



Witchrise



VICTORIA LAMB

A powerful legacy. A vengeful enemy.

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Also by Victoria Lamb

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About the Book

Meg Lytton was born with a powerful gift, as her mother was before her. But practising witchcraft in Tudor England puts Meg's life in constant danger - as does her secret betrothal to the handsome young priest, Alejandro de Castillo.

When Meg discovers an ancient wooden casket containing her mother's magickal instruments, she finds she is able to take her own spells and skills to breathtaking new heights. But something in the grimoire attracts dark spirits to Meg and those around her - and her old enemy, Marcus Dent, wants it for his own evil purposes. Meg is in greater danger than ever - and her future with Alejandro hangs in the balance.

Witchrise

VICTORIA LAMB

RHCP DIGITAL

For Gary Abbott

*O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins: *No Worst, There Is None*

PART ONE

Lytton Park

Christmastide 1555

ONE

The Summoning

Lytton Park, Oxfordshire

'Face north.'

Slowly I obeyed, shuffling round on bare feet. The fire had burned low and I could see only the faintest glimmer of light through the blindfold. But the spell was familiar to me from my training as a witch.

Set four candles about the summoning circle. Four black candles for the four points of the compass.

I shivered, for despite the chill December evening I wore nothing but a simple shift. Yet I was too excited to notice the cold, my heart beating hard, my fingertips already tingling with power.

Pungent smells filled my narrow, low-ceilinged bedchamber: myrrh, juniper berries, scorched yew, and a sickly scent I did not recognize. The preparations were almost complete.

The spirits may be conjured by bell and black candle, and by the burning of churchyard yew and crow's feather.

I ought to have been afraid.

The last time I had tried this spell, I had almost destroyed everything in my world. My mistress, the Lady Elizabeth, sister to Queen Mary, had insisted on seeking advice from her dead mother, Anne Boleyn. I had managed to conjure the executed queen's spirit, but the timing of the spell had not been auspicious. Something else had come through with her from the underworld: a cruel, dark spirit which

had threatened not only our lives with its malice, but the whole of England.

Tonight, though, my friend Richard would be my guide, to lessen the chances of our spell going wrong again.

Besides, this time I was summoning up a spirit for my own reasons. My mistress had banished me from Hatfield House, on the advice of her old governess, Kat Ashley. The Queen had reluctantly dropped the charge of treason against her younger sister, but Elizabeth was still out of favour, and now convinced that the presence of a witch in her household – however secret – would get her arrested again. I was back with my father at our family home in Oxfordshire, but I felt certain my destiny would lead me back to the Lady Elizabeth in the future. And to stand against my enemies, to learn best how to use my powers, I needed help – a magickal help that could only come from the world of the spirits.

‘Take two steps forward. Enough. You are now almost at the edge of the circle.’ I heard the rustle of his conjuror’s robe as he rose from his knees behind me. ‘Wait for my word.’

The bare flesh on my arms grew goose-pimpled as I waited, and not just from the cold.

I had no doubt that this summoning would succeed. Richard was apprentice to Master John Dee, the Queen’s astrologer, a man famed as a conjuror and magician, and had learned the craft from his master. But this was still a dangerous spell.

Richard struck the bell three times with his athame, then raised his voice. ‘Hear us, spirit winds of the north! We ask that you heed our call, by the power of fire, and by the power of sacrifice.’

He paused, and I guessed he must be pouring a dollop of thick, dark blood from the altar cup into his palm.

‘And by the power of this blood.’

His wet finger brushed first my forehead and chin, then stroked from one cheek to the other, completing the sign of the cross in blood.

‘May the stars look kindly on our enterprise,’ Richard continued in a ringing voice. ‘May the dead hear us and obey. By the sacred time, by the dark of the moon, by these spells and this circle, I ask that the spirit be subdued to our will and appear before us.’

