she reached out and touched my hand. "Ahriman must have taken over when Malcolm was dominated by grief."

"And anger," I added gravely. "He was very angry at Lizzy's funeral."

"Anger is natural when one loses a loved one," she said gently. "As I'm sure you were angry when Marcus died."

I closed my eyes and felt the pain of my lover's death anew. "I know that anger is part of the healing process. It will pass," I lied. It wouldn't do any good to tell her Malcolm had killed Marcus and that I would never forgive him for it. "I am more concerned about Malcolm. Is there any way to help him regain control?"

She shook her head. "Mithras and Tehuti are the only ones who can successfully contain Ahriman. Only when Malcolm has won the battle with his grief can he regain control of his physical form."

"Until then?"

She looked at me thoughtfully for a long moment. "All aspects of the Trimuritive have great powers, Tina. As long as Malcolm cannot or will not contain Ahriman, you are in great danger. Have you thought about leaving town?"

The laugh that escaped me was both harsh and short. "I leave tomorrow." As if he couldn't find me wherever I went.

She smiled in relief. "That is good. You must continue with your life. When Malcolm is himself once more I'm sure he will contact you."

I didn't share her confidence. "Perhaps. It is hard to say what the future holds. Malcolm may hate me just as much as Ahriman does. He believes I killed Lizzy."

"What?" She sat back, shock written on her features. "You would never have harmed her, I'd wager my life on it."

"I didn't," I assured her. "Malcolm thinks my father had something to do with the explosion."

"Father Strong?" She thought for a moment, then sighed. "There were rumors that he was involved with the Inquisition when your mother died, and again when your brother passed on."

It was my turn to be surprised. "My mother?"

"Surely you knew she was a mage, child," she told me. "She was among the strongest of our kind, her loss is still felt."

"I suspected," I confessed. "I just never thought that Papa would have been involved in her death."

She took a sip of her tea before replying. "Your father is a strong man, Christina. He believes that there is only black and white in this world, good and evil. He has spent his life fighting the darkness. He does not realize that he is part of it."

Great Expectations

Fire bright and fire burn
Let my wheel of fortune turn
Mebus Succubus - Rune

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

Berkley was everything I expected it to be and nothing I wanted it to be. It was a party atmosphere, where one could easily get lost in the crowd. It was not a place I could lose the memories that haunted me. It was somewhere that I could learn all I wanted about journalism and photography. It was not a place conducive to studying magic.

While most freshmen were expected to live on campus, I managed to 'talk' my way into an exception. I found an apartment not far from the college and settled in as best I could.

Papa decided that he'd also had enough of the painful memories Helena held, and moved to Sacramento late in my freshman year. I spent that first summer with him, helping him settle in. When the fall came I was glad to go back to college. The classes and parties at least gave me something to focus on, something besides the memories of those that I'd lost to death.

Magi are easy to find if you know where to look. Actually they are everywhere, in every culture and every age group. It wasn't hard to find them in Berkley, the place was crawling with magi from every tradition.

I checked a few of the chantries in an effort to find one I felt comfortable in. Most had established members and weren't looking for anyone new. Others with a high percentage of Verbena members recognized the name of my mentor and pressured me for information about Malcolm, but I wasn't ready to talk about him, about what had happened the night he'd attacked me.

Eventually I found a chantry that had no Verbena members prior to me joining them. It was small and quiet, everything I needed. No one pressured me about my past, and no one minded if I kept mostly to myself.

The Ogham was a store that had been suggested to me by a Dreamspeaker, so I stopped by to check it out. It was everything I was told it would be, and carried more magical supplies than any store I'd ever been to.

Several people were in the store looking at the merchandise, and there was a clerk behind the counter. I didn't pay her much attention until she came over to see if she could help me find something. After I politely told her I was just browsing, the girl took a closer look at me.

"Do I know you?" she asked softly.

She did look somewhat familiar, but I'd come to Berkeley to get away from my past, so I tried to brush her off. "I'm sorry, I don't think so," I said, turning away.

"No, I do know you," she insisted. "You're Tina Strong, aren't you?"

I knew I couldn't avoid this, so I turned back and faced the past head on. "Yes."

"I'm Dana, remember?" she prompted. "Yule, about four years ago? The Trimuritive introduced you as his student."

A few of the other patrons of the store turned our way at her words, looking at me curiously. I did my best to ignore them.

"I remember," I reluctantly admitted. "How have you been?"

"Wonderful," she replied with a proprietary look around the store. "Lady Snowfalcon put me in touch with Wilson and we opened this store about a year ago."

"It's doing quite well, I see," I murmured, wondering how I could get away without looking like I was running.

"It must have been awful for you when the Trimuritive disappeared," she told me with an almost pitying look.

"Malcolm," I replied firmly, trying hard to fight the tenseness that made my face feel like stone. "His name was Malcolm."

"Of course," she murmured almost defensively. "It's just he's so important, it's hard for most of us to think of him by anything but 'the Trimuritive'."

I sighed. "He's just a man, Dana, not a god. He has his good days and bad like any of us."

She shot me a disgruntled look, and many of those close to us gave up any pretense of not listening. "How can you say that?" she demanded. "He's the Trimuritive. The elders were distraught when he disappeared. I thought my teacher was going to have a heart attack."

"Mine too," a man about my age put in. "No one seems to know what happened."

The last thing I wanted was to bare my soul to these people. "It's simple, really," I replied tersely. "His girlfriend died and it broke his heart. He's a man, just like any other man," I repeated. "He needed time alone."

"It's been nearly a year," a girl about seventeen put in. "How long does he need?"

I thought about Malcolm's face the last time I'd seen him, the hatred and rage that burned in his eyes. "I don't know," I whispered softly. Carefully I put the statue I'd been holding down on the counter and turned toward the door. The store was silent as I walked out, and thankfully no one tried to stop me from leaving.

Once outside I turned down the alley that ran next to the building. About halfway down its length, I leaned back against the wall and took deep gasping breaths to fight the tears that threatened to overwhelm me.

Regardless of the hatred Malcolm felt for me, I still missed him, even after all this time, even after all he had done. He had been more than a friend to me, more than a mentor. He had been the brother I'd lost in Robert, the father Papa hadn't been since Mama had died. Malcolm and Lizzy and Marcus had been family to me and I still felt their loss every day, just as I felt Robert's loss.

Irritably I told myself to get over it. No amount of tears of sorrow was ever going to bring any of them back, and I had to get on with my life. It was past time I moved on.

Moving On

And though I know what gifts you hold
I cannot love a ghost
Incubus Succubus — Soul Inside

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

After my visit to the Ogham, I resolved to put the past behind me. Despite that resolve, I found myself thinking a lot about Marcus. While we'd both been young, I knew that we'd loved each other, and if he hadn't died we might have had a chance at staying together. But he was dead, and I couldn't spend the rest of my life pining over his memory.

Ned caught my eye the first day of the new semester. We had an economics class together, and I have to say I was drawn to him right off.

I couldn't believe his reaction when I told him I was pregnant. I thought he'd be thrilled, that we could get married and settle down with a white picket fence and a dog. Unfortunately, he didn't feel the same. In fact, he seemed damned reluctant to admit he had anything to do with my pregnancy.

Ned transferred to Harvard the next week. I never saw him before he left, his roommate told me after his plane had taken off. The guy seemed afraid of me and with a little probing into his surface thoughts I realized that Ned had said that he was leaving because I'd been stalking him. What a loser.

At first I thought he'd change his mind and come back, I really did. I believed that he'd think about what a child could mean in his life and remember that he loved me, as he had told me he did. I was wrong. As the weeks passed with fall turning to winter, I realized that he wasn't going to come back. I'd lost yet another person who'd meant something special to me, but this time I'd lost him to his own lack of commitment rather than death.

Pouring over the books I'd recovered from Malcolm's apartment, I found a series of incantations I would use to bless my child. One would be performed at each trimester, and a final incantation had to be spoken over the child within an hour of birth. I copied it carefully into my Grimoire and set about gathering supplies for the first ritual.

Empty Shoes

Live for magic

Live for greatness

Incubus Succubus — Wild

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

Alone and pregnant was not somewhere I wanted to be. I knew that papa would have a heart attack if he found out, that was if he didn't kill me first. I couldn't let him know, and I couldn't count on Ned to come back, and I couldn't raise this baby on my own. Abortion was never an option, I had too much respect for life.

Finally I decided that I would give the baby up for adoption. With the magic at my command, it would be easy enough to hide the pregnancy. No one would know, so no one would question what had happened to the baby. Under an alias I contacted an adoption agency and began preparations to give my child away.

There would be no records that would tell the story of my pregnancy because I had no need to see a doctor. With the magic at my disposal I could see to the child's health myself, much better than any sleeper doctor ever could. I made sure my son would be blessed with health and a family that would love him. It was the least I could do.

As the pregnancy progressed I found it more and more difficult to think about giving my child away. I could feel him move inside of me, hear his heartbeat, sense his development. I knew it would be hard for me to part with him when the time came, but I also knew it was something I had to do.

It was harder than I'd imagined.

When the time came for me to give birth to my son, I stood before the mirror and lit the black candle once more. Looking into the mirror, I spoke the words that I'd been using for months to hide my pregnancy in Berkley, and to change my appearance for the doctor in Oxnard that I'd been seeing for prenatal care. "From burrow Dark and Lake-world deep, Faeries slumbering, rise from sleep. Sometimes here now sometimes there, what I will is the face I wear."

