

EDEN CROWNE



🧛 BOOK FIVE: HIGH JINX 🧛

# GIRL'S GUIDE TO VODOO BOUNTY HUNTING

## CHAPTER ONE

“You are in a heap of trouble, young lady.”

Judge Jelani looked sternly down at Nessa from her high perch in the courtroom.

Nessa squirmed. She certainly was.

With only a few hours' notice, she'd been summoned to the Infernal Court on charges of malicious disregard for public safety and ignoring cloaking protocols. This was due to her unfortunate run-in with a Soul Eater. Soul Eaters are not nice people. As their name suggests, they consume souls.

It had taken a lot of magic on Nessa's part to stop him. A swarm of tornadoes touching down in East L.A. sort of magic.

The Infernal Court was not pleased. How the Court knew it was Nessa and not some other summoner was still a mystery.

Thank God for Ravi's warning.

Ravi Singh was an enforcement officer with the Infernal Court. Nessa called him a Witch Cop. Which he hated. He was also her friend. She'd had very few friends in her life trailing behind Deadbeat Dad from one magical scam to another.

As soon as Ravi saw the summons in the Court ledger, he'd called her. She'd immediately called her boss, Roman Barracuda. Mr. Barracuda owned Barracuda Bail Bonds in Compton.

Nessa and Pim had only recently joined the brave new world of professional bounty hunting. And not by choice. Nessa's deadbeat dad skipped out on his Infernal bond with Barracuda. Only the debt wasn't money. It was magic. Nineteen-year-old Nessa was left as collateral. As an Air Elemental, Nessa was a witch with rare abilities despite her youth. Barracuda decided she was just the person he needed.

She and her Familiar Pim were working off the debt as novice bounty hunters one bail jumper at a time. She never expected to be on trial herself.

The Soul Eater hadn't been a bail bonds job. But if anyone knew how to get her out of trouble with the Infernal Court, it was Roman Barracuda.

The Court was hidden in a row of nondescript buildings in Redondo Beach. Since her boss handled both real-world and supernatural bonds, Nessa had dropped off a few bail jumpers here. She'd never been inside the actual courtroom.

The room was... intimidating. Yep, Nessa thought. That was the word for it. Gray stone floor, stone walls, stone ceiling. Black sigils covered every surface. They glowed with a harsh light. You'd think black couldn't glow. Apparently, it can. The sigils lit up the room. No other lighting was necessary.

The judge's desk was the curved trunk of a living tree growing in a perfect upside-down U-shape. The top of the 'U' formed the desk; its roots dug into the floor; its branches brushed the ceiling.

Flanking the judge's desk were two beings around eight feet tall. They stood upright though slightly hunched forward. Each was surrounded by a flickering green haze of magic. The glow blurred their forms. All Nessa could make out were twisted horns like an antelope's, oversized hands with long claws, and a restless forked tail. These were the Infernal Court's version of Bailiffs.

"Cause any trouble and they'll eat you," Mr. Barracuda warned her.

Nessa laughed until he added, "Really."

She, Pim, and Mr. Barracuda sat behind another living tree desk, though more of a Bonsai version. Their chairs were a tangle of roots and stone. Comfort was not a consideration of the Infernal Court.

The Judge wore black robes much like an ordinary judge in an American court. She had mocha-colored skin and her intricately braided black hair was wound in a complicated up-do. She appeared completely human which didn't necessarily mean anything. Very few things were what they appeared inside this building.

"Ms. Vanessa Chevalier Scott," the Judge said. "And Mr. Pim's Cup Whisker's Rampant."

Nessa snapped to attention. Pim as well. Pim was sitting on the desk so the judge could see him. The fact she could see him only further highlighted the power of this room. Because Pim was invisible.

A shipboard romance with a Gypsy witch's winsome Calico over a century before had resulted in the unfortunate invisibility curse. Unless he was in his alternate werecat form, only Nessa and a few others could see the stocky gray British Shorthair.

The courtroom's anti-illusion spell illuminated him like a pen and ink animation.

His long bushy tail swept back and forth in nervous agitation. Poor Pim. As her Familiar, he was on trial as well.

"You are here today on charges of public endangerment through reckless use of weather magic. Ignoring cloaking protocols and exposing your powers without due provocation. Do you understand these charges Ms. Scott and Mr. Whisker's Rampant?"

Nessa tried to say yes. The only sound she could make was a strangled squeak. She cleared her throat. "Sorry. Um. Yes."

Barracuda nudged her.

"Yes, Your Honor."

Her boss had given her a quick lesson in court manners on their way to Redondo Beach this morning. Despite her father's long criminal career of magical scams, Nessa had never been in any kind of court before this morning.

Pim meowed, nodding his head.

"Your Honor," said Roman Barracuda in his deep rumbling voice. "If I may speak?"