A thrill ran through me as Dee’s apprentice turned away, beginning to chant the ninefold charm. My breathing shallow, I struggled to contain my excitement as the spell came to completion. From behind my blindfold I caught a brief flicker – the candles all dipping together – then the room grew abruptly cold, as though the spirits were approaching.

I lifted my arms in an age-old gesture of welcome, waiting for Richard to finish.

At last he leaned close to my ear, and his breath scorched my cheek. ‘Call her,’ he whispered, and I opened my mouth to obey.

But at that moment I felt a chill draught on my bare feet, then heard Richard growl under his breath in frustration.

‘What do *you* want, Spaniard?’ he demanded. ‘This is no place for you.’

Impatiently I tore at my blindfold.

Alejandro stood framed in the doorway, his face dark with tension, raising a lantern to illuminate the room.

‘What are you doing up here, Meg?’ Alejandro stared first at me, then the magickal paraphernalia scattered about the chalk-drawn circle. His gaze flicked to the young man by my side. To the long shift I wore – perhaps a little scanty to be wearing when alone with another man. ‘And with *him*?’

Oh, Alejandro. What a pest you are, I thought. Yet my heart flooded with tenderness at the sight of him. My Spanish betrothed, so passionate and intense: dark-haired, dark-eyed, graceful as a dancer, both on foot and on

horseback. He was strong too, muscular and broad-shouldered, skilled with a long sword, a born soldier. And glaring at Dee's apprentice with undisguised jealousy as though he intended to draw that dagger at his belt and use it.

There was no doubt in my heart that Alejandro loved me, nor that I loved him. Whether we could spend our lives together was less certain. The military priesthood he still hoped to join might permit their priests to marry, but I was convinced his masters would not extend that courtesy to a *witch*.

But he had still risked disrupting this spell, and I could not help my flicker of irritation.

'Working a spell,' I told him, 'as you can plainly see. Why have you interrupted us?'

Alejandro set his lantern on the table and looked at me broodingly. 'What manner of spell?'

He only wants to protect me, I reminded myself, counting slowly to ten before answering.

Richard put a hand on my arm as I drew breath. 'Wait,' he said urgently. 'Don't tell the priest. It's too dangerous.'

'Keep out of this, boy,' Alejandro snarled, though in fact the two young men were about the same age. Richard was a head shorter though, and lean as a greyhound, so he always appeared younger. And I could see from Richard's tightening expression how much that jibe irked him. But he should not have called Alejandro 'priest', when he knew perfectly well that he was still only a novice.

I held up a hand, silencing them. 'I am attempting to conjure the spirit of my mother, Catherine Canley, and speak with her.'

Alejandro stared from me to Richard. 'Are you mad? Or have you forgotten what happened when you summoned Anne Boleyn? You conjured a creature out of Hell along with the dead queen.'

'I have not forgotten. This time will be different.'

‘Why?’ he demanded, his dark brows twitching together in disbelief. ‘Because you have Master Dee’s errand boy at your side?’

I saw the love and concern in Alejandro’s tortured face, and longed to smooth away his frown. But he was right, at least in part. The spell was dangerous, and possibly foolhardy. But we had to try. There were still questions I needed to answer, not just about my enemy Marcus Dent, but about myself and the extent of my own power.

‘John Dee himself was unable to lay that malevolent spirit to rest,’ he continued, watching me closely. ‘It nearly led to your *death*, Meg! Do you seriously believe his apprentice will know what to do if a demon comes out of the void instead of your mother’s ghost?’

‘You don’t understand, Alejandro. There are things my mother may be able to tell us,’ I muttered, folding my arms tightly across my chest. ‘Important things.’

Much as I loved him, I did not like my betrothed interfering with my magick. He did not understand how much it meant to me.

And how *could* he understand? He had grown up wishing to enter the Catholic priesthood, while at the same time I had been training to be a witch. He was Spanish, I was English. We were complete opposites.

But we had one thing in common. Alejandro never gave up easily either.

