

# Airborn

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

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If I had to pick my favorite way of going home, I wouldn't choose the one I was traveling now. It would be more fun to come home for Christmas -- where I could look forward to spending time with my twin sister and my parents, and the emotional atmosphere would be hey, let's have fun, let's do all the traditional things and enjoy each others' company. And afterward I could leave again, heading back to my own place.

Not like now. Scooting up Oregon back roads in my tiny antique Honda, I had most of my independence squirreled around me; my clarinet case bumped my heels whenever I took my feet off the pedals. I was going home in half-defeat. I had moved away from home at seventeen, finding an apartment in Spores Ferry, a major town an hour away from the small town of Atwell where I grew up. I wasn't even eighteen yet, and I had to move back to my parents' house.

I had made a promise to the powers of air that I would learn about them and become their disciple if they helped me through something I couldn't have survived myself, and they had delivered. The teacher I needed lived in Atwell.

So: I was on my way home, on my way back to school.

Cultivated fields spread out from the road, their green skirts bordered by woods. I slowed at the top of Sourgrass Hill to look at the Crooks Farm produce stand. It was autumn, and fruits and vegetables were ripe. Maybe I should bring Mom some apples as a hostess gift. It would reinforce my guest status in the house where I had grown up, be a pledge that I planned a visit, not a lifetime.

A man stood beside the road, his thumb out. He wore moccasins, dusty leather pants, and a fringed leather jacket. A beat-up narrow-brimmed hat sat low on his head. His scraggly dark hair came down to his shoulders, and his face, as tanned as the leather he was wearing, made his pale green eyes look like lights at night. He stared at me and I heard a whisper of music in my mind, the faint squeal of a fiddle. I felt sparks traveling along my muscles. My hands gripped the steering wheel tighter, turned the wheel toward the man.

I shook my head, pulled myself together, and drove on, without stopping for apples or the hitchhiker. What had I been thinking? There was no room in the car. Besides, the guy gave me the creeps. He looked too much like a maniac from stories after lights-out at camp.

In the rear-view mirror I saw a big gold car pull over. The leather man climbed into the back without even speaking to the driver.

I picked up as much speed as I could. Whispers sounded around me, but I couldn't make out the words. If I had my air powers already, maybe I could have strengthened the voices so I would know what they were talking about.

The big gold car passed me on an uphill climb, and I saw those pale eyes in that dark face staring out the rear window at me. They burned their image into my mind so that I kept seeing them even after the car was out of sight over the hill.

\* \* \*

Atwell hadn't changed since the spring, except the leaves on the maples along Main had grown bigger and turned a darker green, and the movie showing at the Cinemart was different.

When I reached my parents' street, everybody's cars were gone from the driveway of our white one-story house. Mom was probably clerking at the flower store where she worked; Dad worked nights at the local two-star restaurant, and might have been home at noon on a Saturday, but he wasn't; there were lots of places my twin sister Terry might be.

I got out the key I'd taken off my key ring for four months of freedom in Spores and unlocked the door.

The smells of burnt toast, fabric softener, and dust greeted me, whispering that there was no escape from home. Still standing on the front stoop, I closed the door, took a deep breath of outside air, and opened the door again, looking at our front hall. There was the occasional table with its stack of opened and discarded mail, and the coat rack so deep in coats it looked like a hugfest, with Terry's tennis racket peeking out between hems. Everybody's winter boots and duck shoes stood in an orderly line against the wall. Mom was preparing for the rains early. The skittery brown runner carpet lay there on the hardwood floor, waiting to slip out from under the unwary.

Carrying my purse and my clarinet, I stepped over the threshold. This didn't look like the house of a powerful witch (my sister) or even a halfway witch (me). I wondered if Mom and Dad had figured out about that yet. When Terry and I were cursed with witchcraft by a semi-benevolent ghost on our twelfth Halloween, we had agreed without even discussing it not to tell Mom and Dad. We practiced in private. When we found our mentor, Natalya Clayton, we told our parents we had joined Adopt-a-Grandmother to explain why we spent so much time at her house. We called Natalya Gran to help maintain the fiction. Our parents never even figured out Natalya was the principal of Atwell Middle School -- they weren't big on PTA meetings or Open House or Family Night. Later, when we went out at night a lot, Mom and Dad didn't say much. But then, they had never kept a very close eye on us.

I went on through the kitchen, glancing at the stack of dirty dishes clustered around the sink. I checked my power reservoir. I had been practicing channeling lately, inviting power to come to me, welcoming it, storing it, taking it out to stroke so that we would get to know each other and work well together. A fraction of it, a little white dart of power, would clean those dishes and put them away.

On the other hand, I should start as I meant to go on; none of those dishes were mine. I went through the laundry room to the servants' quarters, two little rooms in the back of the house just big enough for a bed, bedside table, and a dresser each, with a shared closet in the middle. Terry had the right room, and I had the left. When we were little, we had borrowed each other's clothes until we didn't know what belonged to whom; by the time we reached ten, though, we had sorted ourselves out. She turned tomboy and I went Laura Ashley.

When I saw Terry two weeks before in Spores, she had changed again, wearing stylish clothes in strong single colors. Her short dark hair had been cut by a professional instead of by her standing in the bathroom and checking it out in the mirror as she went, or by me, same place, with her growling at me every time I tried something fancy. I still had long dark hair which I curled, and was still wearing ruffly things with little flowers all over them, and I felt stupid. When I saw kids my age on the street I felt like a visitor from another time. I felt I was ready for neon, but it was hard to redefine myself.

My room still had its orange and yellow butterfly kite hanging from the ceiling, its ribbon tail tacked in swirls across the wall. From the dust on my dresser, I could tell nobody had been in there since I left.

I put my clarinet and my purse on the dresser. I opened the window, which looked out on the back patio, Dad's rusty barbecue, the lawn, and the stained wood fence around the yard. I held my hands out, palms up, and said, "Powers of air, I welcome you. I invite you. Be with me in this place."

A breath of air blew across my palms.

"Thank you," I said. I sat on the bed, closed my eyes, and thought about my power reservoir. I released a tiny dart of power, instructing it to chase away the dirt and dust in the room and leave everything smelling like sunlight on morning grass. Unlike the dishes, my room was my responsibility. When I opened my eyes the room was cleaner than it had ever been before. The butterfly kite sparkled like sunrise above me.

"See, Tasha? That wasn't hard, was it?" said Terry from the threshold.

I jumped about a foot. "Where'd you come from?"

"I was studying in my room."

"But your car -- "

-- is in the shop. Oil change. I thought you weren't getting in till about three."

"It didn't take as long to pack as I thought it would."

"Not if you only brought your clarinet," she said, and grinned. "Did your boyfriend help?"

"Not during the day."

"I forgot."

I gripped one hand in the other, remembering saying goodbye to Danny in my Spores Ferry apartment just before dawn that morning. He had said, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes," I told him.

A breeze had sneaked in and lifted a strand of my hair. I held up my hand and felt the spiral touch of a tiny whirlwind. "You see? Already I have friends."

He reached out and the whirlwind brushed his fingers. His eyebrows rose. "Well, okay," he said, "but I'm saving the apartment for you."

I hugged him hard. "Wherever I am, you're welcome," I said, letting formality touch my voice. I wanted to make it a binding invitation for both of us.

"Atwell may be out of my range."

"We have a nice dark basement."

"Heh," he said, his eyes laughing. Then he sat up. "The day is troubling my blood," he said. "I have to go." He kissed me, turned to mist, and flowed out my window, seeping down the side of the building and into his basement apartment, where he would sleep the sleep of death all day.

I had stood in the middle of my apartment after he left, thinking. At ten, I had been sure there was magic in the world, but I had never seen any. At eleven, I wasn't so sure anymore. At twelve, I had met that ghost.... After that, everything went wild. It was difficult for me to see the world as flat, understandable, predictable, the way I almost had at eleven. Now, every time I looked hard at anything, it turned surprising.

I had looked at Danny a lot.

Packing, I had taken only half my things. The apartment stayed mine; my landlord had told me so.

I had come home in half-defeat, half-victory, because I still had my own place, away from home.

"I'll help you unload the car," said Terry.

We went outside and fished things out of my car. "Oof," said Terry, scraping her side as she pulled a book box out from behind the seat. "This job could be a lot easier."

"Not if we want to maintain a low profile in this neighborhood," I said, lifting out my Rabbit Track Maranta plant by its hook. That was one of our teacher's basic principles: keep your craft quiet.

Terry rubbed her side and smiled at me. "Just checking." She stacked one box on another and carried them into the house.

"Checking what?" I yelled after her.

One of our neighbors walked by, a golden retriever on a leash dragging him.

"Whether you're practicing your disciplines," Terry yelled back. I held the plant above the dog's nose range and patted him. The neighbor smiled at me and moved on.

Terry and I unloaded the rest of my things in silence. We put everything on the floor of my room except my plant and my suitcase. The plant went on top of my sparkling clean dresser with my clarinet, and the suitcase I set on my bed. I opened it. "Have you been keeping the craft quiet?" I asked my sister.

Terry sat on the bed beside my suitcase. "Very quiet. I barely do anything at home anymore. Mom and Dad have been looking at me sideways lately. They keep wondering why you left. I guess Dad's feeling guilty because he never saw it coming, but then, who did?"

I wasn't sure even I had seen it coming. It had surprised me when I decided to leave home. I had never done anything without Terry before. But I had awakened one morning in my little room thinking that as soon as I stepped out my bedroom door Terry would be on my case about how I wasn't

practicing anything enough and did I want to be a halfway witch, what was wrong with me? The only place I felt comfortable and safe anymore was sleep.

And I had thought: I can go somewhere else. I can get away from this. I can.

Life spread out in front of me like a carrying sea, promising distances and treasures and places to go.

I went, and I was glad to go. It was the right thing to do.

I had to make coming back the right thing to do, too.

"So where do you practice?" I asked.

"I found a game trail that goes up the side of Owl Butte. For people without flashlights or nighteyes it's awfully hard to find after dark. I put a blur on it after I go up. It leads to a clearing halfway up the butte. I've put wards around the clearing -- no sign anybody else has been using it in the past twenty years -- and I work there. I'll take you tonight if you want."

"I'm not sure yet," I said, putting shirts, skirts, and dresses on hangers.

"Discipline," said Terry, nagging again already.

I frowned into the closet. I planned to be disciplined, but if she nagged me about it, I might, just to be perverse, resist. That wouldn't help me and my promise to air. Getting her to stop nagging would be hard, though; she had the habit. I shoved her clothes sideways on the bar in the closet, hung mine up, then collected myself and faced her. "I don't know what disciplines I'll be practicing yet. I have to see Gran."

"What do you mean?"

"I have a direction now," I said. "I've consecrated myself to the powers of air."

I emptied the rest of my suitcase's contents into dresser drawers, looked at my boxes, and sighed. "I think I want to go see Gran now," I said.

"I'll call," said Terry. She went to phone in the kitchen.

I studied myself in the mirror behind the plant on my dresser. My hair had wilted since the morning session with blow dryer and curling iron. I got a brush and an elastic band out of my purse, brushed my hair back, and fastened it into a ponytail. I studied the black eyeliner around my eyes. It brought out the blue, all right, but it made me look like I hadn't gotten enough sleep, which I hadn't. My skin was pale, which made my blusher stand out too much, and I'd fretted most of the lipstick off my lips.