My image in the glass shimmered and a moment later the guise I'd chosen was looking back at me. My hair was short and blond, curling about my head in a way my natural hair would never do. My eyes were dark brown and guileless, holding no secrets within their depths. The image stood several inches shorter than my normal five foot seven inches, and was about twenty pounds heavier. Even the shape of my face had changed enough that no one would have believed that Teresa Carpenter and I were the same person.

I laid a hand on my swollen stomach and bit back the tears that I wanted so badly to shed. Today was the day that I would give up my son, hand him over to strangers who would raise him and love him as if they were his own. As much as I wanted to keep my child, I knew I could not.

Turning, I opened a portal to a little used bathroom in St. John's Regional Medical Center in Oxnard, the place I'd chosen to give birth.

The clerk at the emergency room desk lost no time admitting me and in short order I found myself in the maternity ward. Labor wracked my body, but I knew well how to stop the pain from affecting me. Less than three hours later, my son was born and laid upon my stomach.

He was beautiful, absolutely beautiful. Dark hair covered his head and his blue eyes shone with intelligence. He didn't cry, he simply looked up at me as if he knew the seriousness of what I was about to do.

"What are you going to name him?" one of the nurses asked.

"I'm not," I said sadly. "I've arranged for him to be adopted." I gave her the name and number of the adoption agency I'd contacted, and she went off to call them.

Once we were both cleaned up, everyone left us to have a few minutes alone. I held my son and committing to memory the tiny features of his face. I could see so much of Robert in him that I wanted to cry, but somehow I managed to keep my composure. His small hand wrapped around my finger and at that moment I felt such a close bond with my son that I never wanted to let him go.

I could feel the life within the child, the spark of potential that was unique in every person. Lifting him closer I bent my head to speak softly in his ear. As I spoke the blessing, I used magic to ensure he had the best life I could possibly give him.

"Blessings on you, my beloved son," I whispered against his skin. "May the Morrigan wrap her wings around you. May Hecate smile on your shining face. May Ceridwen feed you well from the ladle of luck. May Arianrhod turn the wheel for your happiness. May Inanna bring you beauty. May Athena grant you courage. May Artemis give you swiftness of foot and of brain. May Hera grant you the grace of fairness in your life. May you sleep ever on soft pillows. May you run always on green grass. May you taste only the sweetness of life. May your thirst always be met with nourishment. May your heart always know that you are loved."

It seemed like I'd only had moments with my son when the agent from the adoption agency showed up. She had all the necessary papers for me to sign, and had a nurse witness them. Then she thanked me for my time and lifted my son from my arms.

After she walked out of the room I covered my head with the pillow and cried as I hadn't done in nearly ten years, not since Robert had died. I knew I was doing what was best, but that didn't stop me from wanting to change what I had done.

When the doctor came by on rounds a little while later, he didn't want to let me leave the hospital. I overruled him, of course, removing any concern he had for me from his mind. After his final examination I healed myself, dressed, and went back to the bathroom I'd come out of hours before. Within minutes I was back in my apartment hundreds of miles away, alone with my grief.

I wandered through the apartment, wishing I'd had the strength to keep my son.

Someone was different in the apartment, wrong, although it took me several minutes to figure out what had changed. The antique wooden rocker I'd picked up at the beginning of summer had been moved from its place near the fireplace to the alcove in the hall. The curtains streamed in the breeze from the open window, and in the dim light I could see the rocker start to move. On the seat lay a pair of white infant shoes.

"Who's there?" I called out softly even as the feel of magic filled the room. The magic had a familiar feel, and in an instant I knew who had been in my apartment, who was reaching out and touching it with his magic even now. "Malcolm? Are you there?"

I've got the ways and means, I heard softly in my mind, to New Orleans, I'm going down by the river where it's warm and green...

"Malcolm, where are you?" I whispered, trying to sense where he was contacting me from. I walked closer to the rocking chair as the curtain danced in the morning breeze and suddenly I wasn't in my apartment anymore.

The leaves at my feet whispered familiar sounds to my ears, and shadows danced in the trees that encircled the clearing I stood in. The rocks that lay around the ancient circle told me I was in the clearing that Malcolm had taken me to begin the seekings he had overseen.

"Are you there, Malcolm?" I called softly.

His voice came into my mind once more. *They used to dance in the garden in the middle of the night...*

"Malcolm, stop this," I said sternly, trying to keep the fear from my voice. I was more than frightened, the last time I'd seen my mentor he'd tried to kill me. He'd grabbed me from my apartment and I hadn't even known it was coming, and now I was in a place where no one would ever find me unless he wanted me found.

Oh you were a vampire and I may never see the light...

My eyes darted from shadow to shadow, but I couldn't see him. He was there though, I knew he had to be. He was the only person I'd ever met strong enough to block me from touching my magic, and at that moment I couldn't even feel it.

"Why, Malcolm?" I whispered.

"You killed my love," he reminded me, his voice coming from no where and everywhere at once. "I killed yours."

Tears filled my eyes. "I didn't kill Lizzy, Malcolm," I told him. "I tried to help you save her, remember?"

From the shadows a figure emerged. "You killed her," he insisted as he walked closer. When I could make out his face I gasped in shock. He looked much older than when I'd seen him last, harsher. His hair hung in limp dread locks around his face, and between his eyes and X had been branded.

"You took my child," he growled, "and you gave yours away."

"Why are you doing this?" I begged.

"Because I can," he barked.

"Go," he cried hoarsely.

"Malcolm?" I whispered.

He looked up at me, pain and struggle written on his face. "Go now, Tina!" he yelled harshly. "While you still can, go!"

I raised a hand in a half salute and stepped through a gateway back to my apartment. Within moments I had so many wards around the flat that it would have taken an army of mages to get to me.

Still, on seat of the rocking chair by the window down the hall lay a pair of white infant shoes, a tangible sign that I hadn't been dreaming. The Trimuritive had been here tonight, had almost killed me, would have killed me had Malcolm not wrestled control away from Ahriman. From the looks of things, his control wouldn't last long.

I shivered, suddenly cold in the California heat, wondering how long my wards would last against the embodiment of magic.

Dog Day After New Year

Descend thou with a willing heart
Down to the Otherworld.
Mecubus Succubus - Underworld

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

Malcolm's visit made me realize that I'd been lax in my pursuit of my craft during the months of my pregnancy. Resolving to correct my lapse I threw myself into magic, learning everything I could from everyone I could.

Eventually I'd learned all I could. There was nothing more I could do, no more power I could gain without seeking Tiamat out once more.

I talked to the others in the chantry and they agreed to keep watch while I performed a seeking.

"Why should I?" I demanded. "I'm tired of facing the things that haunt me. I'm tired of remembering things I'd rather forget. Why can't I just move on with my life and forget the pain?"

That is not the way to enlightenment, she warned me. If you cannot face the demons of your past, they will return to haunt you.

"They haunt me now," I said coldly.

If you face them, they will cease to have power over you, she explained. Malcolm taught you that, long ago.

"Yeah, and he tried to kill me, do you remember that?" I shot back. "Malcolm taught me a lot of things about fairness and forgiveness, and he didn't live up to a single one of them. He took off and left me, just like—" I broke off, but Tiamat knew me well.

Just like everyone else in your life has left you, she finished sadly. The wheel of life turns, apados. For everything there is a season.

"I know," I said softly. "But why is it always my season to lose?"

It will not always be so, she promised. I see change in your future, one that will transform you in ways that are not quite clear to me.

I shook my head, not understanding what she meant. "Change usually means I lose something," I said sadly. "I have nothing left to lose."

You are wrong, apados. You still have your life.

"Are you saying I will die?" I demanded.

It is not clear, she told me. But the nature of the Avatar is such that we rarely see the death of our mage, or ourselves.

Would death be so very bad? At least I wouldn't mourn every day for those I'd lost. I wouldn't have to look in the mirror and see the woman who had given her child away. I wouldn't have to face a lonely future where I couldn't bring myself to get close to anyone new.

Sometimes death is simply the beginning, Tiamat said suddenly. The wheel turns and death brings new life. For the moment we must concentrate on the matter at hand.

I knew she was right, that I had to learn to deal with what the gods dealt out to me, but some things I just didn't want to face anymore. Yet if I didn't, I ran the risk of failing my seeking, or worse. I didn't want to spend the rest of eternity lost in the horrors of my own mind.

"You're right," I said at last. "What must I do?"

The rocks, she told me. You must bring them down as you stand beneath them.

I looked up to find Eagle's Peak towering over me, once again unchanged by the collapse that had killed my brother. I wondered what he had felt when the rocks had collapsed, when he'd been showered in rubble and unable to move or breath because of the weight of the earth on top of him.

"Move back," I told the cat.

No, she countered. You must bury and save us both.

I closed my eyes to the responsibility she was asking me to take on. I'd been very careful the last few years to ensure that no one ever depended on me to take care of them. I'd proven more than once that I was a hazard to those around me, and I never again wanted the responsibility of another's life in my hands.

Still, I knew there was no use arguing with the Avatar. I called her to come closer to me and looked up at the mountain of rock above us. Taking the dagger from my belt, I ran the tip down the inside of my forearm and cleaned the blade on Tiamat's hide. Dipping my fingers in the blood I drew a circle on the stones and gravel around us before healing the wound. Softly I began to chant.