‘Promise me you will wait until Master Dee can come in person and work the spell for you. If you must raise your mother’s spirit, I would trust the conjuror before his apprentice to keep you safe.’

Richard snarled, ‘My master works for Bishop Bonner in London now, as well you know. He cannot be spared from his work.’

‘His *work*?’ Alejandro flashed back at him. ‘Is that what you call it, sniffing out heretics for the bonfire?’

‘Master Dee had no choice but to accept Bonner’s invitation to work for him. Even the Lady Elizabeth agreed that he must, for it was either that or lose his own life.’ Richard was openly hostile now, as ready for a fight as Alejandro. ‘And he may sniff them out, but it is the Spanish Inquisition, your unholy Catholic priests, who light the bonfires under them.’

For a moment there was silence, both of them glaring at each other. Then Alejandro turned his head to look at me. His gaze moved over my face, no doubt noting the dried streaks of blood. His mouth tightened.

‘You insist on continuing with this spell, *mi querida*?’

‘Yes,’ I said uncomfortably.

His eyes flickered hotly, but to my surprise he did not continue to argue. ‘You are a stubborn wretch, Meg Lytton, you know that?’ His voice grew husky, his Spanish accent very pronounced. ‘*Muy bien*, if I cannot persuade you to stop, then I shall stay and keep guard over you myself.’ To my dismay, he closed the door and stood in front of it, crossing his arms. ‘Proceed.’

Richard and I exchanged wry glances. This was not exactly how we had planned the spell to go.

‘Oh, very well.’ I knew it would be impossible to shift him. ‘Unless you wish to stop, Richard, and try again another night?’

‘What, and miss the best alignment of planets?’

Impatiently Richard gestured me to step back into place, then replaced the blindfold so that I was once more in darkness. ‘The circle has not been broken. We shall continue.’ His voice grew curt. ‘Extinguish that lantern, priest. And do not interrupt us again, whatever you may see or hear.’

Blindfolded, I listened to Richard’s rhythmic chanting as he slipped back through the ninefold charm, weaving it about the circle once more.

At first I was very much aware of Alejandro in the room, but then my witch's mind settled into the melodic words and actions of the spell, and I began to sway to their dance-like rhythm, my fingers once more tingling with power. It was like falling into a dream, except that all my senses were on fire at the same time, conscious of everything around me, the creaks and shifts of the old house where I had been born and grew up, birds calling to each other outside in the gathering dusk, the thin whistle of wind under the eaves . . .

'Call her,' Richard whispered in my ear, just as he had done before our spell was interrupted.

'Let the curtain be parted twixt life and death!' I lifted my arms in welcome. 'O spirits of the departed, hear me! Catherine Canley, hear me! I who am thy daughter call thee out from the shades of the other world. Come, spirit of my mother, and stand before thy living flesh and blood.'

The room grew chill and my voice faltered, forgetting the words Richard had taught me.

It was hard not to recall the last time I had summoned the spirit of the dead in this way. Inexperienced in the ways of dark magick, I had dared to call forth the Princess Elizabeth's executed mother, Anne Boleyn, and she had come to us in the darkness at Hampton Court, a silvery floating lady with sad eyes. But then a terrible storm had descended upon the circle, whipping violently at us, threatening to tear apart the palace brick by brick, the wind howling in our faces . . .

My senses were suddenly assailed by the powerful scent of burning rosemary; Richard kneeling behind me within the safety of the circle, chanting under his breath, had scorched the dry sprig in the candle flame.

I staggered slightly under a sense of weight, and heard Alejandro draw a sharp breath.

'She is here,' Richard breathed.

I had known before he spoke, my flesh goose-pimpled with cold once more, my heart beating thunderously in the silence. There was indeed a presence in the room with us, and it was watching me. The tiny hairs lifted on the back of my neck and my scalp tingled. It was like smelling smoke on a dry afternoon, but not knowing from which direction it came.