Mr. Barracuda was a large black man with large black hair. In addition to bailing out felons, he was a centuries-old Voodoo king. Normally he wore vintage bell bottoms with bright polyester shirts and purple-tinted granny glasses perched on his broad nose. Roman Barracuda loved the Seventies. The nineteen-seventies to be precise since he'd lived through the 1770s, the 1870s, and perhaps more before that.

Today, however, he was in a somber dark suit and thick, black-rimmed glasses.

The Judge nodded regally.

"Regarding the charge of public endangerment. As you know, Ms. Scott was battling a Soul Eater at the time. Soul Eaters are possibly the most powerful sorcerers in the magical lexicon. This one had already murdered seven people."

Nessa's eyes widened. She'd thought it was only five.

"Without Ms. Scott's intervention," he continued, "who knows how many more souls he would have claimed. Normally we, the supernatural community, would not intervene. However,

the Soul Eater had taken no precautions to cloak his actions. The murders became public knowledge. Piles of human ash were being shown on local and network television. The police did not even need DNA identification as the Soul Eater made no attempt to dispose of his victims' personal items. This matter called for swift action. I'd say Ms. Scott is to be commended rather than sanctioned."

"You would, would you, Mr. Barracuda?" The Judge's hand whipped up and she twirled a pointed stick, sending out a shower of golden sparks

Nessa and Pim exchanged open-mouthed looks.

'A wand!' she mouthed.

He nodded furiously. Just as surprised.

Nessa had never seen an honest-to-God magic wand.

"Tornadoes, Mr. Barracuda. In Los Angeles. Observe."

Pointing the wand at one wall of sigils, she conjured a grainy film of three funnel clouds. For a moment they surrounded a wall of flames before joining into one furious storm. The focus shifted to the foreground showing the back of a girl, her arms held out.

"Is this or is this not you, Ms. Scott?"

Nessa's stomach dropped. Her dad had taught her when in doubt, lie. Lie like the devil himself. Could she lie in this court? The sigils on the walls pulsed with power. She had an uneasy feeling they might act as magical lie detectors. Uncharacteristically, she decided to tell the truth.

"Yes, Your Honor."

Barracuda gave her a brief nod of approval. Guess she'd done the right thing.

"Where did you procure this film, Your Honor," Barracuda asked.

"It was submitted anonymously."

He shifted his eyes to Nessa.

She shrugged, saying quietly, "I have no idea."

Privately she wondered if it could be Jun Hee. Jun Hee Kim was the newest bounty hunter at Barracuda Bail Bonds. She and Jun Hee did not get along. He'd been present during her fight with the Soul Eater.

The quality of the film looked like it was shot by a cell phone. She wouldn't put it past Jun Hee if money was somehow involved. But the angle seemed wrong. He'd been on her right during the battle, not behind her.

"You will admit, Your Honor, Ms. Scott is attempting to contain the fire summoned by the Soul Eater. She did not initiate the conflict."

"The Court concedes the defendant was seeking to constrain the Soul Eater."

"And, if I may add. She prevented the fire from escaping the confines of the storm and sent the storms back with no loss of human life."

"However, there were humans involved in the clean-up."

The judge whirled her wand in the air. This time the film showed fire engines, ambulances, and a dozen police cars swarming into the cemetery.

She snapped the wand and a second similar scene unfolded at what Nessa recognized as the cemetery in Inglewood. She'd fought the Soul Eater there as well.

Who had taken these?

Somebody had it in for her.

"Witchy snitches get stitches," she whispered to Pim.

He growled in agreement.

"What, Ms. Scott? Mr. Whisker's Rampant? Do you have anything to add?"

Pim shook his head.

Nessa felt her face flush. "No, Your Honor."

With a wave of her wand, Judge Jelani sent the screens spinning away. Mr. Barracuda stood quietly waiting for the judge's next move.

The Judge looked at Nessa with a stern expression. "Explain to me the necessity of raising a flurry of tornadoes in the towns of Boyle Heights and Inglewood over one twenty-four-hour period."

"Everything is in her statement," Mr. Barracuda started to say.

Jelani held up a hand, "I wish to hear it in Ms. Scott's own words."

Nessa gripped the rough stone sides of the chair. Her knees had started to shake.

Hesitantly, she explained how she'd been blackmailed into fighting the sorcerer after her three taco-loving fairies were kidnapped.

“Madame Valencia told me to stop the Soul Eater. She’s a Fire Elemental. Madame Valencia, I mean. She was, um,” Nessa nervously sought the right words. “She was speaking on behalf of the Queen of the Fire Kingdom. I think that’s the how to describe it.”

The Judge nodded. All this was in the statement Mr. Barracuda helped her write over the phone last night. They’d handed it in to the Court first thing in the morning.