"Goddess my shield, my encircler, each day, each night, each dark, each light, Goddess my shield, my encircler." I felt the power build within me and projected it outward to form a three dimensional circle around us. I hoped that it would be enough to protect us from the collapse to come.

"In my lying, in my standing, in my watching, in my sleeping, Goddess be my strength everlasting." When the globe of power was as strong as I could make it, I looked up at the mountain and raised my hands toward the heavens.

"This is what I was and am no more, so it is willed so mote it be!" I cried. "I call upon Brighid to heal the wounds that are haunting me, to help me change within that which is holding me back! I call upon Tigernonos to guide me though the path of trials and tribulations over the rocky path, to help me change what that must be changed! Please grant me wisdom and guidance!"

"I call upon Ceridwen to stand beside me through these changes and bless the journey in knowledge that I have set my feet upon! I call upon Hecate, to guide me toward the light in my journey through my pain protect me and grant me the wisdom to be free again! I call upon Arianrhod to bring forth my destiny, which I can no longer see! Allow me to become that which I was meant to become!"

With a dark rumble the mountain above me began to shake and the world fell down around me.

Personal Demons

A dark angel
Just for danger
Come take my hand and I'll lead you to madness
Mecubus Succubus - Smile of Torment

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

"Why do you bring me here, witch?" the thing with Malcolm's face growled.

"I must face my past before I can continue," I told him as calmly as I could. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, but I fought against the fear that threatened to overwhelm me.

His smile was evil to behold. "Why would I want you to continue?"

"You may not," I conceded coolly. "You may wish me dead. You may even want to kill me as you killed Marcus. That does not change the fact that I must face you."

He stepped closer to me, looming over me. "I have wished you dead, Tina," he admitted. "I have tried to kill you, and may kill you yet. But the fact remains that while you live you punish yourself for Lizzy's death."

I shook my head sadly at the venom in his voice. "The man I knew never had so much hate inside of him."

"I am not the man you knew," he growled, "and I will not help you to face down the demons of your past. You killed my love, and I vow that you will never know love the way I could have known it." His black eyes filled with fire for a moment before he waved a hand and disappeared.

"Well, that went well," I murmured dryly under my breath.

"He is still very angry," a voice said from behind me. "He will hurt you if you are not careful."

I turned to see Marcus standing nearby looking much as I remembered him. His dark hair and eyes were a welcome sight but it took all I had not to break down and cry.

"Are you so sad to see me?" he asked softly.

"No," I told him. "I miss you."

"And I you," he replied. "Why have you called me here?"

"There were things unsaid between us," I said softly. "Things I should have told you and didn't."

"I know, Tina." He walked closer and I realized that I could see right through him. "I knew everything that you wanted to tell me and could not."

"I loved you," I whispered. "I wanted to be with you forever."

"I know," he repeated. "But it wasn't to be."

"Why?" I asked pleadingly. "Why wasn't it? Because Papa got it in his head to kill Lizzy? Because Malcolm wanted revenge? Why was it so wrong that we were happy?"

He reached out to touch my face but all I felt was a coolness where his fingers brushed my cheek. "We loved each other, Tina, but it was not meant to be. There is another for you, one whose soul is bound to yours."

"What are you talking about?" I wanted to touch him, to be held in his arms, but his body had no form or substance, only an image that I couldn't reach.

"You will find him in time," he told me. "When the wheel has turned and events unfold as they should. The two of you have loved before, and you will love again."

"I don't want some bloody fairy tale," I bit out, trying not to break down in tears. "I want what we had."

He shook his head sadly. "Our time is done, Tina. You must release the pain of your past." He stepped back and began to fade away.

"No!" I cried, but when I reached out to hold him there was nothing for me to hold on to. "Marcus, don't go!"

"I'm sorry, Tina." A moment later he was gone.

I buried my face in my hands and sobs tore through my body. To have been so close to him and not able to feel him, and now to lose him all over again was too much for me. I wanted to call out for Tiamat to end this torture, but I couldn't speak through my tears.

Suddenly I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder. When I looked up I saw Robert standing next to me, a tangible Robert I could touch and feel. I threw myself into his arms and he held me, stroking my hair as I cried.

"It's all right," he soothed. "These things are never easy. You have to get a hold of yourself and continue, you know that."

"I know," I sniffled. "Tiamat told me I have to face my past, but it's so hard, Robert. I miss you all so much."

"We're still with you, Tina," he told me. "As long as you remember us we are still with you."

"Even the child?" I demanded.

He smiled and turned to show me a small boy who sat at my feet. He looked up at me and laughed an innocent child's laugh before holding his arms up to my brother. Robert bent and picked him up, holding the boy so I could see his face.

"This child?" he asked softly.

I reached out and slowly touched the soft hand of my son. "How did you do this?"

"You did this," he replied. "You have called us here so you can lay aside the memories that haunt you. You brought him here."

Carefully I lifted the boy and held him in my arms. He smiled and reached up to touch my face. "Tina," he cooed as if he knew me.

Tears overflowed but I managed to smile through them. I called upon my magic to search the boy's life force, to make sure he was safe and healthy, but there was no need. My son was everything I had hoped he would be. Some day he would face Awakening and if things went well he would be one of the strongest Verbena I had ever seen.

"We have to go, Tina," Robert told me, sorrow in his voice. He reached for my son and though I didn't want to hand him over I knew I had to. "You know the path you must take. Trust in Tiamat, she won't lead you wrong."

"I will try," I promised, biting back the tears. I turned away so I wouldn't see them fade away as Marcus had.

I knew my brother was right, that I had to put aside the pain of my past and go on living again. My son was safe and strong and out of my reach as so many of my loved ones were. Taking a deep steadying breath, I called out for my Avatar to return.

Have you found what you seek? she asked softly.

"I have, Tiamat," I assured her. "I know what I have to do, and I think I can finally do it."

And what must you do?

"I must put aside the past and live for the future," I replied calmly as I wiped my tears. "Marcus and Robert are dead, and my son is lost to me. I have to stop living in the past and look toward the future."

You have known this for some time in your head, she reminded me. Do you know this now in your heart?

"I do," I said firmly.

Very good, apados, she purred.

Suddenly Malcolm appeared behind Tiamat, his dark features looking more foreboding than they had only moments ago. "It will not be so easy," he vowed harshly. "I will not allow you to be at peace when you are the one who killed her."

I felt power build in the air around me, more power than I'd felt since Malcolm had disappeared that night in Montana. I tried to raise my shields, but I was no match for the Master he had always been.

"Hail Pan, the destroyer!" he called out, raising his hands to the sky. The wind picked up and whipped our clothing around us. "Hail Hecate, mother of destruction! Bring justice upon the plane of her mind. Let the memories of her deeds haunt her until death brings her home once more!"

I cried out in agony as memories of those I'd lost slammed through my mind. I saw again the night that I'd handed my child to the nurse and watched her walk away. Once more I saw the mountain collapse upon my brother. Again I saw the images I'd seen when I'd touched Marcus' cold hand. The grief and guilt was too much to bear and I collapsed to the ground.

"Why are you doing this?" I demanded through the memories and anguish that threatened to overwhelm me. "I believed in you, I trusted you. You were the one person I trusted to do the right thing, Malcolm. Do you think this is right? Do you think Lizzy would approve of your vengeance?"

Screams the likes of which I'd never heard tore through my mind. I covered my ears but I knew that would not protect me from the sound that echoed across the depths of my soul. I welcomed the blackness that swallowed me whole.

I don't fully remember what happened next. Time dragged on forever yet passed by in a heartbeat. Reality had no meaning. I relived the most painful moments of my past over and over again, and each reliving was more difficult and more painful than the last. At some point I realized that I was insane, that I would never return from the netherworld that Ahriman had flung me into.

It's hard to say how long I might have stayed lost in the past if I hadn't heard Brian's voice calling to me. In my delirium I was barely able to focus on the sound of his voice. I turned from Eagle's Peak and ran down the mountain toward Brian and sanity even as I heard the mountain collapse behind me. When I reached him, he wasn't alone.

"Come with us, Christina," Gena said as she took my hand.

"Where?" I asked.

"Out," she replied.

Brian took my other hand, and together we walked toward a portal that glowed red.

"What happened?" I asked weakly.

"Your seeking didn't go well," Gena said softly from the chair next to the bed. "We went in after you."

I looked from her to Brian, confused. "A Quiet?"

"Yes," he confirmed, holding my arm to steady me as I tried to sit up.

"How long?" I asked.

"A month," he told me.

A month. Thirty days of memories that had nearly driven me insane. These two had pulled me back from the edge of oblivion. I closed my eyes and visions of the past filled my mind. I saw again the day my brother died, the night Lizzy passed away, Marcus in his casket. With a shudder I opened my eyes again.

"What happened?" Gena asked softly.

"My guide told me I had to face the past and let it go," I whispered. "My first mentor was there. He didn't want me to."

"He was actually there?" she queried.

"I don't know," I admitted. "It seemed real, but..."

"Seekings always do," Brian finished with a wry smile.

"Yes," I agreed. "He cursed me."

"You must have done something to really piss him off," he said dryly.

"It wasn't what I did," I corrected him. "It was what my father did. Malcolm will never forgive me, and he will never allow me to forgive myself."

"You've said that he was a master," Gena replied softly, "but no matter how strong he is, he doesn't rule your mind."

