

# Kits

By Faith Hunter

I wrapped the tools of my trade in padded cloth and secured them with Velcro. The pack of stakes, knives, and my silver traced main-gauche was small enough to fit into the saddlebags of the old Yamaha bike, and still leave room for a change of clothes and odds and ends. The Yamaha wasn't my dream bike, but it would do for a while longer, until I earned enough to get the Harley I lusted after.

I tucked my money into the inside pocket of my jeans beside the red lipstick I favored. I French braided my hip-length hair into a careless plait and tucked it into my leather jacket where it wouldn't be in the way or get windblown too badly. The jacket was used, purchased at a consignment store, and it still reeked of the last owner, at least to my sensitive nose. I'd tried spraying it with scent-killers, but nothing worked. If I took down the vamp I was gunning for and earned the bounty, I had promised myself a brand new leather riding jacket. That and two real vamp-killers to replace the less-than-perfectly balanced main-gauche a local silversmith had modified with silver. Last, I adjusted my gold nugget on its double chain for riding, the necklace my only jewelry.

I looked over the small efficiency apartment I rented, making sure I was leaving nothing important behind, and locked the door after me. I helmeted up, keyed on the Yamaha, and headed out of town. I had a gig hunting down a suspected young rogue vamp that was terrorizing the inhabitants outside of Day Book, North Carolina. But first, I was stopping off at a local restaurant to pick up a small tracking charm that would let me follow the whacked out vamp through rough country, and the pay the balance of the cost to the earth witch who'd made it.

I parked the Yamaha out front of the herb shop and eatery and entered. Seven Sassy Sisters' Herb Shop and Café, owned and run by the Everhart sisters, had a booming business, both locally and on the Internet, selling herbal mixtures and teas by bulk and by the ounce, the shop itself serving high quality brewed teas, specialty coffees, brunch and lunch daily, and dinner on weekends. It was mostly vegetarian fare, whipped up by the eldest sister, water witch, professor, and three-star chef, Evangelina Everhart. Carmen Miranda Everhart Newton, an air witch, newly married and pregnant, ran the register and took care of ordering supplies. Two other witch sisters, twins Boadacia and Elizabeth ran the herb store, while two wholly human sisters, Regan and Amelia, were wait staff. I was looking for Molly Meagan Everhart Trueblood. Names with moxie seemed to run in the family. I'm Jane Yellowrock, a woman with no past and with lots of secrets.

I took a booth at the big window overlooking the city and ordered my usual. I had just discovered Eggs Benedict, and a double order would just about keep up with my caloric requirements until lunch. Regan, one of the human sisters, tilted her red head and said, "Honey, if I ate like you I'd be bigger than a house. Hey, we got us a new Himalayan Oolong. It's a semi-fermented Nepal tea; Evangelina says it combines the characteristics of a High-grown Darjeeling and a soulful Oolong." She rolled her eyes and tapped her ordering pad with her pencil. "But you know Evangelina. She can wax poetic about tea better than most anybody."

I didn't really know Evangelina; the eldest witch sister wasn't exactly a warm and cuddly kinda gal, and since I lack a lot by way of social skills, we hadn't hit it off. Also, Evangelina seemed to have noticed that I wasn't completely human, and though she hadn't yet come right out and said so, I could tell she had strong reservations about the friendship developing between Molly and me.

I ate the delectable Eggs Benedict and drank the totally fabulous tea, sipping my third cup with my eyes closed so I could enjoy all the delicate flavors—the flowery, fruity aroma, the clean smooth taste on my tongue. I wasn't a rich woman, but the quality of the tea was well worth the price, at four bucks per half an ounce of dry leaves. My appreciation of the tea went a long way to endearing me to Evangelina, who I noticed watching me through the diner style window between kitchen and dining room. Her mouth wasn't as pursed as normal, and her shoulders weren't quite as unyielding.

Over that last cup of tea, I asked Regan for Molly—who I figured was in the stock room or the office doing accounts—so I could pick up and pay for the tracking charm. Regan slid into the seat opposite me and cupped her chin in her hand. Serious gray eyes met mine across the table. “Molly didn't come in to work today. And she didn't call. And she's not answering her phone. Evangelina's mad, but worried, too, you know? Me and Amelia's going out to her place after work. You want I should take the money to her and bring back your charm?”