“The Soul Eater,” Nessa explained, “was working with a Princess of Fire to assassinate the Queen. Fire Queen, I mean. He, the Soul Eater, was gathering human souls to boost a killing spell of some kind.”

“Why did you not come to the Infernal Court to explain this after you were threatened?” the Judge asked.

Nessa paled, stammering, “I...I... didn’t know the court could help.”

“Not always, of course. The Court concedes this can be a gray area. However, if the choice is between blatantly exposing magic to the public or helping you, I believe we would have interceded.”

Or maybe they would have just killed her. Snap. No Nessa. No problem.

She didn’t know much about the Infernal Court before being forced into the bounty hunting business. Dad deliberately chose the locations of his magical scams far from any Infernal Court presence: Ohio, Nebraska, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Iowa, Wisconsin, New Mexico. None of these states even had a regional office.

“Don’t cross them,” was all he ever said. “Your life will never come first on the Court agenda.”

Nessa dropped her eyes and tried to look penitent. “I’m sorry, Your Honor. Madame Valencia said they would kill my fairies unless I did what she said.”

With an airy wave of her hand, Judge Jelani indicated she should go on

She described trying to capture the Soul Eater and being stopped by another Air Elemental.

“The other Elemental’s name is Roland. He and the Soul Eater were old friends. Roland wanted to help him.” Nessa pointed at the Judge’s desk. “I think I said in my statement the Soul Eater’s name is Oliver.”

Judge Jelani nodded.

“Oliver didn’t want to be helped. He escaped.” She took a shaky breath. “Um...well. Let’s see. I used a location spell to track him to the cemetery in Boyle Heights. He’d harvested two more souls before I could get to him.”

“He raised a flaming barrier,” said the Judge, looking down at the tablet computer.

“Yes, Your Honor. When I approached him. He attacked me and my Familiar.”

She had called on her Elemental Air magic to fight the spectral flames. Clearing her throat she said, quietly “I summoned three whirlwinds.”

“What?” said the Judge. “Speak up. We can’t hear you.”

“I summoned three whirlwinds,” she said loudly.

“Yes, you did.” The Judge narrowed her eyes. “As we saw in the film. This is on top of the funnel cloud you summoned the day before in Inglewood.”

Oh. Yeah. There was that. Probably no point telling Judge Jelani she was protecting an elderly woman from the Soul Eater at the time. The only reason they cared about the sorcerer in the first place was when the murders had become news. Human life was of little concern.

The Judge frowned. “But why three? Wouldn’t one have been sufficient?”

She shook her head. “He was too strong, ma’am. I mean, Your Honor.” That certainly was the truth. “He realized I was a threat and his attacks doubled, then tripled. I thought he was going to send the flames over the city unless I stopped him.”

Her three funnel clouds had joined into one mega-storm surrounding the Soul Eater. It still hadn’t been enough.

“The storms drained his energy,” Nessa said.

Which was a lie.

She glanced at the sigils on the wall. No change. Good.

To stop him she’d called on her mother’s legacy. Her curse. Dark and dirty magic. Every time she opened the metaphysical cage holding her secret power, she risked alerting Frank to her presence. Frank, the Fallen Angel who’d bargained for her mother’s soul. Mom hadn’t known Nessa was already tucked in her womb when she sealed the bargain.

Frank did.

After her mother died in childbirth, he declared Nessa was part of the deal. Her father disagreed. He took her and ran. Nessa had been hiding from Frank ever since.

Nothing except the power of a Fallen Angel could topple the Soul Eater. Which was exactly why her fairies had been kidnapped. Word of Nessa's 'extra abilities' had spread among the Fae after she outed herself during an attack on the Queen's ball.

Nessa sent a silent prayer that the Infernal Court was still ignorant of those details. If anyone found out, her life would be over. Not that they would kill her. Oh no. They would bind her. Force Nessa to use her ultra-rare Angelic powers for *them*. Frank wasn't the only supernatural being Nessa had to watch out for.

"I finally captured him with a Fudo Cord."

Mr. Barracuda lent her a weapon of the divine Japanese Fudo spirits. Fudo are ancient protective spirits who use their magical cords to bind demons. How Mr. Barracuda got it she had no idea. Maybe someone gave it to him as collateral for a bail bond.

"Once he was secure, I tried to send the whirlwinds back. It wasn't easy. Another presence was inside my storm. I think that was the reason they went so wild."

Which was true.

There had been magical energy in the whirlwinds. A Hell Cat.

"The Soul Eater was taken away by a Kasha, you stated."

Mr. Barracuda spoke up, "We have submitted evidence from Mr. Jun Hee Kim's cell phone, Your Honor. The film shows a Japanese supernatural being. A Kasha Hell Cat. The divine being was summoned by the death curse of a Buddhist priest murdered by the Soul Eater. Not Ms. Scott."