"You choose your own path," Brian added. "He cannot make you relive the past."

"Can't he?" I countered. Malcolm was by far the strongest mage I'd ever met. Next to him my power was like a mosquito to an elephant. How could I hope to counter the curse he'd laid upon me if it was real? "He cursed me and I was lost in the past for a month."

"You're strong," she told me. "You can win this."

I nodded, hoping she was right but somehow not quite able to believe it. I closed my eyes again and a vision of my son flashed through my mind. Despite the effort I'd put into putting the past behind me, and the help of my friends to bring me out of my Quiet, I knew that Malcolm's curse was real, and that he'd destroyed whatever progress I had tried so hard to make.

It didn't take long to find out that I was right. I would be sitting in class or driving down the road and suddenly a memory from the past would flash through my mind. At first they lasted only a moment, and were mostly sounds or smells. As the weeks went by they grew stronger until I was seeing visions of my past.

Fillmore Street

For 'tis the night, here comes the dead
Unbound from the underworld
Incubus Succubus - Samhain

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

I had been out with some of my friends and roommates from college, but when their boyfriends had shown up, they'd taken off, leaving me alone. I had let Gena dress me, and she had chosen some rather questionable clothes. 'All the better to help you get a man,' I could still hear her saying.

"Some friends," I mumbled to myself. The sounds from the club behind me were barely audible as I walked away from it. "When I get my hands on those two, they're going to regret leaving me here."

Across the street I could see five guys standing around their motorcycles. One of them noticed me looking in their direction and pointed me out to his friends. They all turned and immediately started in whistling and catcalling. I did my best to ignore them and kept walking down the street away from them. I was pretty sure that the dangerous looking bikers were not the kind of men Gina had hoped I'd attract tonight.

Behind me I could hear them start after me, still calling out. I knew I was severely outnumbered and I walked faster, trying to hide my fear. They started running after me and as I felt them get closer I decided that the only option I had was to make a stand. They thought they were just chasing down a helpless college chick; they had no idea of the magic I could call upon.

Shaking off an image of Malcolm coming at me with a knife, I turned and raised a hand toward them. "I am protected by your might," I whispered urgently. "O gracious Goddess, day and night, I am protected by your might!"

I must have had more adrenaline going than I'd thought because the one closest to me went sailing almost back to where the bikes were parked. That stopped the others short, all but the big Hispanic one.

With a start I realized that his eyes were glowing red. He stepped in front of the others, a hard smile playing on his lips. Then he started laughing, a deep rumbling laugh that had the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. The laugh slowly died down to a low snarl before it faded completely.

"Looks like we got a live one, boys," he growled in a thick Mexican accent. As he stepped into the light his eyes stopped glowing and turned a dark shade of gray.

"Leave me alone, you—"

I was going to say asshole, but then he smiled and I got a good look at his teeth. His canines were a lot longer than they were supposed to be, and sharp. He raised his hand and as I watched claws grew from his fingertips.

I'd seen enough; I turned and ran.

"Get her!" I heard the creature say, and I could almost feel the others running after me. Thankfully I was faster and somehow I was managing to outrun them. I turned into a construction yard and saw a chain link fence on the other side with a large hole in it. When I was almost to the fence, I glanced back to see how close my pursuers were.

When I saw that they were starting to close on me, I turned back to make my way through the fence only to run into someone standing in the opening. I fell backward and landed hard on my back, looking up to see a tall black man looming over me.

I hurried toward the sounds of the fight but before I reached the corner I was knocked down by a man running toward me. I got back to my feet quickly, but Malcolm was quicker.

Blinking away the past, I saw that the man before me was wearing gray slacks with a dark brown leather jacket zipped all the way up to his chin. His head was shaved and he wore black sunglasses that hid his eyes, but my gaze was drawn to his mouth. He was smiling wide, and I could see that he had fangs too. He was looking at the guys who had been chasing me and I heard them come to a stop just out of reach when the black man hissed at them.

"Don't worry, *muchacha*," I heard a deep voice say from somewhere above me. "We can help."

I looked up and saw another man standing on a steel girder high off the ground. He was wearing black leather pants and a gray leather jacket. His hair was cut short and there was a pencil thin mustache above his lips. As I watched, he took a step off of the girder and floated lightly to the ground. He landed effortlessly next to me on his feet before turning to me.

"I am Zach dela Rocha," he said with a small bow. He held his arm out toward the black man who had yet to move. "This is my comrade, Archie."

At the mention of his name, Archie hissed again and took a step past me toward the three men and the monster that were still standing behind me.

Zach turned his attention to them as well. "And this dog is Russell, and his puppies."

"Fuck you, warlock!" Russell growled angrily.

"Not tonight, Russ," a new voice put in. "We've got business to finish first."

Everybody turned to look at the newcomer. He was about five foot nine inches, with flowing brown hair, dressed in jeans and an open shirt with an old black leather jacket over top of it all.

"Back off, Luke," Russell barked. "This toy is mine."

"There will be another time," the man called Luke told him forcefully. "You owe me right now. Zach, take your party and go, this is going to get messy." At the last, he bared fangs of his own and started advancing on Russell.

Zach held his hand out to me and instinctively I took it. "Come," he ordered as I scrambled to my feet and he pulled me along with him. "Archie! Come! Now!" Zach yelled as he moved away taking me with him, and after a slight pause to growl at Russell Archie followed.

I wondered how they could just leave Luke to fight all of the others as the three of us continued running through the night. We came out of an alley onto one of the main streets I recognized. As we slowed down a dark blue car pulled up followed closely by a motorcycle. Zach pushed me behind him and Archie came to stand next to him, but before trouble could erupt the window of the car went down and the tension ran out of my new friends.

"*Señior* dela Rocha," the older man in the car began. "You look a bit hurried this eve." He appeared to be in his mid forties with an easygoing face, but I could tell from one glimpse into his eyes that he was a very intelligent man. He was wearing a light gray suit and coordinating tie. He looked like what a favorite uncle should look like, not that I had a favorite uncle.

I spared a glance back to the motorcycle and its rider. At first I thought he looked like Marcus, but it was just my mind playing tricks on me. I looked closer and he seemed to be about a decade younger than the man in the car. He had a very solemn face and his hair seemed to be holding its style despite being on a bike, but I couldn't see his eyes because he was wearing very dark sunglasses. His long trench coat was only half-buttoned revealing the upper half of a suit and tie.

"You put a fright into me, old man," Zach said as his hand eased on mine.

"Oh?" the man murmured. "Have you reason to be frightened?"

Zach quickly told him about the others back at the construction site. When he was finished the man leaned out of the car window and yelled back to the man on the motorcycle.

"Boy! Go see if Luke needs any help. It sounds like he's outnumbered."

The man nodded and said, "As you wish," before speeding off into the night.

My attention turned back to the man in the car when he spoke. "Well, now that that is taken care of, who is your friend here?" He was looking right into my eyes and I felt like he was measuring me for something.

"This is Christina Strong, daughter of Father Roger Strong, from Helena," Zach told him.

At first I had wondered how he knew who I was, but that was forgotten when he said my father's name. The man in the car nodded as if it all meant something to him.

Zach stepped to the side so I could get a better view of the older man as he got out of his car. "Christina, this is Dougal Galloway. He is a friend of ours from out of town."

"How do you do, young lady?" Dougal asked as he held his hand out for mine. His handshake was firm yet friendly, but his skin was cold, dead cold.

Slowly I reached out to lay the white rose on Marcus' chest as he lay in the casket. As I withdrew, my fingertips brushed his cold hand.

"I'm good, now," I responded as I drew my hand away.

"Are you sure about that?" he inquired. "I see great sadness in your eyes for one so young as you are."

At that I dropped my gaze from his, hoping to hide the pain that was my constant companion, but it was no use.

"How many loved ones have you lost, my child?" he asked softly.

The sadness that bloomed inside of me manifested itself as sarcasm after what I'd been through tonight. "More than I'd care to remember."

My answer seemed to amuse him and he laughed softly. "That could be arranged." He gave a small sigh before going on in a more serious tone. "The ones that have been taken from you are not the ones you mourn for now, but rather the one you have given up."

I held my son and committed to memory the tiny features of his face. I could see so much of Robert in him that I wanted to cry.

That one memory made me go weak at the knees with the mere thought of it, and I had to lean against Zach to keep from falling. He caught my weight easily and guided me to the ground next to him. When I had enough control over my emotions to open my eyes, I saw that Dougal had crouched down next to me as well.

"I did not mean to awaken painful memories, dear child," he soothed as once more he took my hand in his cold grasp.

I looked down at the earth covering Marcus. If I expanded my senses I could feel him lying in his casket, decaying. No matter how hard I tried I could find no trace of his essence, his soul, anywhere around the body.

I shook my head to clear it of memories. "No, it isn't your fault. I've made my choices, it's my pain to bear."

"I do not mean to interrupt," Zach said as he leaned down to me, "but we should be going. Those two boys won't be able to hold off Russell and his crew for long."

"I agree," Dougal said as he stood. "Can I give you all a lift somewhere?"

Zach answered for the three of us. "No thank you. We will escort Miss Strong back to her apartment and then come back to the Chantry. I do look forward to finishing our, er, discussion from last night."

He nodded. "Later then. Miss Strong, it was good to meet you," he told me. "I hope we will meet again."