'Madre di Dios,' Alejandro muttered, and I guessed he must be making the sign of the cross.

Triumph licked like fire along my veins. I dragged off my blindfold and glanced about, my eyes adjusting to the glimmer of candlelight.

I had been prepared for fear. Perhaps even terror. My mother had been a powerful witch, my aunt had often told me that, and to summon such a spirit was always dangerous, even for her own child.

What I had not expected was to feel overwhelmed by love.

My mother had died when I was a young child, and I had little memory of her alive. A haunting scent, laughing blue eyes and a pair of warm enveloping arms about me, that was all I could remember. Catherine Canley had always been just a name to me, a myth, a ghost from my past. Yet here she was before us, a beautiful woman with long fair hair and the same striking blue eyes I remembered.

She floated just beyond the reach of my arms, watching me intently. I had been warned not to look too deeply into the eyes of the dead, and knew not to touch any part of the apparition. But indeed it was hard not to stare, for her face was my own. It was like looking into a mirror.

'M . . . Mother,' I stammered. 'Catherine Canley.'

The ghost of my mother drifted closer, stretching out slender arms, but stopped just short of the circle.

'Meg, my dearest child.' Her voice, like that of the dead Queen Anne, was dry as the rustle of leaves on the wind.

But her clear eyes held a warning. 'Do not touch me. Or you too will be drawn into the land of the dead.'

I nodded, my eyes filling with tears. My mother was so beautiful and ethereal, her skin pale as marble, even her lips, parting now in a smile. It was so cruel that we had been parted when I was only five years old. She could have taught me so much . . .

'My sister Jane taught you all you needed to know,' my mother said softly, reading my thoughts as though I had spoken them aloud. 'Do not grieve for me, Meg. It was my time to leave this earth. And your time will come too. But not yet. And not until you have accomplished those deeds which you are destined to do.'

It was hard to know if she was speaking aloud or inside my head, or even if the other two in the room could hear her. I was entranced by the rustling whisper of her voice and could not seem to tear my gaze from hers.

Richard cleared his throat behind me, and abruptly I was able to look away. We did not have much time to gather the information I needed, he was reminding me with that cough. These apparitions rarely lasted more than a few moments.

I struggled to shake off the cloying spell of her presence, trying to recall my mission. 'Mother, I need to . . . to ask you something.'

'You want to know about the witchfinder called Marcus Dent.'

I swallowed. 'Yes.'

Marcus Dent. Witchfinder. The man who had condemned Aunt Jane to the stake. Once my suitor, now my mortal enemy . . .

I wondered if the others were cold too, but did not dare look at Alejandro, a shadowy figure to my left in the darkness. He was standing outside the safety of our circle, I suddenly realized. If my mother's spirit chose to approach Alejandro, perhaps even to touch him, it was possible she

could kill him. And although she was my mother, I knew the spirits of the dead could never be entirely trusted.

‘The man Dent is dangerous, my child.’

‘He wants me dead,’ I whispered. ‘It was prophesied – some years ago in Germany, by a sorceress he had condemned – that a witch would kill him, and Marcus believes that witch to be me. Is he right?’

‘I cannot tell you that.’ She paused, half closing her eyes as though listening to voices from the shadows about us. ‘But I can tell you that when you sent Marcus Dent into the void that lies beyond this world, he ripped away some of your own magick. And he is learning all he can about the craft so that his magick will grow in power. Soon it will surpass your own if you do not stop him.’

I winced, though we had half suspected as much already about my enemy. To hear it from my mother’s lips was terrible, but I did not have time to examine that information now.

‘Is he right? *Is* the prophecy about me?’ I pressed her.

‘I do not have an answer for you.’

Frustration built in me. It was almost as though she were deliberately blocking me.