The Judge waved her wand.

A life-size image of the ten-foot-tall Kasha Hell Cat burst onto the wall.

Nessa and Pim flinched. He was black and white, standing on his hind legs, surrounded by spectral flames. Snarling, his lips drew back over fangs as big as daggers. Nessa was in the foreground. Another figure lay sprawled at her feet. Roland, the Air Elemental. He'd been trying to save his friend Oliver.

The Kasha launched a fireball the size of a pickup truck at them. Nessa raised her hands, summoning freezing winds to stop the fire from engulfing her and Roland.

"As you can see, Your Honor, Ms. Scott kept the fire from consuming them. She stood valiantly against the Kasha."

Stood *desperately* against him was more accurate.

What did it matter? She'd failed in the end.

Tapping her wand, the Judge fast-forwarded the image to the cat soaring into the sky pulling a flaming cart. Jun Hee's camera zoomed in on the Soul Eater struggling in vain against a dozen skeletal figures holding him down.

Judge Jelani froze the image. "Yes, Mr. Barracuda. We have taken note."

After a minute or two of silently scrutinizing the tablet computer, the Judge said, "There is also the matter of the other charge pertaining to the incident in Beverly Hills at..." she tapped the tablet, "Valliard's Coffee Lounge."

Nessa's mouth went dry. She'd made a stupid, stupid mistake. Madame Valencia had sat there gloating over the kidnapping of Nessa's fairies. Threatening to kill them if Nessa didn't cooperate. Nessa had lost control. Unlocked her dark power and shattered every window in the lounge.

Nessa started to speak. Mr. Barracuda put his hand on her shoulder to stop her.

"Your Honor," he said. "Miss Scott is nineteen and very much alone in the world. Madame Valencia took advantage of her youth to frighten and blackmail her. The woman backed her into a corner. Ms. Scott lost control. You are correct. It is unfortunate. As immature as this young witch is, she injured no one."

"Yet the event was still covered in the news."

"Yes, your Honor," conceded Mr. Barracuda.

"Very well. I believe we have all the facts we need. Do you wish to sum up, Mr. Barracuda?"

"I do, Your Honor," he said.

"Approach the bench."

Mr. Barracuda patted Nessa's back gently before stepping up to the judge.

"Miss Scott was thrust against her will into a perilous situation. She was pitted against an adversary even a team of witches would hesitate to face. She has not had the benefit of a traditional upbringing or proper magical instruction in the jurisdiction of the Infernal Court. The threat of physical harm to her fairies was the primary motivation in her actions. Frightened, threatened, and alone. I aided her as best I could though I am prohibited from interfering directly with the Fae. Mr. Pim's Cup Whisker's Rampant supported her, as is his duty. Given her age, I ask for leniency."

“Understood,” said the Judge.

Mr. Barracuda returned to stand next to Nessa.

Judge Jelani stood.

“*Nullum crimen sine lege*,” she recited. “There is no punishment without law. However, *culpa poena par esto*. Let the punishment duly fit the crime. Mr. Pim’s Cup Whisker’s Rampant. You are guilty of aiding and abetting your witch. Your sentence is to wear the Cone of Shame for thirty days. The cone will prevent you from shifting to a werecat.”

She snapped her wand at Pim.

“*Pareo!* Submit.”

Pim jumped when an almost transparent cone of light appeared around his neck. He gave a strangled meow of surprise.

The Judge pointed her wand at Nessa next.

Nessa suddenly wanted to go to the bathroom really badly.

“*Fiat voluntas mea*,” said the Judge.

Her words echoed through the chamber as if struck from a kettle drum. “*Fiat voluntas mea...fiat voluntas mea...fiat voluntas mea...*”

“Let my intent come to pass!” she said in English, waving her wand in an intricate series of knots.

A circle of fiery pentagrams burst in the air like skyrocket in front of Nessa.

Frightened, Nessa jumped to her feet.

A flick of the wand sent two of the pentagrams flying out of the circle. They snapped onto Nessa’s wrists. She gasped as magic zinged through her nervous system.

The Judge spun the wand at the three remaining pentagrams. The pentagrams linked together, point to point. They sizzled in the air, sending out hot, bright sparks.

“*Pareo!* Submit!” shouted the Judge.

The linked pentagrams swooped at Nessa like fighter jets. Instinctively she tried to duck out of the way. Mimicking her move, the trio of pentagrams swerved sharply, stretching out like a rope to spin around her waist.

Nessa squeaked as an electric shock ran the length of her body.

“Our verdict has been reached. Your Air Elemental Powers are to be locked.”

Nessa’s knees gave out and she collapsed onto the stone floor.

## CHAPTER TWO

When Nessa came to her senses, she was stretched out on a hard wooden bench. The walls were white, not stone. Normal fluorescent lights hung overhead.