I let him help me to my feet and managed a polite goodbye before Zach led me away. He helped me into a dark sedan that was parked nearby, and soon we were on our way to Berkeley. The radio was playing a soft Latin ballad, and conversation was nonexistent at first, but after a while the question roaming around my head got the better of me.

"Look, I don't mean to sound ungrateful," I said softly, "but what the hell is going on? Who was that guy that tried to jump me?"

Zach spat out the open window before letting out a stream of Spanish curses while Archie growled loudly in the back seat.

"They are scum who will meet their end," Zach told me. "Soon if they are not careful."

"Is that guy going to be all right?" I asked. "Luke, wasn't that his name?"

"Just another Gangrel," he said dismissively, "but he is one of the more loyal ones."

Gangrel? Was that some street gang or something? Somehow I didn't think he'd tell me, and I really wasn't sure I wanted to know. "What about the other one? The one on the motorcycle?"

He shot me a hard look and when he spoke his voice was sour. "He is Dougal's childe, and that fact alone has kept me from his throat more than once. He is as tactless as he is deadly."

At the last word, Archie let out another growl low in his throat. I glanced back at him, but I couldn't see him very well in the darkness of the car. I tried to tell myself that they hadn't saved me from Russell just to hurt me themselves. Maybe if I kept them talking I could believe it.

"And Mr. Galloway?"

"Ah, Dougal," he replied with a smile. His voice was warm, as if he were talking about the good old days. "He is an old one, nearly as old as myself. Too bad we can't talk him into staying in one place for too long, he would make a fine leader in some city."

I didn't think he meant mayor, even though the guy had looked the part from what I could tell. An old one? I didn't really understand that comment until I thought about it for a minute. I looked at Zach in the dim light of the car and knew that I was looking into the face of a vampire. I wanted to ask questions, but what the hell would I say? What's it like to drink blood? Are you planning on biting me any time soon?

I turned and looked out the window, more confused about the night's events than before. It didn't seem like very long before we got to my apartment complex. Zach knew exactly what building to stop in front of, exactly what door.

I had so many questions to ask, but I thought it was probably best if I forgot them and just went up to bed. Maybe in the morning I would have a little better perspective. I got out of the car but before I closed the door I leaned down and looked into the car one last time. "How did you know my name?" I asked softly, unable to contain my curiosity.

Zach smiled kindly. "Your father is well known among my kind."

That was hardly surprising. Papa killed things that were supernatural, and vampires were definitely in that category. It didn't exactly answer the question, though. It also didn't tell me how Dougal had known about my son. I'd thought I'd hidden my pregnancy well from everyone.

Change Partners and Dance

Through all her tears she's dreamed of love and lust
She's tired of crying each and every night
Incubus Succubus — Come to Me (Song of The Water Nymph)

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

The visions were getting worse. I didn't want to admit it, but I knew it was true. Sometimes I was lost in the past for minutes at a time. I didn't like to drive because I never knew when one would hit me. The others in the chantry noticed my distraction, but most contributed it to residual effects of my Quiet.

"Why won't you go out with me?" he asked as we moved around the dance floor.

I stiffened in his arms. This wasn't a topic I wanted to go over yet again. "I don't date anyone," I reminded him.

"You used to," he murmured against my temple. "Gena said you were pretty serious about some guy that ended up at Harvard."

"Gena talks too much," I replied. "I'm sorry, but I feel I have to concentrate on school right now."

"You know what I think?" he asked coolly. "I think you got burned and now you won't let anyone get close to you. That's not good, you know. Everyone needs human contact."

I looked up at him suddenly thinking that psych majors had too much time on their hands. "I don't need to be psychoanalyzed," I told him. "I don't date, end of story."

"How is your relationship with your father?" he continued.

I stopped moving and glared up at him. "My relationship with my family has no bearing on what I chose to do with my time," I bit out. "I choose to be alone, and that doesn't mean I had some horrible childhood you can do a paper on. Get over the Freud act and get a life, will you?" With that, I turned and left him standing alone in the middle of the crowd.

As I stalked off the dance floor I barely managed to avoid running into a hard male chest. I looked up and found myself staring into the surprised face of Zach dela Rocha.

"Miss Strong," he drawled softly, glancing over my shoulder at my former dance partner. "Have I found you in need of rescue once again?"

Shane lashed out with his hand and caught me across the side of the face, sending me spinning to the hard sidewalk at his feet.

I smiled and shook my head. "Nothing I couldn't handle, *Señior* dela Rocha," I told him. "This time."

He smiled back and took my arm to lead me away from the dance floor. "Perhaps you will allow me to buy you a drink?"

"Actually I think I owe you one after our last meeting." At the intense look he gave me, I blushed. I had almost forgotten that he was a vampire and that his idea of a drink was totally different than what I'd had in mind. "A cocktail," I amended quickly. I almost missed the look of disappointment that crossed his face.

"I would be delighted, *niña*," he replied smoothly. "Although perhaps we could discuss the 'drink' at a later time."

As he held a chair for me to sit at an empty table, I gave some thought to what he'd said. Of course I'd never had any dealings with vampires before I'd met Zach, and I didn't know anyone who'd been bitten, but I was curious. "Are the legends true?" I asked softly.

He sat down next to me before answering. "Which legends would that be?"

I shrugged. Magic was more my forte, I'd never read much about vampires although I'd seen quite a few movies about them. "Please forgive my naïveté, but I don't know much about your kind," I told him. "I only know what I've seen in the movies. They make it look like a pleasurable experience."

He smiled. "It is for most," he assured me. "Many equate it with lovemaking."

"Then perhaps I'll simply take you at your word," I replied dryly. The last thing I needed was an emotional attachment to a vampire. After a moment's thought, I realized there was perhaps a way I could repay *Señor* dela Rocha for his assistance.

"Do you have a knife?" I asked softly. I could use a fingernail, but a blade was so much more impressive.

He looked at me in surprise. "Yes."

"Give it to me."

I saw interest and confusion warring in his eyes, but he handed the blade to me under the table. I reached for the glasses the waitress had placed before them and moved them closer to me. With a wave of my hand I emptied them, grateful for the dim lighting in the bar.

Looking down at the blade in my lap I ran the tip of a finger across the sharp edge. Even that simple movement sparked a memory in my mind.

Taking the athame that Malcolm had given me from its sheath I held it to the sky for a moment, feeling the power of the moon shining down upon us. I spoke words of power as I ran the knife across the palm of my hand.

Pushing the past away I glanced at my companions to see if they'd noticed the break in my concentration. I knew from the look Archie was giving me that he could smell the blood that welled to the surface of the wound, but neither seemed to have noticed my lapse. Carefully I squeezed a drop of blood into each glass before healing the wound.

Zach watched in what could only be awe as the glasses filled with a dark red substance. I passed the knife back to him under the table, then placed the glasses in front of them and raised my own in a toast.

"For your aide," I said softly. "May you never hunger."

Zach lifted the glass and held it to the light for a moment before bringing it to his lips. Archie was more conspicuous about it, staring at the glass and sniffing at the blood before drinking it quickly. I sipped at my own drink and smiled at the surprise on their faces.

"You are quite surprising, Miss Strong," Zach told me.

"Christina, please," I corrected him.

"Christina. And you must call me Zach," he replied.

"Zach," I agreed. "You will forgive my curiosity, but what brings a man like you to a place like this?"

He smiled and lifted his glass. "We hungered," he said simply.

I had to smile in return, although I did wonder how he chose his victims and where he took them to drink.

"Do not bother yourself with those questions, Christina," he warned me. "I cannot give away all my secrets. Some things are best left unknown."

I smiled at his words. "You are right of course. I will keep my curiosity to myself."

"I realize that you are quite proficient in magic," he said, keeping his voice low, "but how is it that you know that particular trick?" He lifted his glass slightly and the blood swirled, sending the dark aroma of blood into the air.

"I've learned a few things here and there," I said cryptically.

"Who have you learned from?"

I gave him a little smile. "I'm sorry, *Señior* dela Rocha, but I cannot give away all my secrets."

He nodded. "Would it surprise you to learn that we know of your mentor, Malcolm Robbins?"

Malcolm lifted his head and wiped his face, but the anguish in his eyes was terrible to see. He finally seemed to realize that he wasn't alone and turned into my arms.

My face shifted into the blank mask it always became when Malcolm's name was brought up.

"Nothing you have said has surprised me so far."

"When was the last time you heard from him?" he asked.

"Don't you know?" I challenged softly.

"We don't know everything, *niña*," he assured me with a smile. "The last time he was seen was in your company, at the funeral of a friend."

I looked up to meet Malcolm's eyes from across the room. He face was angry and I knew he was having a hard time controlling his rage. I tried to reason with him, but he cut me off with a powerful scream inside my mind. I felt the world spin around me.

"Christina?"

I was grateful that Zach had spoken my name. Sometimes when the memories surfaced I was swept away by them, and his voice had pulled me back from the edge of the vortex. This time. They were always worse when I drank or when I was in crowds. Tonight met both criteria.

I looked away, the horror of Lizzy's death sweeping over me once more. They say pain recedes in time, but thanks to Malcolm's curse that was not the case for me. I thought about the ones that had died every day, and every day I missed them more. Robert and Lizzy's deaths were the hardest for me to endure because my father had been behind both murders, but Marcus' death wasn't far behind.