My Beast sat up inside my mind, kneading me with sharp mental claws. I'm not prescient. Not a lick. But a chill finger of disquiet slid up my spine with the words. Molly was supposed to be here today. She was expecting me. And though I didn't know her well, I knew she was ethical from her toes to her eyeballs. I set the tea cup into the saucer with a dull clink. “You think she'd mind if I took her the check and picked up the charm?” At Regan's suddenly wary expression, I said, “I've been by the house before. When I dropped off the deposit for the charm.”

Witches were notoriously cautious and guarded of their privacy. They had been persecuted for thousands of years until the mid 20th century when vamps and witches came out of the closet. They were currently negotiating for equal civil rights in the US, but the congress and the courts were having a tough time integrating the expanded lifespan of vamps and the power potential of witches into a code of law. And in many places, the human population had a long way to go in accepting witches as anything other than the evil creatures portrayed in history, some scripture, and fiction.

Regan looked me over in my biker jacket, jeans, worn-out butt-stomper boots, and glanced back at the kitchen. I understood and sighed. “Go ask Evangelina. Though she'll probably tell you no way. Evangelina doesn't like me much.”

Regan snorted though her tiny, pert nose. “My big sister doesn't like anyone much. You say you been to Molly's?”

I recited the address and said, “It's a double wide mobile home with pale green trim and about two acres of grass for Big Evan to mow. He was mowing it last Saturday when I took the deposit by, mowing with a big yellow riding mower. Big Evan is redheaded like Molly, bearded, not like

Molly, and built like a mountain.” I thought a moment more and added, “And her kids are actually cute. Angie Baby has so many dolls it’s hard to find her bed under them all.” Angie Baby was the nickname used by six-year old Angelina’s parents, which gave me another bona fide.

“And on the wall of Angelina’s bedroom?”

I grinned. “Noah’s Ark with unicorns, griffins and pixies on the ramp up.” I couldn’t help the softness I knew was taking over my smile when I said, “She climbed up in my lap and introduced her doll to me. Like it was alive.” I shook my head and tucked my chin, looking at Regan under my brows. “I have never talked to a doll before.”

Regan chuckled. “Not even with you were a kid?”

I remembered the children’s home where I was raised and the smile slid off my face. “No. Not even when I was a kid.”

Regan studied my face and the change of emotion there. After a moment she nodded. “Okay, so if you’re such big friends why ask me if you can go?”

That cold finger of unease brushed my spine again. “You think something doesn’t feel right about Molly not coming in to work today, and not calling.” I shrugged slightly, lifting one shoulder. “I’m not a friend, yet, but I like her. And I feel pretty worried too.”

Regan stood, smoothing her waitress’ apron down her jeans-clad legs. “Tell her to call us, okay?” Her face took on a mock-angry look, “And to not do this to us again.”

I tossed a twenty on the table. “I’ll be appropriately irritated for you.”

Beast’s claws gripped my mind in a steady pull, keeping me alert as I took the tunnel out of town, making good time to Molly’s. But Beast’s feeling of worry grew on me hard and fast, helped along by the odd, dark gray cloud that seemed to hang over the crest of a hill in the general direction where I was headed. I had a feeling that the cloud wasn’t natural. And that it was perched above Moll’s house.

Kits, Beast thought at me. Kits in danger.

The weather had turned off cool and dry early for this time of year. It was usually still hot and muggy in late September, but an unexpected cool spell had rolled in from the northwest, and though the trees were still dressed in summer greens, winter already had teeth. The wind picked up as I rode, and shoved into me like a warning hand, pushing me back, holding me away as I climbed the hill to Molly’s. And the cloud that had perched serenely on her hill from a distance, swirled in angry grays as I bent over the bike and gunned the motor. No way was it natural. Something magical was going seriously wrong.

The wind had torn down power lines, they lay drooping in the fields and hanging on tree limbs. Higher up the road, they swirled like snakes on the wind, spitting sparks. Branches flew through the air. Rain pelted in irregular spits, as if the cloud couldn't quite make up its mind to storm.

When I was still a half mile from her house I stopped the bike to call Seven Sassy Sisters for backup. But I had no bars. And I had no business heading into witch-problems. I should leave. Uncertain, I looked into the sky. The air was heavy and dense with moisture. The cloud thickened and divided and coalesced back into one densely packed, dark thunderhead; it sparked with lightning as energy built up inside. The cloud began to boil. It darkened and spread out fingers like claws, as if it drew in energy from the calmer air around it.