Roman Barracuda's face appeared over hers, his brows pressed together. He laid a cold cloth on her forehead.

"What...what happened?"

"You fainted," he said.

Pim was perched on her stomach, kneading it gently with his paws.

The Judge's verdict and the image of the bands of light on her wrist and waist came back like a punch in the gut.

"My powers," she sobbed.

Mr. Barracuda took her hand. "There, there, it's not as bad as you think."

"How could losing my powers be anything but terrible?" she sobbed, tears brimming over to drip down her cheeks.

He gave a rumbling chuckle, "You only lost them for thirty days. Not forever."

"Thir... thirty days?"

"Yes. You fainted before the Judge could finish the sentence."

"Where is she!" demanded a woman.

"Where's our girl!" shouted another.

Mr. Barracuda waved over two enormous ebony-skinned women. Each was over six feet of pure muscle squeezed into black leather jumpsuits with another foot of towering red hair.

Pansie and Rose Marie La Rue knelt by Nessa. The twins were Barracuda Bail Bond's enforcers and Mr. Barracuda's valued partners.

They kissed Pim's head. Like their boss, Pim's invisibility curse did not work on them.

He gave a mournful meow, pointing with one paw to the shimmering cone around his neck.

"Not the Cone of Shame," exclaimed Rose Marie.

“Poor baby,” said Pansie, stroking Pim’s back.

“The lock is only for thirty days,” Barracuda explained. “Judge Jelani considered your age and how you prevented the Soul Eater from taking any more victims. You got rid of him, even if your methods were unorthodox. This is the Infernal Court. They understand improvisational justice. Though the judge did suggest you stop sending funnel clouds around the city if you want to avoid appearing in her court again.”

“What about little ones?” Nessa asked. “You know, mini tornadoes?”

Barracuda cocked an eyebrow, pulling the glasses low over his nose and giving her a significant look.

“Understood,” she mumbled.

“For the time being, you have no choice, young lady.” He stood, frowning down at her. “She’s put a lock on all your Elemental powers.”

“I can still...” her voice broke. She had to swallow several times to clear the rising sense of panic threatening to choke her. “Cast spells, right?”

She needed those abilities to shield herself from Frank. He had sniffers searching for witchy resonance twenty-four-seven. The protective amulets Aunt Emerald made kept her hidden. Still, accidents happened. Frank had sent astral projections that nearly found her location several times since she started work at Barracuda Bail Bonds.

Protective circles didn’t depend on Elemental Magic. At least hers didn’t. Nessa used a blend of sigils painted with a brush carved from human bone and a blood sacrifice. Her blood, unfortunately.

“Only your air abilities are constrained by the Jinx.” His voice became all business, “You and Mr. Pim can return to work today. Neither of you has been pulling your weight this week.” He frowned. “Now don’t go making a face about it. Get yourself home, Miss Scott, change into your work clothes and come to the office.”

“Nessa!” a man’s voice shouted.

She turned her head to see Ravi Singh jogging down the hall. His shiny black hair had fallen forward over his forehead as he ran. He held a canned drink in one hand. Ravi was only three years older than her. Twenty-two and just out of Pepperdine. Each of them was new to their jobs. Ravi as an investigator for the Infernal Court; Nessa as a novice Bounty Hunter.

“Hey, you’re awake. Here, drink this.”

He handed her an icy cold can of Red Bull.

With a grateful look, she popped the top and gulped down the sweet tonic.

He pushed his hair back from his face. He was wearing a trim sharkskin suit with a narrow tie and dark gray shirt. Ravi came from money and looked it.

“I was waiting outside the courtroom,” he said taking the can from her as Mr. Barracuda helped her sit up. “I saw him bring you out. Was it bad?”

Pansie put her hands on her hips, looking down at the young man. “The girl fainted. Guess you could say it was bad.”

He looked from Pansie to Nessa, “Sorry. I know. I mean...”

“Now don’t jump down the boy’s throat.” Mr. Barracuda shook a finger at the tall woman. “He was worried. Nothing wrong with that.”

“Here,” Ravi pushed the can at Nessa, “drink a little more.”

She did. Pim wriggled his head under her arm. She could see the cone glowing around his neck.

“I’m sorry, buddy. It’s my fault you have to wear the cone.”

“Wear what?” Ravi asked. Unlike her boss and the twins, Ravi couldn’t see Pim in his cat form.

“Pim has to wear the Cone of Shame for a month,” she explained.

“And you?”

She held up her wrists. The pentagrams glowed and sparked around them. “No Elemental powers for the same.”

Rave hissed out a breath. “It could have been worse.”

“I don’t want to think about it.”

Roman Barracuda stood, taking the glasses off her rubbed his eyes. “I need to get back to the office. If you’re feeling up to it, I’ll give you a ride to your aunt’s.”