I closed my eyes and called forth a tiny sliver of power, asking it to lift the makeup off my face. Heat kissed my cheeks, my eyes and mouth. I opened my eyes. Without eyeliner, mascara, and shadow, my eyes looked small and defenseless. I frowned with my pale lips, shook my head. Air probably wouldn't care what I looked like.

"She's expecting us -- " Terry said from the door, then paused, her eyes widening.

"What?"

"I just haven't seen you naked like that in a long time." Terry never wore makeup. Her lashes and eyebrows were thicker and darker than mine, and she had more natural color.

We were identical. How could she have more of something? Maybe she disciplined her way into it?

"Well," I said, and shrugged. "Let's take my car."

\* \* \*

Natalya Clayton lived in a big old house on the edge of town. It was painted slate blue and had a black roof and front porch, and all kinds of little gray knick-knacky bits here and there.

When we pulled up at Natalya's that Saturday afternoon, the house lay sleeping in the sun. The pre-settlement maple in Natalya's front yard towered above the house. Its leaves were still green; we were shy of the valley's first frost.

Natalya was in her front yard, spading up earth. She straightened when we got to the gate. Her black eyes were bright, and her silver hair, most of it in a bun, made a little haze around her head "Tasha, my dear," she said. She dropped her gardening gloves on the ground and came to hug me.

She was so small in my arms, warm as a bird, and strong. For a moment I hugged her with my eyes closed. When I opened them, I was looking toward the big maple, and I saw pale eyes looking back at

me. "Oh!" I said, releasing Natalya.

"What?" she asked.

"The Leather Man," I said, peering toward the maple. He had been standing beside the trunk, but now he was gone.

Natalya frowned. "Where did you learn that name?"

"Is that a name? I saw a man all dressed in leather, hitchhiking."

Her eyes widened. "Where?"

"On Sourgrass Hill." I should have bought fruit for Natalya, too. An apple for the teacher. "I almost stopped for him, but there was no room in the car. And... he was just there, but now he's gone again."

She looked toward the tree a long considering moment, then at me. "Just as well," she said. "Tasha, you've changed. There's order in you."

"I hope you'll accept me as a pupil again. I'm ready to learn and apply myself now."

"Let's have tea," she said, which was how all our lessons started. She led us into the house.

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"I think she's nuts," Terry told Natalya as we sipped hibiscus tea at the big brown table in the kitchen.

I took my last sip of tea and handed my cup to Natalya. She studied the leaves in the bottom. "No, she's correct," said Natalya. "She has been granted a boon, and she offers payment. All in alignment with the principles of order. Tasha, I don't know the special mysteries of the powers of air; I am a general practitioner. You must seek a guide."

"How many witches can there be in a town this size, Gran?"

"You might be surprised. But I'm not talking about a witch guide. You need a totem, an animal you can study and learn from. What you are proposing is one of the most severe disciplines possible -- not the craft, more like the priesthood. It will offer you different gifts and satisfactions from the ones you could have received if you had followed the craft."

I felt a sinking sensation in my stomach. She made it sound like this was going to be so strict. I wasn't good at strict. I had agreed to do this on my own. Nobody had suggested it to me. I had never even heard of someone doing it, actually, dedicating themselves to serving a power instead of learning the power and making it serve them.

I took a couple of deep breaths and felt stronger. "Gosh," I said. "Sometimes I wish I was eleven again." When Terry and I were eleven, we had been normal. Mostly.

"Beware of wishes," said Natalya.

"What if I fail? What if I flunk? This sounds so hard, Gran."

She gave me her widest smile. "Yes, child. The best possible thing for you, I think. I had given up hope, but now I feel hope renewed."

"Will it take the rest of my life?"

She lifted an index finger. "Don't look so far ahead. First enhance your relationship with air. Then consult with it. A direction will come to you when you work with your element."

"How can I, uh, enhance my relationship with air?" I said, feeling like laughing and crying. What could you do with air? Breathe it, right? If you were lucky, you couldn't even see it.

"Meditate. Focus. Seek to commune with air."

"I'm out of practice," I said. I had never been good at sitting and waiting for something to happen, and I was even worse at sitting and waiting for nothing to happen.

"Well, don't whine about it. Get back in practice."

I felt defeated. "Okay," I said. "What do I do first?"

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Terry told me the whole thing was silly all the way back to our house. I drove without responding to her. The box of incense Natalya had given me lay in my skirt pocket against my thigh.

"Honestly, Tasha, give it up," said Terry as I parked the car in front of the house. "You don't have the discipline to -- "

*Shut up*, I thought.

She choked and put her hand to her throat, then looked at me, her eyes wide. She struggled for breath.

*No!* I thought. *Forget that!*

She pulled in deep gasping breaths. She got out of the car without saying anything else and headed up the walk, not glancing back.

I sat behind the wheel of my car, wondering whether I should get out at all or just drive away. How could I do that to her?

How could I? I didn't know how to do anything like that. Maybe she just choked or something.

She was strong in her craft, a serious practitioner, with style and class. She wouldn't just choke. She wouldn't allow herself to.

I got out of the car, slamming the door behind me, and followed my sister into the house. "What happened?" I yelled.

"Don't talk to me." She vanished into her room, slamming the door.

I went into my room and put the box of incense on top of my dresser. There wasn't a calm system in my body. I didn't think I was ready to lie down and meditate yet. I went back to the kitchen and washed dishes by hand instead. Too bad about setting precedents; sometimes you just needed to do housework. I searched through the fridge and the cupboards to see what there was for dinner, and put together a salad and a tuna casserole.

Mom walked in while I was setting the table. "Oh, baby," she said, coming to kiss the back of my neck, a favorite target of hers. "It's nice to come home to you."

"Honestly?"

"Oh, yes! I've missed you."

"You had the good twin at home."

"Don't be silly," said Mom. She put a handful of roses she'd brought home into a vase, grabbed a wedge of lettuce from the salad bowl and munched on it. "Terry's the bad twin. What have you got in the oven? It smells good." She went and peeked. "Yum," she said.

"Where's Dad been all day?"

"All day?" Mom glanced over her shoulder at me, her eyebrows drawing together above her nose. "He was going to do some shopping," she said, her voice vaguing out. "He wants to build some shelves for the living room."

"Well, I got here at noon and he wasn't here, and then Terry and I went out for a while. Maybe he came back and got ready for work and left again."

"Mmm, could be," said Mom. "When is it dinner?"

"Half an hour," I said. I put a towel over the salad and stored it in the fridge.

"Is the bad twin home?"

"Uh huh. She's in her room."

"Are you fighting already?"

I looked at her, surprised.

"Well, if you guys were feeling good toward another, wouldn't you be working together, and talking twice as fast as a person can understand, the way you used to?"

"I guess we would," I said.

"What's the plan, now that you're back, anyway? Are you going to school? Would you get left back a grade, or just go on to senior year?"

"I only dropped out a month before the end of the semester," I said. "I don't really know." I wasn't sure how many hours a day my new discipline would take. It occurred to me that it wasn't something that would put food on the table, either, as far as I could tell. I would need other skills. "Maybe I should go

back to school. Mom, do you use anything you learned in high school in your daily life?"

"Not the geometry or the algebra," she said, getting out some crackers. "History, English, science, occasionally a little French, yes."

"Oh." Terry still had her half of the college money our grandmother had left us. I'd put a hole in mine, renting the apartment in Danny's building, and I should keep paying him rent if he was going to keep the apartment for me; otherwise that was lost revenue for him. If I finished high school this year, I could move back to Spores and go to college, for as long as I could afford to. Which, after another year's rent, might not be too long.

"Do you use anything you learned in college in daily life, Mom?"

"Yes," she said. She was slicing cheese.

"I need to make some money," I said.

"College can help you there, too," said Mom. "Have you figured out what kind of career you want?"  
If air and I had an enhanced relationship -- "Maybe I'll fly planes."

"Well, that certainly came out of the blue."

"Exactly," I said, grinning at her.

"Sit with me and tell me what's been happening with you," said Mom, putting a plate of crackers and cheese in the middle of the table. "Did you enjoy life in the big city?"

"Big city? Ha!"

"Okay, but what did you do?"

"Not very much," I said. "I set up my apartment. I tried painting, but I'm lousy at it. I walked around and looked at things. I went to yard sales. I checked a lot of books out of the library and read them. I went swimming in the river. I went to the country fair and the county fair. I sat in on a couple of courtroom sessions." I helped my friends solve a murder mystery, but that didn't seem like something I should tell my mother. "I have a boyfriend. If he comes up to visit, can he stay in the basement?"

"Well, sure," said Mom. We had a guest room down there. It was damp and dark, but it had a bed and there was a half bath.

"Thanks, Mom. His name is Danny and he works nights and sleeps days."

"Works nights at what?"

"Motel clerk."

She blinked. "Well, that's nice," she said. She looked out the window over the sink for a little while, then turned to me. "So what happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"You had this undemanding bohemian lifestyle all arranged, and you can't have spent all your money yet, unless there's something you're not telling me. What happened to change your mind? What brings you home? Not that I'm not glad to have you, but I *am* curious."

"You've never been curious before."

She looked at me with narrowed eyes, then grimaced. "Indulge me."

"There's something I need to study and I thought I could only study it here. I'll help around the house. I'll be quiet at night. I just need to be here for a while. Is that okay?"

"I told you on the phone. It's fine for you to stay as long as you like. If you reach age thirty-five I may start charging rent. Never doubt your welcome, Tasha. I'll keep your room for you. I might park a guest there once in a while, but it'll stay yours."

"Thanks, Mom." I got up and hugged her. What she said touched me more than I had expected it to.

"For goodness' sake, you're not even technically an adult yet, Tash. And people in my family, we're often late bloomers -- don't know what we're going to do with our lives until much later. I haven't settled on a career yet, and I'm thirty-eight. I mean, this is my seventh job in six years.... As long as I can afford to give you room, I'll do it." Her voice sank to a whisper. "Also, maybe you could figure out what's going on with Terry. She spends too much time in her room. Hugh's been calling her every evening, but she hasn't gone out with him in months."

"What? Jeeze! I thought they were the perfect couple."

"Something's burning," said Terry, standing in the doorway to the laundry room.

I let go of Mom and went to the oven. Only the edges of the casserole were too far gone to salvage. If Terry and I had been alone, we could have fixed it. If she hadn't mentioned anything, I could have fixed it before Mom noticed, or Terry could have. I wondered if she had said it out of spite.

"I guess it's dinner," I said to her.

"Good," she said, and sat down.

I put the casserole dish on a trivet on the table. The oven's timer began chiming. I glanced at the temperature setting, and it was right where it should have been. I turned the oven off, standing a little while with its heat moving up past my face, and thinking. Terry must have deliberately burned my casserole. Did she want to get back at me?

Maybe she needed an excuse to speak to me again after what had happened in the car. I had forgotten.

I sat at the table across from my sister. Her face was in neutral.

Mom dished up food for the three of us, the way she had when we were little. "How about a game of Ghost?" she said.

We made faces at her.

"Good enough," she said. "I'd rather you teamed up against me than sat there resenting each other."

"Oh, Mom," said Terry. She wrinkled her nose.