Kits. Beast said. Kits now!

But when I turned the key to ride the rest of way, the bike motor was silent. Dead. And from the hilltop, I heard a scream. Tinny and thin with the distance. But a scream. And it was Molly.

Kits! Beast screamed. Run!

I dug in my booted toes, racing uphill. I'm faster than a human even in human form, thanks to the years I spent in Beast form, and with Beast flooding my system with adrenaline, I reached the yard in seconds. Just as the lightning stabbed at the ground. Blue lightning. Like nothing out of nature. And the wind swirled into a mini-tornado, black wind sparked with yellow lights like fireflies caught in a maelstrom.

I almost stopped. I did not want to do this. But Beast reached into me and forced me on, her scream rising into my throat.

The mobile home rocked on its foundation in the wind. Lightning struck, a sere blue flash, throwing me down, sizzling through me. I somersaulted on the dry ground. Small blue flames licked at the grass. A blast of rain hit beside me, half frozen, and put out the fire. Molly screamed again. Big Evan's voice shouted. They were in trouble. Big trouble. I rolled and to my feet and raced to the house.

Blue sparkles and a gray mist flowed down from the cloud. I recognized magic, both icy and scorching, undirected, dangerous. Searching. And.... Almost sentient. Growing more powerful as I raced.

I was almost to the mobile home when the swirling tornado spiraled down, speeding, threatening. And touched the home.

The wind ripped at the house. Tearing. Questing. And it tore up a corner of the roof. Directly over Angie Baby's room. Lightning struck. The boom deafened. Its flash blinded. My hair raised, pulling itself from my braid. Rain slashed at the earth like claws. The air was so full of magic I couldn't take a breath.

Beast screamed. Flooded my body with strength. I tore the door from its hinges. The wind gathered it up and yanked it away, into the storm. Overhead, the roof and ceiling peeled back, rolling up like an old-fashioned tin can. The storm roared in, brutal and sadistic. Rapacious. The blue mist swirled in filling the front room with power. Uncontrolled, undirected.

Over the sound of the wind, I heard Molly and Big Evan, chanting what sounded like a prayer. Angie screamed.

Kits! Beast screamed.

I dove into the mist.

Magic poured over me. Fangs of power bit into me like angry snakes. Magical energy like venom shot into my bloodstream. And my body began to shift.

I fought the pull of the change, holding onto my own shape. Screaming with frustration. “No! Not now!” My own magic thrummed through me, feeding on the witch magic. Black motes of darkness. Gray mist against the blue.

Pain, pain, pain. Knives of power sliced into me, separating muscle from bone. Flaying skin away. Setting fire to nerves. Choosing the only shape I could take without planning, tools, and trappings to guide me.

My Beast screamed. I screamed.

Pelt erupted through skin. Joints slid and twisted. Claws pierced my fingertips. Killing teeth filled my mouth.

I was Beast. I screamed anger against the storm. Clawed off Jane-clothes. Leaped across room. Wind plucked at me. Tore at me. I raced down hall. Into girl-kit’s room. Human man was sitting with eyes closed, back to wall. Talking to wind. Human woman was standing against other wall. Smell of fear and desperation leaked from pores. Panic. Storm was awake. Angry. Not theirs to control.

Wind snaked into room. Grew in strength, like fist with claws. Bashed out windows. Picked up human things and carried them away. Fear smell grew. Hers, man’s, kit’s. Younger kit screamed from other place, fear on fear on fear.

Female kit was on bed. Screaming. Afraid. Fear like human knives inside her. Power was coming from her fear—and feeding storm. I—Beast—understood fear.

I leaped to bed, standing over kit. Screamed to wind. Kit safe. Safe with me. I am Beast!

Woman opened eyes. Her fear smell swirled thick into room. Fear of Beast. Woman’s mouth moved in soundless cry. Woman was working magic with her hands. Rain poured in, heavy and hard.

I sat on bed. Curled around kit. Holding her with paw so wind with claws would not steal her. I licked her face. Human tears salty. Human skin milky. Smooth. Soft. She made funny sound. Hiccough. Swallowed hard. Crying stopped. Human kit reached up and took my ears in her hands. Pulled Beast face to her. Stared for long moment, eye to eye. And closed eyes. Not afraid. Not any more.

I curled around her. Protected her from rain and wind. Looked at human woman. No. Not human. Witch. Like human man. Like kit. I purred. Licked kit face.