But this was my mother. I looked into her eyes and saw a flicker of sympathy there. Sympathy and sadness. I knew instinctively that she would answer if she could, but something was holding her back. Some obscure rule of the spirit world, perhaps. Then I remembered how John Dee had taught me the correct way to question a spirit and interpret the answers. There were indeed distinct rules to the summoning of a spirit, and I had not been following them.

Or perhaps I had not asked the right question yet.

‘Mother,’ I began carefully, ‘is there any way you can help me to find the answer for myself?’

Her look grew keen, her blue eyes suddenly glowing. ‘Do you have the book?’

I stared, then shot a quick glance at Richard. *Book?*
Dee's apprentice shrugged, his face blank.

'Which book?' I asked.

'My journal.' The spirit of my mother moved closer, her intense blue gaze locked on mine. 'My book of spells.'

I held her gaze, so excited by this information that I could barely respond at first. My fingers were tingling furiously, my body prickling with a sudden violent cold. Outside the house I could hear the whine of the wind rising. There was a storm coming.

'Y . . . you left behind a spell book?' I tried to contain my agitation. 'Where is it hidden? Can you tell me, Mother?'

Her smile seemed strained. 'I have already said too much. It is hidden. The place will be revealed to you. Watch and see.'

'But is it here at Lytton Park? Can you at least tell me that?'

But my mother was fading, growing ever more silvery and spectre-like. 'Watch and see,' she repeated faintly. Already I could see the wall through her body.

Panic filled me as I realized we were losing her. 'Wait, please.' My voice faltered. 'I . . . I love you . . .'

Her smiling look reached my heart. But it turned swiftly back to sadness. 'You will be asked to make a hard choice, Meg.' Her voice was barely audible against the growing roar of the wind. 'Let your heart guide you. Now Queen Mary's husband has left England, leaving her bed empty, her malice towards her sister grows. For she knows King Philip desires the princess in her place.'

I stared, wondering what my mother could possibly know of King Philip, the handsome Spanish king who had married Mary Tudor last year, then deserted her to wage war against the French.

'When I was still living on this earth,' my mother continued, 'I served the princess's mother, the beautiful Anne Boleyn, yet could not save her from King Henry's

cruelty. Now Elizabeth's enemies threaten her with false accusation too. But we Canley women are powerful. Never forget that, Meg. Do not be afraid to use your gift, as I once was . . .'

I felt tears in my eyes. My mother had failed to save Queen Anne from execution. Now it felt as though I had failed Queen Anne's daughter by allowing myself to be dismissed from her side.

Her body was fading to a silvery vapour. The visitation was almost over. My mother turned at the last moment and looked directly at Alejandro. Her eyes seemed to widen.

'Such a bright light . . .' she whispered.

Alejandro had been frozen throughout the summoning, his gaze fixed on my mother, a curious intensity in his face.

I wanted to shout a warning, but could not seem to speak. It was dangerous to touch a spirit. I had been drawn out of the protective circle during my last summoning, and died a magickal death. Alejandro was not even within the circle.

But as her hands stretched out towards him, Alejandro took a cautious step backward. He bowed, courteous even to a ghost, murmuring in Spanish even as he remained just out of her reach.

Then my mother was gone.

The four candles about the circle flickered and were still. The noise of the wind fell sharply away.

It was over.

My body was trembling, the raw power of the spell still throbbing and coursing through me.

I swayed there, head bowed, eyes closed, trying to shake off the dizzying effects of the spell. My feet seem to be floating like the spirit's. It felt as though I had been drenched in ice-water, wrung out like a cloth, then tipped upside down to dry. It was not a comfortable sensation.

Gradually I became aware of a cold draught.

I looked up and promptly wished I had kept my eyes closed, my heart beginning to race.

My bedchamber had disappeared, Alejandro and Richard along with it.

I was soaring like a bird through the chill midwinter night, snow whitening the track leading away from Lytton Park, the dark air humming and alive with strange power.