"I don't resent her," I said. "I just wish she'd stop telling me I'm silly and I have no discipline."

"I think that's her job," Mom said.

"Well, I'm firing her then." I turned to Terry. "You hear me?"

Terry nodded. "Besides, maybe I was wrong." She touched her throat.

Inside me I felt something that had been sitting there armed and poised to shoot relax. I took a big breath, and noticed--

The air tasted so strong. It carried the taste of burnt dinner and vinegar salad dressing and roses, and underneath that there was a power like cold fresh water. I drank the air, and its strength spread through me. I felt as if I had never breathed before. I stared wide-eyed across the table at my twin. She paused, a forkful of lettuce halfway to her mouth, and looked at me, then shook her head just the littlest bit.

I kept breathing, tasting air and dinner, the age of our house, the warmth of my mother and the many pollens she carried on her skin and clothes from working all day with flowers, ancient book dust Terry had brought into the kitchen on her fingers, the chill of white enamel from the sink, the heat still trickling from the oven, the ghosts of dirt that people had tracked into the house all year from their varied journeys, even my own dirt with a whiff of Spores Ferry and Danny's basement edging it.

"Aren't you going to eat anything?" Mom asked.

"I--" I said. "I'm not really hungry." Then I shook my head. That didn't make sense. I took a bite of salad. It didn't have very much taste -- not after the banquet I'd been tasting on the air. Besides, my stomach felt full, even though I hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast aside from a few cookies at Gran's house. "Maybe I'll have some leftovers later," I said. Maybe my stomach would come to its senses. "Mom, what did you do today?"

She told us about the flowers she had put together for a wedding.

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After dinner Terry volunteered to do the dishes and I went to my room. I closed and locked the door, then opened the window wide to the night and unlatched the screen. If I was going to have an animal teacher, I wanted it to be able to get to me.

I set a burning votive candle in a red glass on my bedside table. I put a brick of incense on a saucer and lit it, saying whatever came into my head, something like, "Air, I thank you for your gifts of safety, of food --" my stomach still hadn't growled, so I figured that somehow air had fed me-- "of life. I offer you this scent and hope it pleases you. Now I offer you myself." I lay on my bed, my hands crossed over my stomach. I drew in deep draughts of air. "I don't know how to work with you," I murmured, closing my



eyes. "I ask that you send me a teacher so that I can learn your mysteries and desires, the better to serve you. Grant me whatever it is right for me to have at this time."

I lay and breathed, tasting night grass and evergreens, car exhaust, somebody's barbecue, maple leaves, burning fields, river water. It was the meditation Natalya had suggested. Breathing. "Breathe in for a slow count of eight, hold it for a count of eight, and breathe out for a slow count of eight. Try to be conscious of how the air moves through you, in your blood, nourishing your body. Think thanks."

So I did that. At first I thought, this is taking a long time. Then I lost track of time, focused down on my breathing and counting. Presently I became aware of whispering voices near me, and a time after that I heard words they had probably been saying over and over. "Your totem is here," they whispered to me.

I opened heavy eyelids. Danny's face was just above mine, red light from the candle flickering across his features. He was smiling the gentlest smile I had ever seen. I lifted my hand and touched his lips.

"Missed you," he murmured against my hand.

For some reason I thought that was the most beautiful thing anybody had ever said to me. I lay and stared up at him for a while, feeling the strange unbreathing warmth of his face against my hand -- he only drew in breath when he wanted to talk -- and I started to notice something else about him, that air was mixing with his edges somehow, but before I could concentrate on that, I sat up, looking around, feeling alarmed. "Is there an animal here? Was there one when you came?"

"Just you," he said.

"I'm supposed to have a totem. Air told me." I glanced past him. In the red and white light of the candle all I saw was my kite, the thin gentle thread of smoke rising from the incense, and Danny, kneeling beside the bed.

He looked around too. "I'm not sure I understand."

I explained what Natalya had told me. "I'm supposed to study my totem and learn from it how to interact with the powers of air. Maybe it's a fly." I looked at the ceiling.

"I would know," he said. "There's nobody in the room but us. Although..." He glanced toward the closet. "Two doors away, somebody with a heat signature a lot like yours. Terry, I guess. And a couple rooms that way --" he pointed toward the laundry room and the kitchen beyond -- "someone else, a woman."

I put my hand on his shoulder, took a deep breath, tasting. Listening. "Your totem is here," whispered the voices. Air sifted in and out of Danny's body as though he weren't really solid.

"You're my totem," I said, and hugged Danny, who felt solid enough. "I get to study you! Finally, homework I like!"

"What?"

I let go of him and looked around. "What if he doesn't want to be my totem?" I asked the air.

The whispers had died away.

"Can I study you?" I asked Danny.

"Well. There are things about me I'd rather you didn't know."

"But those things don't have anything to do with air, right?"

"I don't even breathe most of the time. I think you got a bum steer. I've never been certain there was anything to this to begin with, Tash."

I didn't want to convince him the way I had convinced Terry. Come to think, that wouldn't work anyway. I took three deep breaths, trying to taste an answer. Danny had a spicy flavor, like dusty sage and moonlight. I could feel the strength of the air flowing through me, traveling all the roads of my blood. Air wrapped around me like armor, invisible but strong.

I lifted my hand, bending it back so that the inside of my wrist crowned. "Have you eaten yet?" I asked.

"Have you?"

"Uh huh." I had feasted on air, and I knew the taste of it was in my blood.

He sat beside me on the bed and lifted my wrist to his mouth. His lips were soft and warm against my skin. I didn't even feel the nip that broke the skin, but I felt his tongue tasting me, and the warmth of my bloodflow. I closed my eyes and relaxed, all my attention focused on the give-and-take. It felt good.

Terry couldn't understand this. She hated it. I didn't know how to explain. Such a hazy cloud of stigmata surrounded this kind of exchange; I couldn't fight my way past all the words. I just knew inside that it was all right.

Soon -- much sooner than other times we had shared blood -- Danny stopped and pressed his fingers against the little wound, halting the flow of blood his saliva had freed. "Tash," he said in a hushed voice, "it's so strong. It's so rich. It's enough. What happened?"

"It's air," I said. "Do you understand?"

"No," he said, "but I believe you now."

We sat in the flickering light a little longer, his arm around my shoulders, my hand gripping his, me breathing -- feeling the air support me, driving out the lassitude I usually felt after sharing blood with Danny -- and he silent. At last he took a breath and said, "I feel weird."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just weird." He turned his head. "The woman is coming."

I switched on the light on my bedside table. We both blinked. I blew out the candle. "Tasha?" said Mom's voice outside the door. "I thought I heard voices?"

I slipped out of Danny's arm and went to unlock the door and let her in. "Mom, this is Danny, my boyfriend I told you about."

"Oh, my," she said.

He stood up, pushed his heavy dark hair back of his shoulders, and smiled at her.

"Danny, my mom, Rebecca Dane."

Danny rubbed his hand on his black jeans and held it out. Mom shook it. "Please," said Mom, and swallowed, "call me Becky."

Mom had never had that nickname before. This was spooky. I imagined seeing Danny with Mom's eyes, and realized he was a little overwhelming, pale-skinned and beautiful, wiry and intense. He had told me once he thought high-voltage charm was part of the whole vampire package; they needed it to survive. It had stopped hitting me so hard, maybe since he knew I wasn't a threat, and he didn't have to charm me into feeding him,

"And it's nice of you to come visit," said Mom, swallowing again, "but I would appreciate it if you'd use the front door in the future."

"Okay," he said. "Nice to meet you, Becky."

Terry, rubbing her eyes, wandered in behind Mom. "Danny," she said. "Hi."

"Hi, Terry."

"This is meditation?" Terry asked me.

"Danny's my totem."

"Oh, boy," said Terry, "I wish I could dream up a scheme like that."

"What?" said Mom. "Terry, you know Danny?"

"Sure. I met him when I went down to Spores to visit Tasha a couple weeks ago."

"What does 'totem' mean?" Mom asked me.

"Danny's going to help me study," I said.

"That's not what I asked, Tash. Is this some new high school way of referring to something parents aren't supposed to know? What does 'totem' mean?"

"He's, like, my spirit guide in my study. In my quest."

"I don't like the sound of this," Mom said. She glanced at Danny, who was looking at me, eyebrows up.

"Mom, why are you being such a parent?" asked Terry. "I mean, why now? You never noticed anything we did before."

"Time I started, then." Mom's gaze flicked to Danny, then to me. "What, exactly, are you studying, Tash?"

"I'm studying air."

"Something you can't find in Spores?"

"Gran's helping me study it, and she lives here."

"And now Danny's helping you study it? And he lives... in Spores?"

"I'm confused too," I said.

Mom put her hands on my shoulders and stared into my eyes. "Tash, does this have anything to do with drugs?"

"Absolutely nothing. Zip. Zero."

"Promise, cross your heart?"

"I promise." I made an X across my chest with an index finger.

"Is this going to hurt your health?"

I shook my head.

"I mean, you didn't eat your dinner."

"Yes, but I'm okay."

"You're not on methamplifiers that suppress your appetite?"

"Mom!"

"Why would you want to study air? Why would you need a spirit guide to study air? Are you trying to put something over on me?"

I drew in breath, trying to taste answers. Somebody else's cooking was on the air. Danny stepped forward, touched my shoulder, looked past all of us toward the kitchen.

"Where is everybody?" asked Dad's voice from the kitchen.

"Out here," Terry called.

He was untying his bow-tie as he came into my room, which already had too many people in it.

"Tasha?" Dad said, blinking at me. "This is a surprise!"

"Hi, Dad," I said.

He eeled past Mom and Terry and gave me a hug. He smelled like heavily garlicked spaghetti sauce, and pepperoni; I savored the taste the air carried, felt it filling me again. I realized Danny had backed away from both of us. I looked over my shoulder at him. He pinched his nose.

Garlic, I thought. Powers of air. Can I take a scent out of me instead of taking it in? I took a deep breath, counting eight as I drew in air. I held it for awhile, imagining all the molecules of garlic gathering in it, and then I released it, a slow count, toward my wall and away from Danny.

"Are you okay?" Dad asked.

"Huh?" I felt garlic-free. I also felt ravenous. "Starving," I said. "Dad, this is my friend Danny, from Spores Ferry."

"Pleased to meet you, son," said Dad, holding out his hand. I thought about air deciding not to carry any garlic from Dad to Danny and watched them shake hands. Danny didn't even wince. I wasn't certain if that was because of my protection, or because his manners were too good for him to display discomfort. Dad said, "Why are you all having a pow-wow in Tasha's room? Wouldn't the kitchen make more sense?"

"Sure would," said Terry, yawning into the back of her hand.

My stomach growled. I thought about burnt leftover casserole or too-long dressed salad. Nope. A piece of bread, maybe. Toast.

I heard whispers riding the air, but there wasn't enough quiet for me to understand them. Mom, Terry, and Dad headed out the door. Danny gripped my shoulder. "What are you doing?" he whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"There are smells here, but they're avoiding me. I sensed the sulfur go into you and come out again."

"That's better, isn't it? You don't like it."

"What makes you think you need a guide on this quest? You seem to be handling everything just fine."

I turned and put my arms around him. "No," I whispered, "no, I've barely begun. I don't know what air wants from me yet. You must have something to teach me, too."