Witch woman walked to witch man. Took hands. Chanting steadied like calm heartbeat. Power in storm shifted and eased. Rain softened. Warmed. I purred.

Man and woman worked magic like net, binding power in girl-kit. Felt it curl under belly and paws, around small kit-body.

Storm fell apart. The thunderhead darkening the sky, thinned and wisped. Clear sky showed through. Magic disappeared like mist. Floating away.

Man fell over. Dead? No, breathing. Asleep. Empty of magic.

Kit fell asleep. I purred. Keeping kit safe.

Storm was gone. Woman witch studied me. Fear tainted the air, but confused fear. Not run-from-predator fear. I purred. Licked kit face. Moved her with paw off of my leg. Licked face again.

Slowly I stood. Looked at woman. She looked at me. At necklace on my neck. Jane's necklace.

"Jane?" she whispered. "Oh my god.... Jane."

I hacked. Not Jane. Beast.

I leaped from bed to wet squishy cloth floor. Padded from room, rain puddles splashing. And out door. Kits safe.

I woke beside my bike, naked and cold, my bones aching. A half moon and several million stars dusted light to the earth, enough for me to see with my night vision intact. I knew better than to change in daylight. It hurt. It hurt bad. And I'd learned that though I could shift into Beast in daylight, I couldn't change back to me in daylight. Or at least, I'd never figured out the mechanism. And it wasn't like I had anyone to teach me. I was the only skinwalker I had ever heard of.

Shivers gripped me and shook me hard. Teeth chattering, I opened the bike's saddlebags and pulled out my one change of clothes. Dressed, but barefoot, I started the bike and road up the hill, into Molly's yard. The house was dark but for a candle guttering in a window. I killed the engine. Bare feet on cool earth, I waited. If Molly heard me, if she wanted to talk, she'd come out. If not, then I could ride on. But it would be a lot easier with my boots. Jacket. Helmet. Did

she know what I had done? What I was? Crap. I didn't want her to find out this way. I didn't want her to find out at all.

The front door opened. Molly stood on the front porch, her white nightgown fluttering in the hilltop breeze. I couldn't have said why, but a shudder ran through me, part fear, part...something I couldn't name. I kicked the stand down and walked across the lawn, watching Molly's face in the light of the candle. She was smiling. And tears trickled slowly down her face.

I stopped at the bottom of the three steps leading to the tiny porch. And couldn't think of a solitary thing to say. My boots and jeans and torn clothes were folded in a neat stack by her feet. Yeah. She knew. Crap. She knew. I hunched my shoulders and tucked one hand under the opposite armpit. And waited for her judgment.

"You..." She stopped and caught a breath. I gathered that she had been crying for a while. "Thank you. You saved my baby." When I didn't reply, she went on, voice rough through her tears. "We were losing her. She was too uncontrolled. Too powerful. Neither us was ready to deal with that much power. And not so early." I still didn't speak and she said, "Her power wasn't due until her first menses. Not for years and years. We weren't ready. And we almost lost her."

I nodded. And still couldn't think of a thing to say.

Suddenly Molly giggled. "What? Cat got your tongue?"

I jerked. An answering laugh tittered in my throat. I stuck my hands in my jeans pockets, shoulders till hunched. "Cute. You're okay it? With me? Me being Beast?"

"I have...no idea what you are. But you saved my baby, and for that you have my undying thanks, my undying friendship, and any help you may need for as long I can give it."

She'd given me three things and I knew that for witches important things were done in threes. The cold that had settled in my bones warmed a bit, the ache of the shift pulled through me by the magic, easing. "Well, I'll settle for my socks and boots. My feet are cold."

"And tea?" she said, the laughter still in the tones. "Power is out, but I have a kettle on the camp stove."

I didn't have time for tea. I had to be on the road, had to get to the job. But that wasn't what came out of my mouth. "I'd love a cup. And Molly? I'm a skinwalker. And I never told anyone that before tonight. Not anyone."

"So we can share secrets, is that what you're saying? You a skinwalker, whatever that is, and my baby an early blooming, powerful witch? Come on in. Let's talk."

I pulled on my socks and carried my boots into what was left of Molly's house. We had tea. We shared secrets. Weirdly, Molly held my hand while we talked, as if protecting something fragile,

or sealing something precious. Even more weirdly, I let her. For the first time in my life, I had discovered a friend.