TWO

Marcus Dent

I was still clad in my thin white shift. A mercifully long garment, it flapped about my ankles as I was dragged above the treetops, struggling in vain against the spell that had wrenched me away from my friends. I would have seemed to any observer like a great white owl haunting the night, though in truth I felt more like the sorrowful ghost I had summoned. Now I knew how it must feel to be tugged from eternal sleep to stand again in the world of the living, forced to obey a greater power.

This being a vision though, there was no one about to observe my undignified flight. Not until I circled the broken roof of an old hayloft and realized where the spell was taking me.

Home Farm.

The site was a desolate ruin now: a collection of empty and tumbledown buildings a few acres past the wood, their fallen stones overgrown with long grass and brambles. Once though it had been a thriving farm, attached to the big house and providing for our family's needs. But my great-grandfather had allied himself to some minor uprising, and though he had been spared execution, our family fell out of favour at court. So Home Farm had been abandoned, our coffers not deep enough to pay for its upkeep, and now the livestock was kept at the big house instead, and vegetables grown in our own gardens.

The night was very still here, almost expectant. I glanced down, and saw a fair-haired man below me, looking up.

It was Marcus Dent.

Witchfinder, would-be friend to the all-powerful Spanish Inquisition, and my aunt's murderer.

I felt raw terror for a moment, then deliberately slowed my breathing, trying to control my fear. I did not want Marcus to think he had any advantage over me.

This was the man who had once asked me to marry him, claiming he loved me, yet now wished solely for my destruction. My mother's spirit had told me he was dangerous. And probably more witch than witchfinder now.

That much I had already known for myself.

Last time we met, Marcus Dent had tricked me into climbing his magickal tower, and there attempted to separate my head from my body. When I managed to escape, he shifted shape, pursuing me first as a hawk, then scuttling away in the form of a black rat. I had always suspected that Marcus had taken on some of my power while in the void, and my mother's words tonight had confirmed that. But how such a transfer of power could have happened, and what it might signify for the future, I still did not understand.

The darkness shifted, jolting sideways.

Suddenly I was on the ground, standing in front of him. Beyond him stood the old pigsty, its crumbling timbers whitened by frost and overgrown with brambles, its door half hanging off its hinges.

How on earth had Marcus managed to break my protective spells and get me here?

Perhaps we had created a weakness in our barrier of spells with the summoning. After all, my mother's spirit had got in past those spells. Perhaps Marcus had brought me out the same way.

Unless this was all happening in my head.

But how to be sure?

The stars hung far above, cold and vaguely threatening in their majesty, and for a moment the moon peeked out from

its hood of cloud, watching us with a doleful face. I could not see the wintry ground but felt the cold strike up through my feet, and shivered.

Marcus studied me in silence, then smiled. 'Meg Lytton,' he said with heavy emphasis at last, as though my name were some kind of charm.

'Master Dent.'

He was dressed all in black, hands clasped behind his back, sleek fair head - no cap - tilted to one side as he considered me.

I searched for the scars he had received when I sent him spinning into the void, but his face was unclear, as though there was a mist across it, shimmering whenever he moved or spoke, like a watery reflection being stirred.

He was not really there, I realized.

And neither was I.

I was hugely relieved to know this was a vision, not truth. But it was still a shock to be looking directly at Marcus Dent. He looked real enough, I thought. Too frighteningly real.

Beware a traveller who comes over water, over land.

My late aunt, also a witch and the woman who had trained me to follow in her footsteps, had warned me to beware such a man. We had initially feared her prophecy was about Alejandro de Castillo, fresh come from Spain, but now I knew it had concerned this villain, Marcus Dent, who had recently returned from Germany at the time.

How long it seemed since Aunt Jane had been my tutor, and we had lived in peace together in this place, secretly practising our craft under the full moon each month.