"Okay," he murmured, hugging me back. Then, "Your parents don't know about you and Terry?"

"Not a clue," I muttered to his chest.

"Kind of complicates things, huh?"

"It never used to matter. They were so wrapped up in each other we could do anything we liked.

Something must have happened."

"Tasha!" Mom yelled from the kitchen.

We went out and joined the others. I found some pretzels before I sat down. I was hearing whispers still, but I wasn't calm enough to decipher them.

"Cocoa?" Dad asked me, then glanced at Mom, Terry, and Danny.

"None for me, thanks," said Danny.

"I'm up for some," Terry said, and Mom nodded. I sat at the table eating pretzels and wondering when we could go to bed. The big question in my brain was whether Mom was going to pursue her uncharacteristic line of questioning. I had already told her the truth. I wondered whether I should come up with plausible-sounding lies instead.

"Danny, will you be spending the night?" Mom asked.

Dad, at the stove, turned and stared at her.

"It's a long drive back to Spores, and we do have a guest room in the basement," Mom continued.

"Tasha mentioned it. I think I had better go home tonight. Gotta work tomorrow night, and I need my rest in a familiar place. Right now I'm wide awake, though; these are my normal hours. I'll be fine to drive."

"In what way could you be a spirit guide for Tasha?" Mom said, puncturing my suspense about whether she was going to grill us anymore.

"I'm not sure. Maybe it has something to do with flying. Or weather. Those are the only subjects I can think of that I could help her with."

"What's spiritual about that?"

"I don't know." He glanced at me. "There's a lot we don't know yet."

Dad said, "For heaven's sake, Rebecca, why don't you ask them meaningful questions? Are you kids using protection?"

"Dad!" I yelled.

Terry almost fell out of her chair laughing. She laughed so hard she ended up coughing.

Dad stared at Danny right across Terry's laughter.

"We haven't exactly," Danny said, "gotten that far."

"Don't kid a kidder, son. I'm not blind."

Danny frowned and looked at me. I put down my pretzel and pulled in breath. Something had happened in the room, chasing all the taste of champagne bubble lightness out of it, cranking up the tension. "I promise you we're protected, Dad," I said, wondering if the metal edge of unease was just from parents who didn't want to think of their kids as sexual beings or from something else. I glanced at Mom. She tasted of the gentle salt of tears. I licked the air again, and got another faint taste from Dad, under all his own scents of Italian cookery, aftershave, flesh, fabric -- a whisper of perfume, not Mom's. Protection -- against what? I turned and stared into Danny's eyes. "I want to go home," I whispered.

Under the table, he took my hand.

Terry's laughter finally stopped. She jumped up and got herself a glass of water, drinking it in smooth gulps to settle herself. "What happened?" she asked everybody.

It was so strange. Dad's betrayal lay on the table between us, and I knew, and Mom knew, and Dad knew, and even, I thought, Danny knew somehow, but nobody was going to say anything. We were going to pretend it wasn't there. I wasn't sure I would even tell Terry in private.

Whispers scraped at my awareness. In the silence following Terry's question I breathed carefully, keeping count, and listened to the whispers. "Everything can be encompassed," they said.

I wanted to tell them to shut up, to choke on it, because I was sitting here with my heart laid open by a dull blade and I wasn't going to detour around that fact.

"Everything can be encompassed," they said again.

I lost control of my breathing, heard my breath hissing in and out of my nose. Anger was a red ball of fire lodged just below my throat.

So they had never been the most attentive parents. That had worked out all right for Terry and me. At least we could watch them being in love with each other. How dare Dad mess up what we had, even if it

wasn't the best thing in the world?

Danny put his hand on my head. "Breathe it out," he said.

"What?" I gasped.

He tapped my chest just below my clavicle -- right where my anger burned. "Breathe it out," he said.

I panted for a moment, then closed my eyes. I let out a very long breath, feeding the fire to it. I felt fire leave me, traveling on air. I felt like a dragon and wondered if I were scorching anything. When I drew in my next breath, it was full of cool strength. It flowed through me, calming me. Everything could be encompassed. Stupid but true.

"What was that a demonstration of?" Mom asked.

"It's part of the study of air, Mom. Breathing. It's like therapy. This is sooooo weird," I said. "Thanks, Danny."

"You're welcome," he said, subdued.

"What? What?" Terry said, striding across to us and grabbing our shoulders. "What?"

"Her heat signature went nova," Danny said. He stood up, slipping out of Terry's grasp. "Tash, I have to go. I've got another free night Monday. I'll be back, if you don't come down to Spores. Good night, all." He kissed my forehead and slipped out of the room and the house.

"What does that mean, heat signature?" Mom asked. "What is this jargon? I had no idea I was so out of touch."

"I'm going to bed," I said.

"Not before you give me some answers," Terry said, giving me her best wide-eyed glare.

I almost told her to shut up. Instead I put the pretzels back in the cupboard, brushed my teeth, went to my bedroom, lay down, and fell immediately asleep before she could terrorize me.

\* \* \*

I woke in the morning just after sunrise and showered, then put on one of my favorite dresses, a stretchy material made into a tight bodice and a flared mid-calf-length skirt, with a jewel-cut neckline. It was less neutral than most of my other clothes, cream-colored with strong sprigs of purple flowers and green leaves.

I brushed out my hair and let it hang. Then I grabbed the stuff that hung down in front, took scissors out of a drawer, and chopped off hair until I had bangs. After that I looked different -- not Tasha, not Terry. I looked like somebody I didn't know yet. I decided that was good.

In the kitchen, Mom was drinking coffee. "Are you going to tell me what's really going on now?"

"I'm studying air," I said.

"Tash!" She hit the table with her fist, then winced. "Will you stop this nonsense and tell me what's actually happening to you?"

"But Mom -- "

"Tell me something solid that makes sense."

"But Mom..." I sighed. "Do you want me to lie to you?"

"No, dammit!"

"The truth is that I'm studying air. No lie."

"All right, *why* are you studying air?"

What could I tell her? Well, I was in terrible trouble and air saved my life? I'm entering the priesthood? Air is my god? "Mom," I said. I lifted a napkin from the holder in the middle of the table, and tore it into bits. "I can't really explain this. It goes back too far. But -- " I threw the shreds of napkin up, and air held them. They swirled around and formed the pattern of a snowflake, then hung like washing on a line, rippling a little. "Air," I said. I held up my hand, and the litterbits fluttered down to rest on my palm. I closed my hand around them. I looked at my mother.

She had gone pale. Her eyes stared toward me, but they weren't focused on me.

"Mom?" I said.

After a moment she clicked back to herself. "How did -- what did -- what -- was that a trick?"

I bit my lower lip.

"How could you possibly set up a trick like that?" She held out her hand. "Give me those."

I shook my head. "I will never defy the magician's creed and reveal my secrets."

"So you're actually studying magic?"

I took a deep breath, tasted it, let it out. "Yes," I said. She meant magic tricks, and I meant magic, the real thing. I thought that was probably the best way to leave it.

"Why didn't you say so?"

"Well, it's air magic. It's studying how air works, learning to work with it."

"I feel so relieved," she said. "This is much better than all the awful things I was imagining. But I still don't understand." She sipped coffee and studied me. I got out some cereal and ate. Since last night I hadn't figured out how to eat air again, and I thought maybe it was a good idea for me to eat food in front of Mom, who had enough to worry about.

"Would you like to go to church with me?" Mom asked when I was almost done with my Cheerios.

I was going to say no, but a wind ruffled my bangs. "Okay," I said. I hadn't been to church in years. Maybe it would all be different. Maybe the air in a church would have something to teach me.

\* \* \*

I stood next to my mother, breathing deep, tasting body scents, perfumes, oiled wood, and candle wax. The stained glass cast colored light across everybody, a random patch of magenta here, orange there, lime green on the back of someone else's head. I felt the air spinning in my chest, and I waited.

The organ played four measures of a hymn. Throats opened all around me, and voices emerged. I gripped the pew-back in front of me. The excitement of the air! The blending of purpose, the harmony and resonance...even with six or eight people off key. "Immortal, invisible, God only wise," people sang. My mother held the hymnal out and nudged my shoulder. I lifted my voice too, feeling a strange and painful blossoming of beauty in my chest. Air entered me, left me, carrying song with it, my song mixing with everybody else's, coloring the air, so that when I breathed in again the air carried a strange sustenance. I wanted the hymn to last forever.

I felt light and ripply. The music stroked me inside and out. My feet left the floor. I tightened my grip on the pew and forced my feet down.

The music cut off with an Amen and my weight settled on me again.

None of the other hymns during the service affected me in quite the same way as that first one, but they each had their own flavor, and each took me out of myself. One of them tasted like thick cold wintergreen syrup and actually made me cough. I tried holding my breath till the end.

While Mom went up for Communion, I stayed in our pew, kneeling and thinking. All morning I had been keeping my mind from thinking about Dad and what had happened the night before. Now I let myself know.

When I had called to ask if I could come back and stay at the house for a while, I had talked to Mom, assuming she would tell Dad -- they were so close they shared everything; they told each other everything they had done during the day, even if it was the same as what had happened the day before. Terry and I had always felt like interruptions in their twoness, so we were glad we had each other.

Dad had been out yesterday afternoon, and he had been surprised to see me when he came home after work. So: Mom hadn't told him I was coming back.

Dad had smelled like some other woman, and Mom had been crying.

Mom said Terry was acting strange.

Was everything at home falling apart?

I noticed that my breathing had gotten shorter, and I slowed it. There was a strange taste to the air as people came back from the Communion railing and sat down to pray -- a shift in body chemistry, almost a smell of sleep. Maybe just a sense of calm, mixed with the faint flavor of Communion wine. I breathed

in the calmness. Everything could be encompassed. That was easy for air to say. Air was everywhere. Of course it could encompass everything. Surround, invade, possess. I felt the fire of anger sparking in my chest again. I sighed, and breathed it out.

Mom came back and knelt beside me.

The recession at the end of the service was full of buoyancy.

On the walk home, Mom said, "I think I like your boyfriend. Whatever your relationship consists of." After half a block, she said, "How on earth did you meet the night clerk of a hotel?"

"He's also my landlord."

"Hmm," said Mom. "Convenient."

"It is kind of convenient, actually. Only...I don't know what kind of relationship we have. It's strange. We never say anything about love. I just like to spend time with him."

"Maybe that's a good place to stay for a while," said Mom, and sighed.

We walked in silence for a block. "Mom," I said. "What's happening with you and Dad?"

She just shook her head.

The phone was ringing when we got back to the house. I picked up the extension in the living room. "Hello?" I said.

"This is Hugh," said Terry's boyfriend, his voice desperate. "Will you meet me? Please?"

"Sure," I said. "Where?"

"The cemetery. Our favorite grave."

"When?"

"Now. Please."

"Okay," I said.

He hung up.

"Who was that?" asked Mom.

"Hugh," I said. "I'm meeting him in five minutes."

"You never identified yourself," said Mom.

As twins, Terry and I had made it a policy to always let other people know which twin they were dealing with, unless we agreed to deceive. These days we didn't have to say anything to people who could see us. Our voices on the phone were the only things about us that were identical anymore.

I should have told Hugh. "He didn't ask."

"Not fair, Tash."

I shrugged. "He'll know the difference when I get there. I wonder which is Terry's favorite grave?" The cemetery wasn't big enough to get lost in, though it had graves from pioneer times on up to the present.