“Oh, I can take her, Mr. Barracuda.”

He turned a long considering look on Ravi saying at last, “Well, alright then. Much obliged.”

Rose Marie and Pansie hugged Nessa so tightly her breath whooshed out. They patted Pim on the head. Arm in arm, they followed their boss down the long hallway.

“Can you stand?” Ravi asked.

Nessa nodded, getting to her feet. Ravi put a hand under her arm, his brows knitted in concern. "Let me help you."

After a few experimental steps, she let out a deep breath. Gravity stayed firmly in place. No vertigo or nausea. Pim rubbed against her legs, feeling her relief.

"Do you want to finish the drink?"

She nodded yes and Ravi stood with her while she drained the small can.

"Give it to me, I'll throw it away."

He took the can, tucking it in one pocket.

"Better now," she said with a little smile. "Thanks."

Men and women in suits or court robes hurried by as Nessa, Ravi, and Pim walked slowly in the direction of the Court's back door. Ravi kept his hand under her arm even though she said she was fine.

Ravi pulled open one of the big double doors leading to the parking lot. They stepped into the heat of a bright spring morning and the path of a tall woman, wearing a black pantsuit with a long brightly colored scarf draped across her throat to fall down her back.

Ravi stepped back, almost pushing Nessa behind him. "What are you doing here?" he said to the woman.

The woman closed the space between them, placing her hands on his shoulders and pulling him forward for a kiss on both cheeks. "*Beta*, is that any way to greet me?"

"Mummyji, mom, sorry. Um, well..." he stammered, "You don't usually come to the Court. I'm surprised."

Mom?

She was a handsome woman. Strong featured with an athletic build tall enough to stare eye-to-eye with Ravi.

He adjusted his position and Nessa again had the feeling he was pushing her behind his back. Hiding her.

Ravi's mom gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "I must give a statement in a case. Business. Nothing to do with me. And who is this?"

Her voice was accented, unlike Ravi who had a clear California inflection

Ravi's posture stiffened. "This...um... this is my friend, Nessa Scott. Vanessa Scott," he corrected himself.

Nessa stepped forward. “How do you do, Dr. Singh. It’s nice to meet you. Ravi has told me a little about your work.”

He’d told her a lot more. During one of their adventures, i.e. surviving yet another encounter with Voodoo Loa of the Dead Baron Samedi, he’d revealed his mom was a Nagini. A semi-divine shapeshifting snake spirit from the Hindu pantheon of gods. Ravi had inherited his mother’s abilities, though not many people but Nessa were aware of this. Giant anthropomorphic snakes are scary even to other supernaturals. Ravi’s coworkers only knew he could throw down a magic circle and toss defensive spells with the best of them.

Dr. Singh deliberately drew herself up to look down at Nessa. Since Nessa was only five feet two this was not difficult.

“You are friends with my son?” she asked laser-targeting Nessa with her large, brown, perfectly lined eyes.

Was it Nessa’s imagination or had the air turned frosty?

“We’ve worked together on some cases.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “You are an investigator with the Infernal Court?”

Ravi brought up his wrist to look at the flashy designer watch he wore. “Oh, goodness, look at the time. We need to be going.”

Still holding Nessa’s arm, he tried to pull her with him down the short flight of stairs into the parking lot. Dr. Singh took a step to the side, blocking his way.

She cocked her head at Nessa waiting for an answer.

“Uh, no. I’m with Barracuda Bail Bonds. I’m a...a bond recovery agent.”

Ravi became very still.

Dr. Singh narrowed her eyes.

“Bail bonds?” she said, a sharp edge in her voice.

Better leave Deadbeat Dad and the story of her current indentured servitude to Barracuda Bail Bonds out of this. “I’m working my way through college.”

“Are you really?” said Ravi’s mom, her expression inscrutable. “What college?”

“Santa Monica City College.”

“Santa Monica...” Without breaking eye contact with Nessa, she said to Ravi. “Is this the girl Auntie Poonam saw you with the other day in Del Amo?”

Ravi flushed. “Mommy-ji, tell the Mumbai Auntie Mafia to mind their own business.”

Dr. Singh's eyebrows drew together.

"Please," he added belatedly.

"*Beta*, you know your father and I only have..."

Ravi took Nessa's arm, practically jumping around his mother. "Gotta' go. Love you. Bye."

He pulled Ness with him, practically running to his car.

Nessa looked over her shoulder. Dr. Singh was staring after them. Nessa thought she saw the faintest outline of a cobra's hood shimmer in the air.

## CHAPTER THREE

Several hours and another Red Bull later, Nessa stood outside an old-fashioned adobe-colored bungalow with a slate roof on a quiet Pasadena residential street. It had a small front porch and a beautiful green lawn. The lawn had to be artificial. Few people had green lawns these days due to California's never-ending drought coupled with the high price of water.