But then my father had forced me into the disgraced Lady Elizabeth's service, and Dent had burned Aunt Jane at the stake as a witch. Only last spring he had accused me of witchcraft too, condemning me to face trial by water. I had found the strength to escape my bonds that day and turn my skill against the witchfinder. I had opened a gate into

the void beyond our world and Marcus Dent had been sucked into darkness.

He had returned, of course. Many times more powerful, not quite human, and now intent on my death.

Nothing was ever simple with dark magick.

'Very well, Marcus, you have my attention.' I looked at my tormentor boldly. 'What do you want? Why are you in my dreams again?'

'Is this a dream, Meg?'

The air was cold against my cheek, the icy track beneath my feet solid, and I could hear the faint rustling of some wild creature in the overgrown ruins.

He was right. It did not feel like a dream.

'A waking vision, then. What do you want, Marcus?'

There was a flicker of rage in his face, hurriedly suppressed. 'I want you to know that you will fail.'

'Fail at what?'

'The quest I am setting you.'

'Go away, Marcus. I'm not interested in your games.'

'You will be.'

I looked at him, distrusting his smile. 'You can forget your quest. And keep your distance from Alejandro,' I told him. 'Or I'll make you sorry you came back from the void.'

'Threatening me, Meg?' The witchfinder's confidence infuriated me as always. 'You are hardly in a position to be threatening anyone, my dear. But perhaps you mistakenly believe it will not be long before your mistress inherits the throne, and your fortune changes with hers.'

I raised my eyebrows, not answering.

He showed white teeth, shaking his head as though I had spoken. 'Wrong again, Meg. Your mistress is no closer to the throne than she was, for the wayward princess has been making the most unfortunate friends in your absence. And when the Queen hears of this latest scandal, Elizabeth will be thrown back in the Tower of London where she belongs.' He smiled with satisfaction - Marcus Dent was no

friend to the Lady Elizabeth. And that was partly my fault . . .

'I no longer serve the Lady Elizabeth. And I'm serious about Alejandro. Stay away from him, do you hear?' I struggled to keep my voice level, my hands clenched into fists by my side. I did not know what he was trying to say about the Lady Elizabeth, but it sounded like mere nonsense, designed to distract me from his intentions towards my betrothed. 'You can stay away from me too, while you're at it. I've had enough of your foul company to last me into Hell itself.'

Behind him the outline of the pigsty wavered, and I caught again that odd rustling sound, more muffled now, like some unseen animal was digging in the ruins.

'Come, Meg, you don't mean that. We were so close once. And I like to think you might come to love me if we met in Hell.'

'Not a chance.'

'That remains to be seen.' His gaze moved slowly down my body, and I felt my skin crawl under that scrutiny. 'Would you not rather spend your days and nights with a man you are destined to kill than a man who is destined to kill *you*?'

The witchfinder was speaking of the two prophecies that touched me. First that Marcus Dent would be killed by a witch with the power to summon a dead king - a feat I had already achieved that spring when I raised Henry Tudor from his grave. And second, that Alejandro's wife would die in childbirth, a curse laid on him by a dying witch he had mistakenly betrayed.

'Who can you trust in this business?' Marcus continued smoothly when I did not reply. 'That is the question you will have to answer.'

'I don't have to answer any question of yours, Marcus Dent,' I said hotly, losing my slender grip on my temper. 'You are nothing to me. You are a shadow in the darkness.'

‘Of course,’ the witchfinder murmured, watching me with raised eyebrows. ‘I am a shadow. I am what you made me, in fact.’

‘I thought I made you *dead*.’

He was smiling again, the thin curve of his lips malevolent. ‘Death is life’s mirror, only the glass is kept dark. A lesson you should have learned by now, my young witch.’

He took a step backwards, and I realized that his outline was fading, just as my mother’s spirit had faded in my chamber as the summoning-spell wore off. Already I could see snow-covered brambles and the timber ruins of the old pigsty more sharply through his body.

The place was silent again now, the wild creature I had heard vanished into the night, though above our heads a brilliant single star was shining, bright and clear in the heavens.