"I'll be back in a little while."

She watched as I left the house. I could feel her gaze, but I didn't look back.

I was starting to feel hungry again. On the walk to the cemetery, I spoke to air. "You fed me yesterday. Can you teach me how? Is that okay for me to ask?"

I heard the faint weave of whispers around me, and I stopped, breathed, slowed myself until I could listen.

"Ask any time," the whispers said. "Open your mouth."

I leaned against a maple, hugged myself, closed my eyes, and opened my mouth. I breathed slowly and deeply, and tasted--

Crisp red fall apples, the coolness of the mountains where the leaves had already started to turn and ice formed on puddles, the browning edge of bread in the ovens of the bakery, fresh mint from the fields toward the central valley, Sunday dinners cooking in houses all over town, and the barest taste of fabric softener from the Laundromat by Safeway.

I asked the air to edit out the fabric softener, then breathed everything else down inside me until I felt full.

"Thanks," I said.

The whispers tumbled over each other. I couldn't make out the words, and not because I wasn't listening. This time they were telling me something I wasn't ready to hear; but I got the sense that

somehow as they fed me, I was feeding them, so it worked out for all of us.

Hugh sat at the feet of a stone angel. When he saw me, his face lit up, only to damp down almost immediately. "Shoulda known," he said as I gathered my skirts and sat down beside him. "You agreed way too fast to see me."

His red hair was shorter than I remembered it. He looked paler than usual, with smudges under his green eyes. He had always been short -- no taller than Terry and I, and we were five foot three -- but, hunching in his sage green sweater, he looked diminished.

"Well, you asked me to come, and I wanted to find out what's going on," I said. "You don't look good."

"You remember that time when Terry went down inside herself and I went after her?"

It had happened when we were all fifteen, pretty soon after Terry and Hugh met. I nodded.

"Ever since then we've had this connection. I thought I was lucky. I only had to think about her, and I'd have some idea of where she was and what she was doing. We almost didn't need the phone to talk. I grew up alone, and I always dreamed of finding somebody to connect with like that, and it was great! Just absolutely great. I thought I was set for life."

"So?" I said.

"Lately, all I get is a lot of pain, and she won't even talk to me. Tasha... if this is how it's going to be, I need to ask her to cut the cord. I can't take much more of this."

I took his hand. "Come on, Hugh," I said. "Come home with me."

"Don't you think I've tried that? If I get anywhere near her, she slips off sideways. I can never catch up to her, even though I know where she is."

"Yes," I said, "but you're not me."

His eyebrows rose. "Right," he said, and we got up.

I pulled Hugh to a stop on our front stoop and tasted the air. He cocked his head. "She's home," he said.

"Keep her here," I whispered to air, "please." A breeze patted my cheek.

We went inside.

Dad was sitting at the kitchen table, reading a section of the paper and drinking coffee. He hadn't shaved yet, and he was in his bathrobe. He looked up at us and frowned as we walked through. "I forgot what it was like to have a full house," he said in a grumpy voice.

"Dad, it's almost one," I said. "Don't tell me I woke you up. I've been out of the house most of the morning."

He glared, then returned to his paper.

Hugh followed me through the laundry room, then hesitated outside Terry's door. We looked at each other. We both knew Terry was still inside. Hugh's face scrunched up, then relaxed. "She tried to bolt," he whispered.

I touched the doorknob. The door opened from the other side. Terry, wide-eyed and pale, stood and stared at us. "What are you doing to me?" she asked me.

"What are you running away from?" I asked in return. I grabbed Hugh's hand and dragged him past Terry into her room, which was the mirror image of mine as far as furniture went. She had painted her walls and ceiling black, though, and stuck phosphorescent stars all over them. A realistic rubber bat hung from a string. The bed was covered with a navy-blue spread, and the rag rug on the floor was midnight blue. Hugh and I stood beside each other, glancing around. The decor was new since the last time either of us had been in her room, I guessed. I remembered the walls being papered with forest posters. "What is this?"

Stacks of old books stood by her bed, book marks sticking out like white tongues from between their pages.

"Research," she said.

"On what?" I said, and hunched my shoulders. The air here was tainted by something I didn't recognize and didn't much like.

"On some topics Gran won't go into," said Terry.



"Ewww. Hugh... I'll be just the other side of the closet if you need me." I opened Terry's closet door.

"Don't go," he said.

"But -- "

"This should only take a minute. Terry, either stick with me or cut me loose."

She went even paler. She looked like soap, with two sapphires inset for eyes. "Hugh," she said.

"I thought maybe this separation was temporary, that you'd get back to me when you were finished with whatever you're doing." He glanced around the room, then shoved his hands into his jean pockets.

"But this looks permanent, and it hurts too much. I think you hurt too much. Either let me help you, or let me go."

"All right," she said. Her eyes were so wide white was visible all the way around the irises. Her mouth pinched shut. She held up her right hand, using her index and middle fingers like scissors, and cut the air between her and Hugh.

Both of them gasped. Hugh clapped his hands to his chest, breathing in jagged rasps. Terry didn't seem to be breathing at all.

"Air," I said. I held out my hands to my sister and my friend, felt the air flowing like water across my palms. One stream went to each of them. I knew it carried strength and support and what healing air and I could offer. Gradually Hugh and Terry started breathing normally. Color touched their cheeks.

"Oh," said Hugh at last. "That hurt."

"You asked for it," Terry said.

"Yes. I'm starting to feel better now. What's wrong with you, Tere?"

"What do you care?"

"I love you," he said.

She stared at him, silent, for a long moment. A tear spilled down her cheek and vanished. "If you love me why did you want to cut me off?"

"Because you're killing me. What are you doing to yourself?"

She sniffled and touched a finger to the inner corner of her eye.

"You want me to leave?" I asked. "I hope you don't. I want to know what's going on, too."

"I don't ever want you to leave," Terry said, with considerable ferocity.

"What?" I faltered.

"How could you leave, anyway? How could you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I wouldn't leave you," she said.

"This is about me?"

She stared at me, her lips thinning, then looked away. She held up scissor fingers and made a few half-hearted snips in the air.

"What?" I said. "What, what?"

"I'm the strong one. I know what I'm doing. How come you're the one who got away?"

"It surprised me too," I said. "But it wasn't that hard, once I got on the other side of it. You could do it. So what is this? Have you spent the months since I left miserating and hurting Hugh and not even telling me?"

"Not exactly," she said.

I sat on her bed and picked up one of the books on the floor.

"Hey!" she said.

I looked at the spine. The book was about necromancy.

"Th!" I said, and threw it across the room. "No wonder it smells bad in here!" I picked up another book. It was about voodoo. I dropped it.

"Some of it works," said Terry.

"Eww, Terry!"

"Don't be such a prude," said Terry.

Hugh picked up the book I had set down, glanced at the spine, opened it, and flipped through a few pages. "Huh," he said, "pictures." He showed me a picture of a voodoo doll.

"Air," I whispered, starting to feel afraid. The cool strength of air flowed into me, and I felt better.

"What did you do?" I asked my sister.

"Well, you came home, didn't you?"

I breathed so deeply that my feet left the ground. The air was filtering out the taint in the room for me. I stood up, air under my feet. Now was not a good time to tell her I still had an apartment in Spores.

"You jab me with any pins and I will turn it back on you," I said.

"I didn't. I wouldn't. Not ever."

"Even after I choked you?"

"Thinking isn't doing," she said.

"Are you messing with Mom and Dad?"

"No."

"Good. Don't."

"Somebody ought to," she said.

"No."

"Face it, Tash, they're screwing up somehow. You know how, don't you? That's what happened last night. You figured it out."

I spread my fingers, felt wind weaving between them. "Don't even think about it," I said. "I'm living my discipline now." I still didn't know what air would want to do with me when I reached alignment with it; from my association with it so far, I got the impression it would respect some of my wishes.

I glanced at Hugh. He set the voodoo book down. He looked much less haunted than he had at the feet of the stone angel in the cemetery. "It's starting to make sense," he said. "Terry. Let me know when you're done with this." He tapped the book. He walked to the door and let himself out.

"Everybody's a prude," said Terry. She twisted her fingers in a power gesture, and muttered some words in a language Natalya had taught us. "So tell me," she said. "What *is* going on with Mom and Dad?"

Air caught the powerflow from her hands and her mouth, and filtered it elsewhere before I breathed it in. "Don't push me," I said. The door blew open, and I slipped out of her room, still floating on air.

\* \* \*

"Show your dad the trick you showed me this morning," Mom said. "Tash is studying to be a magician, Austin."

Dad looked a little more agreeable. He had taken his shower, shaved, and gotten dressed, and he and Mom were sharing the paper and a late lunch.

I reached into my pocket for the napkin scraps. "Watch this," I said, and sprinkled the handful of scraps in the air. They darted around, then formed the snowflake pattern again and hung there, flickering. I grinned. I snapped my fingers and held out my hand, and the shreds gathered on my palm.

Dad stared, then blinked. "Do you know any other tricks, Tasha?" he said, his voice strained.

"I haven't worked anything else out yet. I'm still studying principles. If I figure out some other tricks, I'll show them to you."

"I'd like to see that one again."

"Okay." A cold finger touched the base of my spine. I looked up and saw my twin standing in the door to the laundry room. Oh, well. In for a penny, in for a pound. This time I made a couple of magic passes over the paper shreds, then dropped them. They spread into a different snowflake. I wondered if that was a mistake. I let them hover a little longer, then snapped at them and they jumped into my hand.

"How," said Dad, "did you do that?"

"Can't tell you."

"Did you know I had a magic act when I was a teenager? I actually played in clubs."

I had known, when I was little: I remembered Dad doing card tricks for me and Terry, and teaching us the magician's creed. But I had forgotten. "Maybe you can show me some of your stuff," I said. Air

brushed the back of my neck, trying to blow down the hackles that had risen.

"I never had a trick to compare to that one," he said. "As one magician to another, can you tell me how it's done?"

I put the scraps back in my pocket. "I'll make you a deal. A secret for a secret."

"All right," said Dad.

I drew in a deep breath, trying to taste my options. Everything had gotten so mixed up, with Terry practicing the arts that involved blood and death and controlling other people for her own wishes, and all the other cracks in the family picture. I didn't want to hurt Mom. Maybe it was time, though, to get things out in the open. That might hurt less than secrets.

Air had warmth riding it, a different strength from coolness. It entered me and touched me with relaxation. Whatever happened, I knew air would support me. "What's her name?" I said.

"Whose name?"

"The woman you were seeing yesterday."

In the silence, I could hear air whispers. Tiny warm breezes like fingers brushed up and down my arms.

I glanced toward Terry. She had her hand at her throat.

"Linda," said Dad. "How did you know?"

"Perfume. Not Mom's." I looked at Mom. I remembered kneeling next to her in church that morning. She had been praying; the air had told me about it, how the energy around her changed. It was part of the calmness that wasn't sleep.

Right now she looked still. Her hands clasped each other on the table in front of her. "Why, Austin?" she said. Her voice was steady.

"That's going to take some time, Becka." He ran his hands through his hair, then scrubbed his face. "No excuses, though. I did it. Tash, how did you do that paper trick?"

I was trembling. "Magic."

"That's no answer," said Dad.