Thinking about Robert brought tears to my eyes. What I wouldn't have given to see my brother again, to talk to him, to lean on him for advice. Just to hear his voice or feel his comforting arms around me would be heaven.

"Sorry," I murmured, forcing myself to dismiss the memories. "I haven't seen or heard from Malcolm in years, we didn't exactly part on good terms. The last time I saw him he tried to kill me."

Zach seemed surprised. "Why?"

"My father killed his girlfriend," I reluctantly explained. "Malcolm blamed me for it. When she died he went crazy, to my knowledge no other Verbena has seen him since."

"And you don't expect him to return, do you?"

I shrugged as if it didn't matter, although I suppose I wasn't anyone. "Not really. I can't imagine him showing up for a social visit."

"I suppose not," he agreed.

Sipping at my drink I made a pretense of watching the dance floor, but my mind was in the past.

When Malcolm swung the knife at me I somehow managed to get my arm up in time to protect my face and throat, but I was a little too slow to avoid the blow altogether. The blade embedded deep in my left forearm sending waves of pain shooting up my arm.

I screamed when he tried to pull it free, but the curved edge was caught between the bones in my arm. I looked down at the hilt and recognized the weapon; it was Lizzy's ceremonial dagger. I stumbled backwards pulling the dagger free from his hand and caught myself on the wall of the building behind me. I could hear voices and running feet coming toward us as Malcolm glanced in that direction before turning back to stare at me with eyes full of hate.

"Next time, child, you won't have your father's followers to save you." With a flourish of his cloak, he simply vanished.

A snapping sound brought me back to the present. I looked up to see Zach snapping his fingers in front of my eyes.

"Is something amiss?" he asked, concerned.

I tried to smile but I wanted to scream. "It is nothing, *Señior*." Idly my fingers moved to the spot on my arm where I still bore the scar from Lizzy's ritual knife. The spot itched although it had long been healed.

"It did not look like 'nothing'," he replied firmly. "You blanked out for nearly a minute."

"That long?" I knew the visions were bad, but I'd never had one last for so long.

His eyes stared into my soul. "You've had this happen before?"

"I've been having... well, flashbacks," I admitted reluctantly, looking away. "They happen at odd moments."

"You've had several tonight." There was no question in his voice.

"Alcohol and crowds seem to contribute to the problem," I confessed. "I know better, but—"

"But sometimes it is better to be alone in a crowd than alone by yourself," he finished.

I nodded. "Usually I can control them but I'm having a hard time tonight."

"Have you seen someone about them?" he asked politely.

My smile was grim. "It's not exactly something I can go to a doctor about. They'd probably put me in an asylum somewhere and throw away the key."

His kind eyes said he understood. "What of the elders of your tradition?"

"There is nothing they can do," I replied as calmly as I could. "The visions are a side effect from a recent seeking."

"Ahh," he murmured thoughtfully. "Will they fade in time?"

As much as I wanted to tell him they would, I didn't want to lie. "I doubt it."

"They have been getting worse," he guessed, or perhaps he was reading my mind.

I avoided a direct answer. "As I said, alcohol and crowds simply make them more pronounced." I didn't want to admit to anyone that there were times I couldn't control the visions. "But you did not come here to discuss my problems, *Señior*."

"Please, are we not friends?" he murmured. "Zach."

"Zach."

"What do you know of my kind?" he asked softly.

"Blood and sunlight," I replied with a shrug. "Wooden stakes, and sometimes crosses."

"Hollywood at its best, I'm sure," he murmured. "We are divided into clans, bloodlines. My clan began as magic users such as yourself. We have the ability to do magic, although not in the manner that you have."

I looked at him curiously. "I thought vampires were a secretive group. Why are you telling me this?"

He ignored my question. "You say they are flashbacks, Christina. They are memories then?"

"They are."

He glanced around as if making sure we wouldn't be overheard. "I may know of a way to eliminate your problem," he said softly.

"With your magic?" I prompted.

"Not exactly." He glanced around once more then reached across the table for my hand. "I would like you to meet with a friend of mine," he told me. "He may have a solution for you."

"Forgive me for my doubts, but what could he do that the elders of my kind could not?" I asked quietly.

"I am not at liberty to say," he replied. "If you met with him, he would explain everything to you."

Flashback

I put a hand to my forehead hoping to stem the tide of memories. Taking a deep shaking breath, I looked at Zach. "I hope you are right, *Señor*. I'm not sure how much more of this I can take."

He sat back, an unreadable look on his face. "Can I see you home, Christina?"

I glanced around for Paul, but he was nowhere to be seen. "I would be grateful," I agreed. "My ride seems to have disappeared, and you already know where I live."

Desperate Measures

So cast out your fears, they're ever near
So much can change with a single kiss
Incubus Succubus - Vampires

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

Zach called me shortly after nightfall the following evening. He'd made arrangements for me to meet with his friend the next night at a restaurant downtown. "It is formal, Christina. If you don't have anything suitable—"

"I'm sure I can come up with something," I assured him.

"*Bien*. I will pick you up at seven." He sounded almost as if he wanted to say something more, but in the end he simply said goodbye.

I pulled the evening gown from the back of my closet and looked at it for a long moment. Ned had liked the dress on me, and I'd almost burned it when he left. I hated to wear it now, but a few simple changes to the gown made it bearable.

Zach was at the door at precisely seven o'clock wearing a tuxedo. I think he was surprised that I was ready and waiting for him, but he hid it well.

"You have met my friend before," he told me. "He is Dougal Galloway, the gentleman who turned up just as we were leaving the scene."

"I remember," I assured him. "You honestly think he knows something that will help with the flashbacks?"

I looked around the restaurant, feeling a little uncomfortable in the evening gown. Zach cupped my elbow and led me toward an area that was shielded from view by a row of plants. As we got closer, I could see that Dougal sat alone at a table, sipping what looked like a dark red wine.

When we reached the table, he stood and gave me a small bow. "Miss Strong, so good to see you again."

I held my hand out to him and he raised it to his lips where he kissed the back of it in the old world style. He gestured toward one of the chairs, and Zach held it for me to sit down. To my relief Zach sat down as well, as did Archie. It wasn't that I didn't trust Dougal, I just wasn't keen on being alone with a vampire I'd only met once before.

"Has *Señor* dela Rocha told you why I wanted to meet with you?" Dougal began.

"No, sir," I said softly.

"I thought it best if you explained," the Spaniard told him. "I do not know your reasons, nor do I have your charm."

I smiled, finding it hard to believe that anyone would have more charm than Zach.

"If you would give us a moment alone," Dougal said to him.

"Of course."

A moment later both Archie and Zach were gone, and misgivings were filling my head once more.

"You have no need to fear me," Dougal told me softly.

I met his eyes for the first time since I'd sat down and read the truth within them. I relaxed.

"You once said you had lost more than you cared to remember, Christina," he said softly. "Did you mean that?"

I looked away, unable to meet his eyes as visions of Marcus and Robert flitted across the inner screen of my mind. I longed to forget the pain of their deaths and the loss of my son. "Yes."

"If you are serious I can help you forget."

I was surprised for the first time since I'd sat down at the table. "How? Some kind of mind magic?" I asked skeptically. "I'm sorry, but I've tried that."

"Mind magic can be temporary at best," he said sympathetically. "Memories have a tendency to return at the most inopportune time. But I'm not speaking of mind magic; I'm speaking of something permanent and irreversible."

My interest was sparked. "What is it you speak of?"

He took a sip from his glass and I realized that it held not wine, but blood. "Are you aware of how one becomes a vampire?" he asked.

While vampire lore was not my specialty, I'd seen more than my share of horror movies. "Through an exchange of blood at the point of death."

"That is correct," he said with a smile, almost as if he were pleased that I knew the answer. "When my sire embraced me, I lost all memory of my mortal life. In nearly a century I have never regained it. My sire, may God rest his soul, lived four centuries and was never troubled with memories from prior to his embrace."

I watched him as he spoke, trying to figure out what his memory loss had to do with me.

"I have sired several children, and only one has regained his memories," he continued. "Only a deep and abiding love can return memories to one of my bloodline. Is there someone in this world you love in that way?"

I thought back over my life, of the brief time I'd spent with my mother and the slightly longer time I'd had with Robert. Marcus had been in my life for three years, but he was dead now, lost to me. I couldn't honestly say I'd loved Ned, and when he'd left me I'd lost all affection I'd once felt for him. I hadn't known my child long enough to have loved him that deeply. Of all the people I could remember, I thought perhaps Robert was the one I'd loved best.

"Your brother perhaps?" he prompted as if reading my mind.

Robert grabbed my shoulders in a bruising grip. "I promise nothing will happen to me, Tina, but you have to be safe."

"My brother is dead," I said in an emotionless voice.

"I'm sorry," he told me kindly. "I merely wish to find out if you felt love for anyone strong enough to lift the blockage my blood might cause for you."

Once again I stared at him in shock. "You're talking about making me a vampire?"

He nodded. "While I admit there are some drawbacks to becoming one of us, I believe for you the good would far outweigh the bad."

"You mean the loss of my memory."

"I do. You've said you have lost more than you care to remember, Christina," he reminded me reasonably. "By accepting the dark gift I offer, you will be able to forget the pain and loss of your past."

How tempting his offer was. I'd never expected to find peace short of a mortal death that I had no hope of surviving. Dougal was offering to give me life beyond death, a life without memories of a past that haunted me every minute of every day.