His ghostly smile lingered in the darkness a moment after his body had disappeared, taunting me.

‘When you are ready to face me again, Meg Lytton, you will easily find me.’ Then the last trace of Marcus Dent was gone, only a thin echo of his voice floating back to me on the chilly air. ‘Unless I find you first.’

The room was dark, suffocatingly so. I swam slowly up out of the vision, my head aching. Someone had wrapped me in a warming cloak or blanket, and was tilting a cup of something spicy to my lips. A fiery liquid burned my throat and I struggled, pushing the cup away.

‘Faugh!’ I spluttered. ‘What is that stuff?’

‘She’s awake,’ Richard said drily, and straightened up, smiling down at me. ‘Thank God. I was beginning to think we would never get you back, Meg. Your father is coming up the stairs to see what all the commotion is about. I’d better head him off before he bursts in here and has a fit.’

You know how little he likes your Spanish priest, and if he should catch the two of you like *that . . .*’

Richard vanished through the door, and a few seconds later I heard him talking on the stairs in a soothing voice, using his own not insubstantial magickal powers to persuade my father back down to his study.

I frowned, still light-headed, not quite understanding what Richard had meant.

If he should catch the two of you like that . . .

That was when I realized that I was lying on the floor in my bedchamber, my shift rucked up about my bare knees in a most undignified fashion, my head on Alejandro’s lap. My face flushed with embarrassment and I struggled to sit up, dragging my shift down to cover my legs.

‘What on earth . . .?’

‘Hush,’ Alejandro insisted, holding me by the shoulders. He did not sound upset but his smile was strained. ‘It’s awkward, I agree, but I don’t think you should move yet. You’re very pale. Have another sip of Richard’s concoction. I don’t know what’s in it, and it smells and probably tastes foul too, but it brought you back to us.’

‘What happened?’

‘You tell me.’ His gaze searched my face upside down. ‘Your mother’s ghost vanished and you collapsed. You lay still for a moment, then gave a dreadful shriek and started drumming your heels on the floor and waving your arms about like a lunatic.’

I blinked, considering that information, and my face grew hotter than ever.

Richard came limping back into the room. He had been beaten by his drunken father as a child, one leg broken so cruelly it had never quite recovered. His bad leg was what made him sharp with Alejandro, I felt sure of it, for where Richard was physically awkward, Alejandro was tall, handsome and startlingly graceful at times.

Besides, Richard was in love with me. He had told me so himself only a few weeks ago when trying to stop me pursuing Marcus Dent. So to see me with my head in Alejandro's lap must hurt.

Richard closed the door behind him with a quiet click. 'No need to fret, I told your father you had suffered a nightmare,' he told me, seeing my worried face. 'I assured him that I had only come up to check you were all right, and to administer a sleeping draught. Your father seemed to believe me. Though you never know. Perhaps he thinks there's something going on between us.'

Above me, Alejandro said nothing in response to this but ground his teeth audibly.

'Don't even joke about that,' I warned Richard.

'Very well. I can do a straight face when required. Though I suspect your father would be ecstatic if he thought Alejandro was no longer your betrothed.' Richard looked at me, dropping the act. 'Some kind of vision, was it?'

I nodded.

'That's not uncommon following the raising of a spirit. I should have warned you before we started, but I didn't want to frighten you.'

'Thanks.'

'You're welcome.' Richard rekindled the lantern and hung it from a hook on the wall. Then he knelt to examine me, his face shuttered as though he did not want me to suspect how worried he had been. But I could tell from the prickly manner in which he spoke that my seizure had frightened him. 'Now to check what harm has been done to you, if any. Then you can tell me all about what you saw. Hands first.'

I held out my hands, but squinted in pain. The light from that lantern was too bright. Or else I was feverish. My head was throbbing. A memory was straining to be let through, squeezing between the darkness of that other world and the brightness of this harsh new one.