"I'm not a magician, Mom. Dad. I'm a witch. Secret for a secret."

"Tasha," said Mom, and this time her voice was full of the pain it hadn't held when she had braced Dad.

I smiled, leaning against air, and opened my hands. Paper scraps startled up, tore into tinier bits, streamed in a spiral up and down, circled me as the warm-edged wind tangled my hair. The tiny white paper bits hovered above the table, forming a rayed sun, spun for a moment in the air, then drifted gently down onto the table. "I've been wanting to tell you for a while."

"Tasha," said Mom again, only this time her voice was half breath.

"Right now I'm studying air. I love air."

Dad collected some paper scraps in his hand. "Lift them," he said, holding his hand up.

A puff of air moved across his hand, collecting the paper, dancing it up and across the room. It snowed down on my hair, catching in the dark tangles like white feathers.

"Terry, did you know this?" Mom asked.

"That Tasha is a witch? I knew."

"Is it -- real?" Mom said.

"Yes," said Terry. "She's a witch. And I'm a witch."

"Oh," said Mom. She put her hands on her cheeks. "I feel so odd."

I went to her and laid my hands on her shoulders. "Breathe," I said, and asked the air to nourish and sustain her. She took some deep breaths.

Presently she said, "I feel better. I don't know why. How can you be witches? Your father and I never --" She looked around the kitchen as if searching for a cause. "Do you worship Satan?"

"Oh, no!" I said. "No. It's not like that at all. It's more --" I thought of offering flower dust to air. "A -- an affinity for natural forces."

"Being able to talk to nature," Terry said, "and having it answer."

"That doesn't sound so bad," said Mom. "Maybe I'm a witch too, when I garden."

"Yes, Mom," I said, squeezing her shoulders a little. I released her and sat at the table.

"How did this happen?" Dad asked. "Were you born like this?" His voice carried an undertone of hope.

"No," said Terry. "Actually, this guy cast a spell on us when we were twelve, and it activated our -- our witchliness."

"Could you cast a spell like that? All my life I've dreamed -- "

"We aren't that sophisticated yet, Dad," Terry said.

"Oh," said Mom, her eyes looking up and to the right, "no discipline. Oh. Danny is your spirit guide. Oh. Oh, my. He's going to teach you to fly? What does that make him?"

"Someone more sophisticated," Terry said.

"Could *he* cast that spell?" Dad asked.

"Nope, he doesn't work that way," said Terry.

"What's a heat signature?" Mom demanded.

"Danny doesn't -- " I began. "He sees a little differently from us."

"Oh, dear," said Mom. She sank back. "Oh, this rips the world open, twins. I feel like a baby. I don't know what's been going on here these last five years."

"A lot of stuff you don't know about that doesn't really change much," I said. "We're not on drugs, we don't worship the Devil, we don't turn people into toads. At least -- " I frowned at Terry, and she giggled. I remembered, suddenly, the first time I had met Hugh -- before Terry did. He insulted one of my best friends, and I turned him into a dog. That was back when I was young and confident, secure in my disciplines. I tried to remember the spell I had used. Back then it was right there when I needed it, uncomplicated: just words, very strong words, and no stage fright or hesitation on my part. When had I lost that confidence, and why?

Air whispered to me. I breathed and listened. "Never be afraid again," it said.

"What if I can't ask for what I need?" I murmured.

"We can hear inside your head," said the whispers, stroking my ears and neck.

"What was that?" Mom asked.

"I'm talking to the air."

"The air," she said. "The air."

"That's the element she picked to study," said Terry. "Personally I'd prefer something with a little more force, like water or fire."

"You talk to the air, and it talks back?" asked Mom.

"Yes." I grinned. "Oh, yes. At first I thought like Terry. What fun is air? But it's amazing, Mom! The music this morning was so powerful. There's so much I don't know yet! Air is the element that talks. And..." I pushed my chair back and stood up. "And..." Air slipped under my feet, held me around waist and shoulders, lifted me a foot above the floor. I laughed, holding out my arms. My hair rose around my head, and my skirt flared. "Danny's going to teach me how to do this and make it work."

I lowered my arms and sank to the floor.

"That worked just fine," said Terry.

"That worked..." Mom said. She put her hand over her breastbone. "Oh, Tash," she whispered.

Dad was just staring. At last he blinked. I felt strange. The happiness, the antigravity seeped away. I had never figured out what to expect once I told them I was a witch. I hadn't expected them to be scared.

"Terry, you can do that too?" Mom asked.

"Not that, but other things."

"Oh. Oh, twins," said Mom. "I need time to think."

"So do I," Dad said.

"We'll go away for a while," said Terry.

"I want to call Gran," I said. Natalya would help me. Had telling our parents been a big mistake?

"Gran," said Mom. "Oh, no. Another piece of the puzzle. Gran. That sweet little old lady is a master witch. Look, Tasha. Here's my college education coming into play. It helped me master analysis of facts.

Gran's been seeing a lot of you two for the past five years. Gran's supposed to help you study air. Oh, my."

"Looks like college does help," I said. "Keep taking deep breaths, Mom. The air is your friend." I headed for the living room extension and called Natalya. "I need you."

"All right," she said.

"And Gran, Terry -- "

Air tugged a lock of my hair. I turned and saw Terry standing in the doorway to the living room.

"Yes?" said Gran. "Terry what?"

"Can Terry and I come over and talk to you?"

She sighed. "Of course."

I glanced at the VCR's clock. Nearly four-thirty in the afternoon. "I have to ask her, but I know I want to talk to you, anyway. I'll be right over."

I said good-bye and hung up. "Will you go to Gran's with me?"

"You're going to tell her about my studies if I don't, aren't you?"

"I will anyway. Your choice."

"What do you think? She's going to cast at me and switch me around inside until I'm a marshmallow?"

"That's more your style."

"I could do that to you first, so you can't tell her anything."

"Don't," I said.

"Stop me if you can."

She chanted at me, invoking twisters, adding gestures. The words were in the language of magic. I listened. The spell she laid out would soften me until I would be too nice to interfere in anything she chose to do. I would always be good and sweet and kind, and I would do every dirty dish I saw. She said the endword, added the finishing gesture, and cast the whole tapestry of command at me.

Air swallowed the spell. A second later I felt something small and square materialize in my pocket.

"You would hate it if that had worked," I said.

She looked pale. It was a tough, effective spell, and she had put effort into it, only to see it disappear into nowhere. Or my pocket. She didn't know that, though.

"In fact, right now I could drop it on you. You know how ugly that would be? I would hate you like that."

"I just thought it would be fun to try for a while. I could always switch you back later."

"How do you know?"

She blew on her fingernails, buffed them on her chest, and smiled at me.

"Sure," I said. "Okay, you're good. I don't trust you to put me back together right, though."

Air tweaked a lock of my hair again. I glanced toward the kitchen. I wondered how long Mom had been standing there. "Mom?" I said.

She gave me a smile with a wobble in it. I went and hugged her, holding her until the stiffness melted and she embraced me in response. "I just keep breathing," she whispered.

"Good," I whispered back. "I love you." I wished I could protect her from everything, but I knew I couldn't.

"Your granny witch -- she's a good person?" Mom asked.

"The best," I said. We had had Natalya over to supper a few times. She and Mom had discussed gardening and the language of flowers.

She let me go and stepped back. "So many things have happened, I feel like I don't know anybody anymore -- not you, not Terry, not your father. Have I been walking around blind for so long? How?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry. I thought it was time to stop keeping secrets now."

"Yes," she said. She rubbed her eyes. "A little space will help, I think. I need to sit and think about all this."

"Come on, Gran's expecting us," said Terry from behind me. "Comb your hair, Tash. It's a mess."

I ducked into the front bathroom and studied myself. My hair was in tangles, snowed with napkin scraps. I pulled a comb through it. With air's help, there weren't any snarls, and my hair curled. I

frowned. That shouldn't be happening. It was naturally flat, and I hadn't done any work with a blow dryer or curling iron. I looked less like any self I had known than ever. The blue in my eyes had darkened. I smiled at me and said, "Air."

My curls twitched.

I put down the comb and joined Terry.

"My car this time," she said.

"How did you buy this car, anyway?" I asked when we were on our way. Terry had a nice white Fiat. "Your college money?"

"Lottery tickets," said Terry. She waggled her eyebrows at me.

"Jeeze! What a great idea!"

"You have to be subtle. I favor the small wins myself, because you don't need ID to pick up the money."

"I could make my rent."

"Rent?" she asked, staring at me with narrowed eyes.

I smiled at her. *Air*, I thought, *if there's a doll of me anywhere in her room, please find it and steal it for me. Please put it somewhere safe until I can dismantle it.*

*Yes*, whispered air.

*Thanks.*

Air stroked my cheek. I closed my eyes. *How can I ever repay you? I thought I was working my way out of debt, but I just keep asking for more things.*

*Don't worry*, whispered air. *Breathe.*

I breathed, slow and deep. It was weird. I tasted clean cool air coming in, and I tasted something else going out of me, warm and sweet.

Terry poked me. "Rent?" she said again.

"Rent," I said. "What about it?"

"What do you mean, rent?"

"On my apartment."

"It's still your apartment?"

"Mmm," I said.

"Damn!"

"If the dark arts worked perfectly, what would be the point? If you could pull my strings and make me do whatever you wanted me to do, why would you want me around at all? You could do it to anybody you liked or hated."

"The fun part is doing it to you," she said.

"Forget it."

"Tash," she said, despair in her voice, "I always knew we'd split up sometime. I just think now is too soon."

"You've been getting too bossy and superior. You're too hard to live with. Besides, there's Danny -- "

"What kind of future could a relationship like that have?"

"I'd like to find out," I said.

"Ih! You think *I'm* sick!"

"We've been driving around this block for five minutes," I said. "Will you get us to Gran's already?"

"Maybe not," she said.

I looked at her. The car got very quiet. It turned down Main. Terry jerked the steering wheel right and left without effect; we were riding on air.

"You're getting mean," Terry told me between clenched teeth. She pressed the gas pedal. The engine roared, to no avail.

"Me? I didn't do anything." I opened the door and slid out of the car. When I was safely on the sidewalk and had closed the door again, the car dropped to the asphalt. Terry still had her foot on the gas, and the car shot down the street.

I sucked air in between my teeth. If she was hurt--

She got the car turned around and parked. She was steaming when she climbed out.

Natalya stood by her gate, watching both of us.

Terry threw a rash of pimples at me.

"You're wasting your energy," I said, and went to kiss Natalya, who was smiling.

"Astonishing, Tasha," she said after we had greeted each other. "I've never before seen so much progress so fast."

"I'm not doing it. I mean, all I do is breathe, and I'd be doing that anyway, wouldn't I? Air does it."

"It takes two. You align, air aligns. It's beautiful to see."

"It's more fun than I ever imagined. Gran, my totem turned out to be my boyfriend!"

"How could that be?"

"Uh -- " Would she think it was sick, the way Terry did? Air had picked him for me; it must be right. "He's a vampire."

She frowned. "I wasn't sure such things existed. I don't understand how this can aid you... I find this confusing, but I would like an introduction if the opportunity arises."

"Of course." I glanced at Terry, who had joined me. "Gran, my sister is practicing dark arts."

"I know," said Natalya.

"On me."