"What are the drawbacks?" I asked softly.

Taking another sip from his glass, he sat back in his chair and met my curious gaze. "Blood, for one. Legend is correct that we need blood to survive. Sunlight and fire can destroy us, as can beheading. The day is lost to us and the night becomes our home."

"What about magic?" My gifts were important to me, I'd fought long and hard to earn them and I didn't want to face eternity without them, even if I never remembered what it was like to do magic.

"I won't lie to you," he said gravely. "The magic you have now will cease to exist. That does not mean that you will not have the ability to do magic, only that it will change."

"What do you mean?"

When he glanced at my glass of wine it rose in the air and moved toward me. "My clan is one of the few that has magic as one of its natural disciplines. The first among us was a mage, and we have continued to practice magic through the ages."

The book lifted out of my hands putting an abrupt end to my reading. It floated across the room while another book settled in my hands. I looked at Malcolm in surprise.

Dougal seemed to be expecting me to take the glass so I did and sipped at the cool wine it held while wondering how my embrace would benefit him. He was offering to make me forget the past sacrificing only my life. If I forgot my past I wouldn't remember the sunlight or the day to miss them. Magic would still be available to me. As far as blood went I was used to working with it in many ways for my own purposes.

"You may wonder what is in this for me," he said softly, once again guessing what I was thinking.

"Are you reading my mind?" I asked warily.

"I can," he admitted, "but this question is written on your face. I expected you to wonder why I offer you the gift of forgetfulness."

"I do."

"Father Roger Strong is a member of an organization that calls itself the Society of Leopold," he told me. "My kind calls it the Inquisition, for that is what it truly is."

"I have heard it called the same," I admitted. "I have known for many years that my father was among their numbers."

"If you know this, why do you still consort with him?" He looked genuinely confused.

"Mr. Galloway, regardless of what my father has done, he is still my father," I told him. "I show him only what he wishes to see, and hide what he most fears."

"Your magic," he replied with a smile. "You are quite talented, my dear."

I wasn't sure how much he knew about my abilities, but I nodded my thanks.

"Did you know that your father has some forty kills to his name?" he asked.

I hadn't known the exact number, but since I had known that my father was a killer I nodded. "Among them my brother."

"And your mother," he added softly.

"Father Strong?" Lady Snowfalcon thought for a moment, then sighed. "There were rumors that he was involved with the Inquisition when your mother died, and again when your brother passed on."

Looking down I studied the tablecloth for a long moment, hoping to hide the surprise and the rage in my eyes. "It seems you know more about my background than I gave you credit for."

"We have had our eye on Father Strong for many years," he admitted. "For decades we have searched for a way to bring his killing to an end. We have tried to reason with the man, but—"

"There is no reason in my father when it comes to what he calls evil, Mr. Galloway."

"Evil must be punished, wherever it lies," Papa told me. "Whatever form it takes." His voice never changed, it sounded like he was talking about the weather instead of murder.

"Dougal, please."

"Dougal." As I studied his eyes I lightly scanned the surface of his thoughts. He was difficult to read, but not impossible. "You have tried to reason with him and he has rejected any offer of peace," I said after a few minutes. "He has probably even killed one envoy, maybe more. You want to strike at him where you feel he is the weakest."

"Your father may have his faults, but he does love you," he admitted. "Your disappearance would devastate him."

"I would never do anything to hurt you, Christina," Papa promised, his eyes begging me to believe his words. "But I want you to stop seeing Malcolm," he added firmly. "Stop learning about magic."

I raised an eyebrow at Dougal. "And you expect me to go willingly to the embrace knowing that?" I asked in surprise. "How do you know I won't go straight to my father and tell him everything?"

His smile told me he had never entertained such a ridiculous idea. "Now you know what we stand to gain, Christina, and so now I ask if you will agree."

"Would I stay with you after my embrace?"

I thought I saw a shadow pass behind his eyes, but it was gone too quickly for me to be sure. "No," he told me. "There is one among us who would take you in and teach you all that you would learn about our clan and our society. He is of high standing in his city, and would welcome taking on an apprentice."

"But you would not."

"I have an apprentice, my dear," he said not unkindly. "He keeps me quite busy."

Cormac, that was the man's name, the one who had helped Luke fight Russell. Something about the night of his embrace was painful for Dougal to remember, something about a girl. As soon as I touched the thought I felt his mental shields lock down and I lost all contact with his mind.

"How do I know you are telling me the truth?" I demanded. "You could tell me anything now, and I could find myself undead with my memories intact."

"Christina, if I wished to, I could take you here, now," he told me with a hard undertone to his words. "I could force you to become one of us and nothing, not even your magic, could stop me."

Warily I glanced at the other patrons, wondering if he would in fact do what he threatened in front of these witnesses.

"Relax, my dear," he soothed. "It is not my wish to embrace you against your will. If it were, you would already be one of us. If you chose not to take the gift I am offering, you are free to go. Get up, walk out of the restaurant, and you will never hear from any of us again."

Part of me thought that was the best idea I'd heard all night, but in the end I kept my seat. If he were going to hurt me he'd have done it already. What he was offering me was something I'd never be able to get from anyone else.

"When?" I asked softly.

"A few days, perhaps a week," he replied. "We need some time to make the final preparations, and I'm sure you would like to get your things in order."

"How?"

He seemed to know exactly what I was asking. "We would like you to simply walk away from your mortal life without leaving any clues. You will tell no one of what is going to happen. You will have a few days to settle things without revealing your plans. *Señior* dela Rocha will call you when the time is at hand. He will tell you where to go, and you will be taken to another location where you will become one of us."

I stared down at the tablecloth for a long time, thinking about my past. I wondered if my mother would have approved of what these vampires proposed. I knew that Malcolm would not have. The Verbena way of magic was too important for him to ever accept anyone giving it up willingly. Marcus would simply have wanted me to do whatever made me happy.

Briefly I wondered what my son would say if he knew what I was contemplating, but then I realized that he would never know. I had covered my tracks too well for anyone to find me short of magic, and it would be years before he was old enough for that, if he ever actually Awakened at all.

If Robert were still alive I could have asked his advice. He would have listened to my point of view and given me the best advice he could have come up with. He would have accepted my decision with a hug and wished me happiness. But Robert was dead had to make this decision alone.

Finally I straightened my spine and looked him in the eye once more. "Yes," I said firmly, without reservation.

Dougal smiled. "Very good, my childe. I think you will find that you have made the right decision."

I returned his smile with a wry one of my own. "If I haven't, at least I won't remember making the decision, right?"

"You are quick witted," he told me approvingly. "I can see why Robbins chose you for his student."

Malcolm's grin turned into a smile. "Yes Tina, I can answer your questions. I can teach you all you need to know about our kind, about what you are feeling, about your gifts. Do you accept my offer to mentor you?"

I felt my smile freeze on my face. "Perhaps it would be best if we did not bring him into this, Dougal. After all, he is one of the things I would like to forget."

He nodded. "I am sorry, I wish to ease your pain, not cause you more of it." He glanced in Zach's direction, and the vampire immediately stood to make his way back to us, Archie trailing in his wake. "Miss Strong has agreed to our proposal," Dougal said as the others joined us. "She will be waiting your call."

"*Muy bien,*" Zach drawled, smiling down at me. "You will not regret your choice, my dear."

I nodded, hoping he was right. Dougal stood, signaling an end to our interview, and I left the restaurant with the men I'd come with.

I was quiet on the way back to my apartment. Zach didn't try to fill the silence with small talk, he simply left me to my thoughts and for that I was grateful. My mind was spinning with a list of what I needed to do before I disappeared, and how to do them without revealing I'd planned to walk out of my life.

Zach spoke only when he came to a stop in front of my building. "You must be careful, *niña,*" he cautioned me. "You must not say goodbye to anyone, you must not give warning of what you plan to do."

"I know," I replied softly, looking up at the windows of my apartment. "If Papa thought I planned to disappear he would move heaven and earth to find me."

"If you need my assistance, I will be more than willing to help," he offered.

I turned to smile at him. "I think I can manage, Zach, but thank you."

He simply nodded graciously.

"And thank you for bringing me this opportunity," I added sincerely. "It's been a long time since I had hope of—" My voice broke, and he reached over to cover my hand with his.

"There is no need for you to speak of it," he told me gently. "The embrace will help you to forget, and will strengthen my clan. There is no need of gratitude between us."

"Perhaps it would help my nervousness if I knew more about your kind," I suggested softly, my heart pounding at the thoughts racing through my mind.

He studied my face in the dim light. "What do you mean?"

I glanced around at the cars and streetlights that surrounded us. "Perhaps if you came up we could speak of it in private."

After a moment he nodded, then glanced back at Archie. "Stay here," he told the man. "I will return shortly."

Archie didn't seem to like the idea of Zach going off without him, but he didn't argue. I got out of the car and Zach did the same, following me up the path to my ground floor apartment. I unlocked the door and walked into the dimly lit room, nervousness making my hands shake.

"I want you to feed from me," I said bluntly.

He stared at me in surprise. "*Por que?*"

"I want to know what its like," I explained nervously, rubbing the palms of my hands on my thighs. "I can't do it until... after, but you can show me what it's like."

The tension left his body in a rush and he took a step toward me. "Are you sure this is what you want, *niña?*" he asked softly. "You will not remember it once Dougal has turned you."