Bird of Paradise plants flanked the beds on either side of the front walk. They were blooming, the flowers bright bursts of orange, red, and blue. The house belonged to Reiko Sömmerhauler.

Ravi had dropped her off at Aunt Emerald's after a slightly tense drive where they pointedly did not talk about his mother.

She'd been slightly delayed by her aunt who wanted Nessa's help with a séance.

That was when Nessa had to show her the sparking pentagrams around her wrists.

"I can't. No air magic for thirty days. I'm really sorry."

Her aunt had not been pleased. Part of Nessa's room and board depended on using her abilities to enhance Aunt Emerald's séances from a hidden closet in the workroom. A warm breeze or a chill wind at the right moment. A little peal of thunder. Easy stuff to conjure.

Not that her aunt was cheating the clients. Far from it. Aunt Emerald could see and talk to spirits. She was one-hundred percent the real deal. However, for her aunt, it was a simple process generally. The spirits silently materialized without drama and Aunt Emerald helped her client communicate with their loved ones. The winds or thunder were all about enhancing the experience for the *client*. Aunt Emerald's bookings had increased since Nessa moved in due to good word-of-mouth.

Mr. Barracuda had handed her a stack of folders when she finally made it to the office. He ordered her to start with the first folder in the stack. Reiko Sömmerhauler.

When Reiko was not studying chemistry at UCLA, she was brewing a potion causing supernaturals to go bat-shit crazy. She and her partner Reese Villanova were the alchemists behind Bee Buzzed, an experimental energy drink responsible for a week of chaos in the South Bay following some highly illegal test marketing.

Miss Sömmerhaulder was two days late for her Infernal Court appearance.

“She won’t give you any trouble,” Mr. Barracuda declared.

Nessa groaned. Famous last words.

Every time Mr. Barracuda said he was giving her an easy case, the apprehension turned into some sort of magical mayhem Nessa barely survived.

She’d groaned again when she saw the address was all the way across town in Pasadena. Crossing the city by scooter took forever.

The scooter, her boss pointed out, was not appropriate transportation for a bond agent.

“Well then, where’s Fiona?” Nessa asked. “Isn’t she supposed to drive me around?”

Fiona Garde and her Audi were part of the solution to the scooter problem. Fiona was a self-absorbed witch with a taste for Black Magic. She’d gotten in trouble with the Infernal Court after runoff from a spell to lower the price on a sweet real estate deal resulted in the death of a herd of sacred sheep. Black Magic, well any magic, demanded a price. Blowback from dark magic could be particularly lethal. Adepts were able to divert this price onto someone or something else. In Fiona’s case, well, goodbye sheep.

The Shaman who cared for the sheep had taken out a secret vendetta against Fiona. After a couple of Navajo Skinwalkers nearly killed Nessa, Fiona, and Ravi, the Infernal Court worked out a deal with the Shaman allowing the young witch to work for Mr. Barracuda as community service. How Bail Bonds could be classified as community service Nessa still wasn’t clear on.

Aunt Emerald had taken advantage of the situation by offering her home as a halfway house to the young miscreant. For a price. Aunt Emerald liked money.

Fiona was currently Nessa’s roommate in the little two-bedroom apartment above her aunt’s garage.

“Fiona hasn’t called in,” Mr. Barracuda said, peering over his granny glasses. The black-rimmed pair had been put away along with the conservative suit. He was back in his bell bottoms and wide-collared polyester shirts. Marvin Gaye crooned love songs on the old-school record player behind his desk. “Do you know where she is?”

Nessa said truthfully, she did not. Nessa had been a little preoccupied fighting a Soul Eater and rescuing her fairies over the past few days to think about one self-centered roommate.

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Barracuda sent them on their way.

Pim and Nessa read through Reiko Sömmerhauler's file before motoring away from the office.

She pulled out the *Speak and Spell* for Pim to add his opinion. Her Familiar was not her pet, he was her partner. Cat's vocal cords – even magical cats – are not made for human speech. Pim had six claws on his front paws, the extra one working as an opposable thumb. He could read and write and type though his paws were too awkward for most keyboards. Nessa's Grandmother Hattie had hit on the *Speak and Spell* back in the day. Way back. After Nessa inherited Pim, she and her dad engineered upgrades to the machine – some highly illegal but all extremely useful.

He growled a string of feline curse words as he tried to position his paws on the keyboard around the awkward Cone of Shame.

"I frate yris ying," the female electronic voice said tonelessly.

"What?"

Pim yowled shrilly.

"I hate this pring..." the voice said.

"Thing," Pim corrected.

She ran a hand gently over his ears. "I'm so sorry It's my fault."

He shook his head. "No. We are artners...partners."