"Better on you than someone else, Tasha. You have defenses."

I fished the spell from my pocket and handed it to Natalya. She exclaimed and dropped it. "What is that?" she cried, alarmed.

"Terry's plan for making me docile," I said. It was a small pink and powder-blue cube, and it lay on the ground, innocent as any pebble.

"How did you do that?" Terry asked, studying her handiwork transformed.

"Toxic," said Natalya, fanning the air in front of her face. "Terry, you're getting sloppy."

"I knew it wouldn't work."

"You did not!" I said.

Terry shrugged.

Natalya said, "Of course it would have worked. It's overkill, though, and dangerous. Terry, you know whatever you put out will return to you three times."

Terry shrugged. I held out my hand, and the cube rose to it. I tucked it back in my pocket.

"What are you going to do with it?" Terry asked me.

"I don't know yet. Maybe flush it down the toilet." Air tugged at my bangs, and I looked toward Natalya's house. Sitting on the porch swing was the Leather Man. This time I decided not to say anything to Natalya.

*Who is that?* I asked air. The Leather Man's green eyes stared into mine.

*Ours,* whispered air. *You and he will be together.*

"What?" I said, trembling. He looked so much like the nightmares of my childhood, the man who would come in the night to steal me away and do I knew not what to me, the man I had heard stories about on dark nights at sleepover parties. How could this be? How could air sanction my being with Danny, and tell me that this man was to be my -- I didn't even know what.

"Tasha?" said Natalya. She touched my hand, then followed my gaze. The Leather Man's stare stayed on me. He faded like a shadow at the sun's touch.

"It just stopped being fun," I said in a wobbly voice.

"What happened?" Terry asked.

"Did you see him?"

"The ghost? Sure. I've been seeing him for a couple years."

"He's going to be my -- I don't know. Air says we'll be together. That's what air asks of me."

"Tasha," said Natalya. "Try to trust."

"But -- " Air had saved me. I had given myself to air; air was taking care of me; and now air was giving me to someone else. For a moment I couldn't even breathe. Fear choked me. Desperation closed my throat.

Air pushed its way inside me. Soon I was breathing deeply without even trying. Breathing in cool strength, breathing out fear.

I closed my eyes and felt a tear track down my cheek. *All right*, I told air. *I'm sorry. Whatever you say*. I breathed out my resistance, letting it go.

*Breathe and be you*, air said.

*Be me? Me is scared.*

*That's all right.*

"Okay," I said aloud. "I'll try to trust." I touched the lump in my pocket. If I couldn't stand what happened to me, I could always break Terry's spell over my head. Whoever I turned into would acquiesce to anything.

"Let's have tea," said Natalya.

\* \* \*

Natalya poured. She was using the Japanese service this time, glazed white porcelain with black characters on the pot, and small handleless white cups. The tea this time was dark and smoky-tasting.

I thought about all the questions I had for Natalya. What could I learn from Danny when he was already confused about it? What was I supposed to do about the Leather Man? Where was this discipline leading me? What about Terry, anyway? Maybe Natalya would just tell me to trust. Maybe she could tell me other things. "There's so much I don't understand. Where do I end up, Gran? Who do I turn into?"

"I don't know," said Natalya. "Truth to tell, I don't know anybody who's activated a relationship with an element quite the way you have, so I can't predict your future."

I breathed in cool calm and released more fear. The whispers were clear to me. *Whatever happens, we will keep you safe*, they said.

*What's your definition of safe?*

*Body, mind, and spirit nourished and growing.*

I took another breath and tasted baking bread on it. I glanced around the kitchen, frowning. The oven was off.

Baking bread smelled like the safest thing I knew, with the anticipation of eating it hot and buttered soon after it came out of the oven.

I breathed again, and the taste was stronger, feeding me. One more breathful and I felt calm, ready to accept whatever happened.

"You keep zoning out," Terry said.

"I'm still here. I'm just talking to air."

"It's really annoying."

"Get used to it, Twin. The rest of my life I'll be doing it."

"You sure have switched over from yesterday."

"A lot has changed."

Terry looked at Natalya. In a voice edged with sadness, she said, "Gran. Dad was -- Tash comes home, she looks at him, she figures it out. Dad was seeing some other woman yesterday. We don't even know what this means. Tash told Mom about that and the witching and then we left. It feels like everything could fall apart."

Natalya reached across the table and gripped Terry's hands. For a long moment none of us said anything. "The pieces will fall into new patterns," Natalya said at last. "Everything changes. Trying to lock something into one pattern when it's ready to change is a mistake. In the face of change, I will be here. You're always welcome."

"Are you saying --" Terry swiped at a tear. "No. It's not fair. What's magic for, anyway? If I plan right, I can fix it!"

"Terry," said Natalya.



"Tasha runs away, Hugh tells me to cut our bond -- that hurt, Gran! -- Mom and Dad -- I can channel enough power. I know I can."

I wanted to jump up and tell her I'd block everything she wanted to do. It gave me the creeps. I breathed instead, and waited.

"How would you start?" Natalya said. There was no condemnation in her voice.

Terry gripped her hands. "A strong tether spell on Tasha. Not to her room, to the town. She could be herself and do anything she wanted. She'd just stay here. Hugh -- I don't know what to do about Hugh. He said he'd come back if I gave up these other arts, but how can I handle this without these other arts? If I put a come-hither on him, though, he wouldn't be the same. I haven't figured out Hugh yet. If I could just wipe out Mom and Dad's memories of yesterday -- maybe the whole weekend would be better. How can I do that, Gran?"

"I can't help you with that, my dear."

"Can't or won't?"

Natalya smiled. "For me to do it, I would have to violate my covenant with the powers that work with me, and if I break my covenant, I can't expect the powers to respond to me the way I want them to. Can't, Terry, and won't."

She had told us about her covenant before, in passing. She had never really explained it. She said a time would come when she'd need to tell us about it, but so far the time hadn't arrived.

"Then I'll just have to work it out with my books." Terry got up.

Natalya rose too. "Terry. I will always love you. You are choosing toward aligning yourself with powers I won't deal with. That might make it hard for you to visit me, because my house is warded against those powers. I said you are always welcome here, and you are, if you come without those powers. The choice is yours. Just now I want to say farewell." She put her arms around Terry.

Terry leaned forward and hugged her back, then pushed her away. "No. You're supposed to tell me it's wrong and I shouldn't do it."

"The choice is yours."

"No," said Terry, "that's not fair either. Dad never told us what to do, Mom never told us what to do, and now you won't tell us what to do. Most kids have grown-ups who tell them what to do, Gran. You used to tell us. It used to drive me nuts! You used to be so bossy, making us memorize that stuff, and learn those languages, and not try anything until you told us we were ready -- "

"You're old enough now to decide what you want to learn and what you don't want."

"No," said Terry again. "I don't want to be that old." Her eyes were wild. "And I don't want Tasha to be that old, either. This air stuff. This apartment stuff. She's acting way too much like a grown-up. I -- " She closed her hands, then opened them and worked her fingers, weaving something I had never seen before. Elements of it looked almost recognizable, a thread of water magic, a ripple of time, a pinch of green; but the other ingredients came from disciplines we had never learned from Natalya.

Air lifted my hair, blowing it back, stroking cool along my cheeks. Wind touched me everywhere.

When Terry made her cut-off gesture and set her spell loose, it rose like green-gray smoke, hovered over us all for a moment, then drifted down toward her and me. The arm of the spell that reached for me blew away before it could touch me. Terry stood, hunched, watching the other arm. A finger reached for her face. She backed away. "No," she said. "If it doesn't work for both of us, I don't want it." It pursued her. She rounded the table and grabbed my arm. "Tash. Okay. I give up. Stop it, will you?"

I lifted a hand, not sure what air would do. It swallowed the spell the way it had the marshmallow one and compressed it, then handed it to me; I held a small golden disc shot with streaks of black and red in my hand. I put it in my pocket with the other spell.

"What was this one supposed to do?" I asked.

"Turn us into little kids."

"You are *nuts*," I said. Then I thought about it. When we were little kids, we were tight with each other. We went everywhere together, fearless, warriors. We explored, we crossed lines, we pushed boundaries. No magic. Bottomless curiosity. No supervision.

Something in me longed for that.

I took a deep breath. No. I was here now, my feet on the ground, air inside me, in the middle of the journey where all my choices had led me. It was time to take the next step.

"Did that spell come out of a book?" Natalya asked after a moment's silence.

"No. I just made it up."

Natalya went to the stationery drawer and got out some paper and a pen. "Please write it down before you lose it. It was beautiful, Terry. The combination of elements -- inspired."

"But Gran -- " Terry looked at Natalya, then shook her head and sat down, accepting pen and paper. She frowned at her hand, tried to frame the gestures she had used, then write them down. "Gran," she said, after working at it. "I forget."

"Invoke your discipline," said Natalya.

Terry glared at her a moment with narrowed eyes, then went back to work.

"Didn't that use powers you wouldn't use?" I asked Natalya.

Natalya got down some almond biscotti and put them on a plate, set the plate on the table. "Perhaps," she said. "Many people do. Still, it's something that should be saved."

Terry ate a biscotto and frowned at her hand some more. I was still full of aerial bread.

\* \* \*

"So, what are we going to do about Mom and Dad?" Terry said in a low voice when we had finished our tea.

Natalya looked into her teacup. "Tell them you're upset, ask them how they feel, whether there are new plans. That's my advice."

"And your advice is to leave Tasha alone, right?"

"The choice is yours."

"And Hugh?"

"What did he say?"

"He said he loved me, and I should call him when I give up the dark arts."

"Well, that sounds clear to me. Anything else?"

"No," said Terry. She looked at the page she had written, crossed something out, added something in, then put down the pen.

"All right. Go home. It's supertime. Maybe you and your parents can sort a few things out." Natalya patted Terry's shoulder. "The choice is always yours," she said. "and the consequences of your choices -- those are yours too. I love you no matter what. Remember that if you continue to follow the dark paths, it will be harder for us to see each other."

"Okay," said Terry. She folded up the guidelines to her spell and shoved them into her pocket.

"Also remember that you're inspired. You have a gift. Whichever direction you choose, you're going to be very good, as long as you maintain discipline."

"Okay. Thanks," said Terry gruffly.

"What about me?" I asked.

"You'll be fine. I don't know that there's anything more for me to teach you."

\* \* \*

On the drive home, Terry said, "Maybe just a little stardust."

I didn't say anything.

"You know, sprinkle it on Mom and Dad, they look at each other, they're in love; whatever's past is past. That wouldn't hurt anybody, would it?"

"I don't know," I said. "It wouldn't tell us why."

"I mean, it's not the end of the world. Other guys cheat. Maybe Mom did something like that too."

Maybe they're just bored. Maybe they'll get a divorce. Almost everybody we know has divorced parents. Why should ours be different?"

"You're OBAH," I said, which was shorthand for Obsessing Before Anything Happens.

"Yeah, sure, okay," she said, and we spent the rest of the drive in silence.

Terry parked her car behind Mom's maroon Ghia and we walked into the house, wondering. I breathed deep, searching the air for hints. Lemon chicken, cooking in the oven; the ammonia aftertaste of loud voices; a chili scent of tempers held just short of breaking, and a faint caraway-seed taste of hope. I took Terry's hand and walked into the kitchen.