I met his gaze without flinching. "I know."

"You are leery of Dougal, no?" he said suddenly. "If you are afraid that he will hurt you, I can assure you—"

"Has he ever bit you?" I asked dryly. At the look on his face, I guessed that he hadn't. "Then do not assure me with your words, Zach. Feed from me. Put my fears to rest."

"Has anyone ever told you that you are impetuous, *niña?*" he drawled with a small smile.

I laughed. "Always, *Señior dela Rocha.*"

"I hope that our clan will teach you caution, Christina," he told me as he walked toward me. "The Tremere do not always tolerate those who do not follow the rules."

"It is important to know when to follow the rules," I assured him as he led me to the couch. "It is also important to know when to break them."

We sat down together, and I could see anticipation burning in his eyes. He brushed my hair behind my shoulder and away from my neck, his eyes staring at the pulse point with blatant hunger. To my surprise, I wasn't frightened of what he was going to do; I wanted it almost as much as he seemed to.

"This is your last chance to change your mind, *niña,*" he said softly, watching my throat.

How could I spend eternity feeding from others if I couldn't face the thought of Zach feeding from me? I tilted my head to give him better access to my neck. "I am ready, *señior.*"

Slowly he leaned closer to me and I met him half way. I felt the cold touch of his lips on my skin for a split second before I felt the drag of his teeth. Gently he pushed his fangs into my flesh and instead of the pain I'd expected, pleasure ran through my body. I couldn't stop from gasping and reflexively I put a hand on the back of his neck to pull him closer.

Contentment poured through my veins leaving me weak. I knew if he kept drinking I could die, but I never wanted him to stop. With but a thought I filled my body with blood once more, letting him take his fill.

Finally he eased his teeth from my skin and ran his tongue lightly across the wounds on my throat. Instinctively I tried to use magic to heal them, but to my surprise there was no break in my skin. He pulled away just enough to look into my eyes.

"Will you always surprise me, *niña*?" he whispered.

"I will always try, Zach," I promised with a languorous smile.

He frowned and eased me back against the cushions, suddenly all business. "Remember what I have told you about saying goodbye," he warned me. "Everything must appear normal until the minute you disappear."

"I know," I told him once again. "I will be careful, I promise."

"I must go. My very presence in your apartment endangers our plan." He stood and headed for the door. "I will call you when everything is finalized."

"Zach," I called softly, stopping him with his hand on the doorknob. He turned to look at me, his face unreadable. "Will you be around," I asked, "afterward?"

"I don't think so, *muchacha*," he said regretfully, turning toward the door.

I sat up, surprised and a little hurt by his answer. "Why?"

"I will miss you," he said simply. "It will be easier to miss you in your absence than it would be to miss you in your presence."

"Do you think I will change that much?" I asked, concerned.

"No, *niña*," he assured me, looking at me once more. "But it would hurt me to look in your eyes and not see me there." Without another word he turned and walked out the door, closing it softly behind him.

I watched in silence, for after all there was nothing I could say. We might have been friends, Zach and I, if things had been different. We might even have been more, but now we would never know.

Point of No Return

The sky is alive with anticipation
Another soul will join them tonight
Incubus Succubus — Vampires

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

When the phone rang at midnight I answered it absently, still concentrating on my homework. Zach's voice threw me for a moment. "It is time, *niña*," he said simply.

"Now?" My voice shook, and it took an effort for me to stay calm.

"Tomorrow," he replied soothingly. "You must be at the Oakland International Airport at four thirty in the afternoon. Come to the United Airlines terminal, there will be a private jet waiting and the pilot will be expecting you. I will join you after sundown."

"Where are we going?"

"No questions, *muchacha*," he advised me. "Once you have become one of us the whys and wherefores will not matter."

For a moment I thought about the classes I would be missing and what clothes I needed to pack before I realized that none of that mattered. Tomorrow I would walk away from my life and once Dougal embraced me I would never remember that Christina Strong had ever existed.

"You are right, of course," I conceded. "I will be there."

"Good," he replied. "*Hasta mañana*."

"Tomorrow," I repeated softly.

When the three o'clock bell rang signaling the end of my English class, I picked up my books and made my way out of the classroom. As I stopped to speak briefly with a few of my friends, I found it difficult not to say the word 'goodbye' to them. For years I'd made a point not to use the word, hoping that not using it would keep death away from my friends. If I started using it now, someone might get suspicious. I limited myself to a few 'see you later's and made my way to my car.

For a long moment I studied the Mustang, knowing that this would be the last time I drove it. I put the top down and sat my books in the back seat, then headed away from the college. I drove through town for a little while not wanting to go to my apartment. I let the wind blow through my hair and the sun shine on my face, enjoying the sensation for the last time.

Finally it was time for me to head to the airport. I drove slowly, taking my time and savoring the last moments of light on my face. I sitting at a red light just thinking I would have to hurry to make the plane when I was jolted by a car hitting mine from behind.

Even before I got out and looked at the damage, I knew it wasn't bad. The problem was that I didn't have time to talk to the police, and I really didn't want a police report on record that told exactly what I was doing on my last afternoon of life. With a coaxing smile I turned to the other driver and made her believe that this accident was not her problem. Moments later she was driving away, unconcerned about the car she'd struck only minutes before.

The accident made me realize how badly I wanted to make the plane Zach had arranged for me. I pulled the car into a nearby convenience store and went in to use the rest room. A moment later I was in another rest room, this one in Oakland International Airport.

Listening quietly to make sure that I was alone, I wrapped a veil of magic around me. It was similar to the one I'd used a few minutes earlier, but was more general and so worked on more people. No one saw me walk through the airport lobby, no security guard watched me walk through the metal detectors, no passengers noticed me striding down the length of the terminal.

Moments later I had found the gate my plane was waiting at. I stepped behind a sign and dropped the cloak of magic I'd been wearing to approach the pilot who was waiting near the door. Once I'd identified myself, he led me down the walkway and into the waiting plane.

Blast the Past

A voice that says 'Come with me'
'And I'll set you forever free'
Incubus Succubus — Heartbeat of the Earth

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS NOT FINISHED AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE SOME CONTINUITY TO THE STORY.

Dougal opened the door and motioned for me to enter before him. It was a charming motel room, really lovely. The canopied four-poster bed that sat against the far wall was covered with a beautiful lace coverlet. Candles were burning on the fireplace mantle and on a table to my left. The windows were open letting the warm night air drift gently into the room.

A thin willowy man stood near the fireplace waiting impatiently for us. Something about his eyes told me I shouldn't trust him even though I knew that Dougal did. I hadn't liked the idea that a stranger would be here tonight, but at least I'd known about his presence before we arrived.

"Come, child," the vampire who would soon take my life said softly. His face was kind, and he reminded me quite a bit of my mother's younger brother, Joshua. "Sit down."

I sat on the edge of the bed, wondering for the first time if I was doing the right thing. Becoming a vampire meant giving up so many things, but they were nothing compared to all that I had already lost, everything that I had given away. Resolution burned strong in my mind and I knew that I honestly wanted nothing more than to forget my past.

Dougal sat beside me and took my hand. "I know you're nervous," he said gently, his voice easing my apprehension. "You have no reason to be. Once this is done you will have no memory of what has happened here tonight."

"I know," I replied, my voice hardly above a whisper.

I looked down at the bracelets on my wrist that my brother had given to me so long ago. One was an ID bracelet and had my name etched beautifully into its surface. The other was a charm bracelet that had once belonged to my mother. The bracelets were the only reminders I had left of the brother I had missed every minute of every day since his death at our father's hands.

"You are sure you want to do this?" he asked not unkindly. "Your past will die here in this room and you will never regain your memories."

I was grateful that he was giving me the opportunity to change my mind, but I knew that wasn't what I wanted. I closed my eyes and focused one last time on the power Malcolm had once taught me to draw upon, savoring its feel within me. I released it and met his questioning gaze with no further hesitation. "I am sure, Dougal. I have so many things I want to forget."

"Then let us begin," he said with a gentle smile.

He put his hands on my shoulders and slowly laid me back on the bed. It felt strange to have him this close to me, to feel his hands on me like those of a gentle lover. I felt his cold skin brush mine as he leaned closer still and sank his sharp teeth into my throat.

I'd expected pain, but I was surprised by the serenity that swept through me. It had been a long time since I'd felt any kind of peace, so long time since I'd felt safe in the arms of a man. Marcus had once made me feel that way, but no one else had ever come close.

Ruthlessly I closed the memory of my first lover out of my mind. Marcus was dead, Malcolm had killed him. Marcus, Malcolm and Lizzy were only a few of the things I never wanted to think about

again. To clear my mind, I began to chant, willing my mind to empty. "Isis, Istarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna..."

Dougal drained the blood from my body and my heart began to slow its pace. He'd explained what this would be like, but actually feeling myself dying was much different than hearing how it would happen. I found it difficult to breathe but refused to fight for breath. "Pan, Poseidon, Dionysus, Cernunnos, Mythros, Loki, Apollo..."

I clenched my fists on the lace coverlet so that I couldn't try and push my murderer away. I reminded myself that I had asked for death and it was far too late to turn back now. "Isis, Istarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna..."

My whispered voice was barely audible in the silent room. "Pan, Poseidon, Dionysus..."

As the last breath left my body, I said goodbye to the light and welcomed the darkness that closed in on me.