Our parents were sitting at the table playing rummy. "So," said Dad, "did you get everything squared away?"

"Did you?" Terry asked.

"No," said Mom. She picked up the card face up on the discard pile and dropped something else.

"Dad," Terry said. "Dad, how could you?"

He hunched his shoulders, then sighed and dropped his cards. "I've been over this with your mother," he said. "It feels complicated to me, but maybe it's not. I come home from work and everything is kind of locked up somehow. You're in your room doing stuff that worries me more now than it did before. Tasha is gone. Becka is tired. I go to work and there's no place for me to go -- I'm a waiter, I don't know if I'll ever make maitre d'. Your mother and I are barely managing the house payments. They reassess the house higher every year and jack the property tax. We might have to sell, and then what? I lie in bed at night thinking about this after your mother is asleep, and I wake every morning with a sour taste in my mouth.

"So I'm at work. Linda's a cocktail waitress at the restaurant. She's young and beautiful and she gives me these looks. She says these inviting things. And I think... I think, anything for a little change or a little hope. So, finally, yesterday, I said yes."

He rubbed his hand across his mouth. "The irony of it is that what I was looking for was a little magic."

I felt as if something had struck my heart. If I had come home one day earlier... if I had talked to the parents about witchcraft a month ago, a year ago... if Terry had... if Mom had told Dad I was coming home in the middle day... if Terry had been out in the living room talking to Dad instead of back in her room reading...

"-- and the truth of it is that I chose to take Linda up on an invitation," he said. "I didn't think I would get caught. I didn't think it would hurt anybody. I didn't sleep very well last night, though. It's better that it came out. The next move is your mother's."

"Well, you can stay for dinner," said Mom. "But I'm not sleeping with you."

"So I'm bunking on the living room couch. That's as squared as we've gotten it," Dad said.

"I want counseling, too," Mom said. "Both of us."

"I don't see how we can afford it."

"We can't afford not to."

Dad sighed. "All right. So, twins, what's next for you?"

Terry shrugged. "Study and discipline," she said.

"Discipline and study," I said.

"Tash, show me that napkin trick again," Dad said, "please."

I was mad at him -- not an explosive anger that ran through me like fire, I knew air would smother an anger like that, but a quiet anger, low and steady, because he had put so much of what I loved at risk. I looked at him for a long moment, then sat down at the table, took a napkin, and shredded it. If it helped him and Mom accept what they now knew about me and Terry, it was a good thing to do.

\* \* \*

After dinner, Terry and I stood in our back yard. The evening had cooled, and I had changed into my sneak clothes, black T-shirt, denim jacket, jeans, sneakers. We had left the back lights off, keeping the

yard dark to give ourselves as much of an advantage as we could.

Tonight we had agreed to practice one of our basics, Rule Three: Gather as much information as possible.

"Since you left, I've been working on new skills," Terry said. "One is nightwalking invisibly. Watch this." She did three quick gestures, said one powerful word, and disappeared. "Neat, huh?"

"Terrif."

"What's the point if you can't actually use it?" said her voice from a head-high spot in the air. "I've been casing the whole neighborhood. Stand still. I'm going to turn you invisible, too."

"Uh--" I said, looking down at my hands. They faded away. For the first time, air had let Terry land a spell on me.

"The tricky part is not bumping into anything. You have to think about all your body parts more than you usually would. When you can't see them, they get closer to a lot of stuff than you would have thought." Her hand crept into mine. "Come on."

Our invisible feet rustled on the grass. I felt very strange.

Terry stopped suddenly. "Wait a sec. Can you fly us? I haven't been able to get any aerial views of the neighborhood so far."

"I can't fly yet," I said. "Not really."

"I've seen you lift off the ground twice."

"Yes, but--" *Air, could you carry us?*

Terry's hand clamped on mine. We rose, the neighborhood dropping away from our feet, until we could see over our fence and most of the others on the block, into back yards. We looked down on roofs, on the crowns of trees, in through back windows. Barbecues and patio furniture sat abandoned. A hot tub steamed. A swingset sat still, robbed of the kinetic energy of children. Cats wandered fences, dogs barked, TV light flickered, people moved past windows.

I took some deep breaths, settling my surprise. "Now what?"

"Uh," said Terry. She sounded panicky. Not something I ever expected from my sister. She felt shaky, and her breathing was ragged. Maybe she was afraid of heights? Good grief!

*Down, please,* I thought, and air let us down gently on our back lawn.

Terry let out a whew.

A silvery mist seeped into the yard.

"Weird weather," said Terry, her voice still a little wobbly.

The mist agitated, as if stirred. I let go of Terry's hand and walked toward the mist and it collected itself around me. It coalesced and turned into Danny, his arms embracing me. "Your heat signature is here, but where's the rest of you?"

"I thought you had to work tonight."

"I traded shifts with Chet. I thought being a totem might be more important." He laid his hand on my cheek. "Tash, you smell strange."

I asked air to lift Terry's invisibility spell from me. It was odd. In the faint light of the city reflected from the clouds above, I saw my hair, my nose, and the upper edges of my cheeks appear, all the things I usually saw with peripheral vision but ignored.

Danny touched my lips with gentle fingers, then bent and kissed me. I opened my mouth against his, breathing him in, sage and moonlight, warmth and no-longer-human flesh; I even tasted the strange viral undertone of his vampirism, bloodwarm and ironsweet, and the special chemical in his saliva that stopped blood from clotting while he fed. I noticed again that his edges weren't like live peoples'; air mixed more easily with him. I discovered that there were a thousand trace smells to him, faint notes, each a spectrum inside itself. What was this? His fingers tangled in my hair, pressed warmth against my skull.

"What, what?" he whispered presently, releasing me. "You taste like grass and bread and candle wax, dark tea and chicken and cookies, things I haven't tasted in so long."

"That's a catalog of some of the things I've done today. And you taste like -- I can't figure it out."

"But I mean, it's different. It's not on your skin. It's inside you." His lips brushed mine again, his tongue flicking to taste me. "Oh!" he said. "Now I'm in there too."

Trembling started in my shoulders and spread. I leaned against Danny, shudders rippling through me. He held me.

"Air," I whispered.

*In our service, all you need to do is breathe and be,* whispered air. *Breathe and become.*

"Become what?"

*Everything. Everything can be encompassed.*

"I don't understand."

*It is not important for you to understand.*

I took three deep breaths. They contained a warmth and tenderness I had never tasted before. I breathed out fear. Tasting it on its way out of me, I sensed sterile dust. I let it go.

"What is it?" Danny whispered.

"I don't think I get it yet," I said. "It's scary." Fear was dust that choked me. I breathed again, and tasted night dewing the grass, and the body heat and complex scent-web of Danny, and Terry, who was somewhere near. I let the dust go. "Well, okay. I go beyond my fear. I gave myself to air. Air says all it asks of me is that I become everything."

He stroked my hair back from my face. "Ah," he said. "This is starting to make sense."

"It is?"

"I don't need to teach you how to fly. You can get up and down by yourself already. It's about tasting."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone I've ever tasted is inside me."

I pressed my cheek against his chest. "Everything I breathe becomes part of me."

"Yes," he whispered. "You know what that means?"

"What?"

"You can go out and pick the things you're going to breathe. Maybe you'll get around to everything eventually, but you might as well start with the things you enjoy."

"Is that what you do?"

"When I can." He reached for my hand, lifted my wrist to his lips. I breathed in night and woodsmoke, flooding my blood with flavored air. As we shared blood, I drew in breath, tasting leaves turning, suppers cooking, plants sliding into sleep in preparation for winter.

He pressed his fingers to my wrist. "Chili," he said.

"Tempers. It's been some kind of day."

He shook his head, smiling. "Will you be my totem?"

Breath caught in my throat, then flowed. "Yes," I said.

He laughed and let me go, then reached out and snagged something standing near us. "You want to go in?" he asked me. "I think we should go around to the front door if we do. I promised your mom."

"All right. I told them about us being witches today."

"Oh? What did you say about me?"

"Terry said you were more sophisticated."

"Very nice," he said to the air beside him.

"You're sick!" it responded. "You both are."

"Works for me," Danny said. Keeping a grip on her, he led the way around the house and through the side gate.

\* \* \*

This time I packed the car more carefully, keeping the passenger seat empty. Leaving my plant in Mom and Dad's house helped. Terry said she'd bring it down on her next visit.

I had stowed Terry's two spells on the ledge below the speedometer, where I could reach them in a hurry.

I stopped at the stop sign on Main and stared at the town for a while, though there was no cross traffic to wait for.

Rexall Drugs, the Cinemart, True Value Hardware, the Blue Bird Cafe, David's Department Store, Woolworth's, with the dance school upstairs, Mountainview Tavern. I took some deep breaths, letting my hometown become a part of me. Overnight the maples had turned, summer's dark and ragged green gone to yellow-gold. A log truck rolled past me, streaming diesel fumes from the exhaust pipe near its cab, and I took a breath of that, too.

Then I drove through town.

At the stop sign where Main met the highway, the Leather Man stood. I pulled over to him and pushed the passenger door open, breathing in the taste of my possessions, breathing out fear. He climbed into the car, and I took my first breath of him. He tasted like the smoke of burning leaves.

My heart hammered. Air had told me this man and I would be together, and I didn't even know why.

He pulled the door shut and turned to look at me with his opalescent green eyes. I stared back, breathing. Breathing.

He lifted a dark calloused hand and touched my cheek. The breath I took then had a thousand flavors: Nepalese snow, Brazilian rainforest, Antarctic ice, Sahara sand, stone used to build an Indian temple a thousand years ago, needles from a bristlecone pine -- each odor tagged so that I knew it without having ever tasted it before. "So you're to be my daughter?" he said, his voice as warm as sun on black granite.

"Am I?" I said.

"You've entered the service of air?"

"Yes."

"That's a fine thing," he said. "I've been in the service a hundred and thirty-two years. It's a life with a lot of travel in it; you get a taste for the distant places. In all my time, I never met another of us until now. Air told me about you. Last time I had a name, it was Pierre Chandler."

"Pierre," I said. "My name is Tasha, and it's all new to me."

He smiled, his teeth white in his dark face. "That's fine," he said, "That's just fine. I would admire to see somebody coming at this new. It's all so amazing, but you forget just how amazing once you get used to it. I would purely appreciate it if you and I could spend some time together, before the wanderlust catches up to me and I take off in search of someplace I ain't been yet."

"Air told me," I said. I swallowed. "Air told me you and I were going to be together."

He smiled at me and patted my hair. "That scared you, an old mossback like me, didn't it?"

After a moment, I nodded.

"You say me yea or nay, and I'll abide by your wishes."

Fear was just dust. I didn't need it anymore. "I would love to spend some time with you," I said.

"I'll show you some of my favorite secret places. There are woods here I ain't walked in years -- gotta taste 'em and see how time has changed 'em."

"If we both go to the same places, aren't we duplicating our efforts?"

"It don't matter to air. It's everywhere anyways. I think it just likes having someone to talk to. Besides, you'll probably go off and breathe in space. Now, that'll be new -- too new for me, I'm thinking. Separate or together, we're doing our job."

I smiled at him and put the car in gear. Together, we drove toward home.

I took another breath and tasted Canadian wilderness. No: home, like air, was everywhere. Together, we drove through home toward Spores Ferry.