"Still. What do you think?" she asked. "Start with the house in Pasadena or UCLA?"

Pasadena was by the San Gabriel mountains. UCLA, not far from the sea. If L.A. traffic had its way, the two would never meet so this was not a casual question.

"I think we should dtart...start with the farthest point first," the female electronic voice said tonelessly. "Get it over with."

Nessa nodded in agreement. "Plus, UCLA is huge. I wouldn't know where to begin."

"Agreed. Let's go to the house. Is your faser charged?" He yowled again. "Taser, I mean."

Nessa checked her backpack, pulling it out for them both to see. The weapon sparkled with rhinestones in the afternoon sun. Fiona had designer cases for her pair and had insisted on having Nessa's glammed up. Nessa wasn't sure how she felt about it.

"Fully charged," Pim typed, adding, "and ridiculous."

She rested a hand on his back. “Are you worried about not having powers for the next month?”

“Jell yes,” he typed.

He meowed in frustration.

“Hell, yes. I mean hell.”

“Me too.”

They couldn’t take the little scooter on the freeway. Its top speed was forty-five miles an hour and that was pushing it. Surface streets, as people in LA called anything not on the freeway, would have to do.

After an endless butt-numbing ride, they’d arrived at the bungalow.

A car was parked in the driveway along one side of the house. An older-model white Corolla. A wooden shed stood at the end of the driveway. Not quite big enough to serve as a garage but not tiny either.

No buzz of magic greeted them at the front walk. Most witches and warlocks automatically warded their homes against danger.

As they approached the door Pim stopped. His fur *poofed* to stand on end. He drew his paw across his throat.

“Dead?” she asked. “Inside?”

He cocked his head in a move she knew meant ‘maybe.’

Nessa took the Taser out of her backpack. The pentagrams around her wrists sparked, sensing her magic trying to escape the Court’s spellcast bonds. She couldn’t use any of it, even in self-defense.

Standing to one side, a survival trick Deadbeat Dad had taught her when approaching unknown houses, she knocked. Not that she thought the girl had a gun. She was a chemist for God’s sake.

“Hello? Miss Sömmerhaulder? Barracuda Bail Bonds. Hello?”

No answer.

“Miss Sömmerhaulder, you missed your court date.”

No answer.

Using her t-shirt, Nessa wrapped it around the doorknob and turned. Not locked.

She pushed it open with her foot, keeping her body to the side of the door frame.

Pim slipped inside.

Having an invisible cat as a partner had many advantages. She waited until he meowed an all-clear.

After the bright sunlight, the entry hall was dark and dim. She waited a moment for her eyes to adjust before shutting the door with her hip. No need to leave fingerprints especially if Pim was right.

And he was.

A body lay stretched out between the foyer and the living room.

Not Reiko Sömmerhauler.

A man.

Young. Maybe in his early twenties? Good looking. Asian features, straight thick black hair. He lay rigid, eyes wide, fingers splayed. A small gray parrot stood on his chest. The parrot spread its wings screeching, "Poppy daddy, poppy daddy!"

Nessa exchanged looks with Pim.

"A parrot?" she said.

He gave the kitty equivalent of a shrug before darting off to check the rest of the house.

Spreading its wings and tail feathers, the bird screeched at her.

Nessa had been around dead bodies before. Though never one guarded by an irate parrot. Real dead bodies unlike those on television are nasty things. Usually. But not this one. No bodily fluids leaking – which there should be – no blood she could see. Even his mouth was closed tightly.

He looked like he'd been petrified.

Holy Harry Potter.

Kneeling, she reached out to touch him.

The parrot dived. Its sharp beak darted out sharply across her knuckles.

Nessa snatched her hand away a second too late.

"What the hell bird," she yelled. "You bit me!"

"Poppy, poppy, poppy," it screeched.

Swearing under her breath, she went in search of a tissue. A half bath in the hall only a few steps from the front door had a box. Careful not to touch anything, she pocketed the Taser before pulling out several tissues to press against the torn skin. Blood was vital in casting a

variety of powerful spells – as well as Police CSI investigations. Making sure not even a drip was left behind was second nature to Nessa.

Back in the entryway, the bird began squawking “Go away, go away,” its reedy little voice breaking.

Nessa didn't know what to do with an angry parrot.

Pim trotted back, satisfied there were no immediate threats.

She called her boss.

“Have you got her?” Barracuda barked before she could get a word out.

“No sir,” she answered respectfully. Roman Barracuda was a powerful Voodoo King as well as her boss. “I've got a body. Not,” she added quickly, “Miss Sömmerhaulder. A man.”

She explained the unidentified man looked petrified.

“You sure he's dead?”

“Who's dead?” came a woman's voice over the speaker. Either Pansy or Rose Marie.

“Man. Petrified,” he said.

Nessa looked at the body. “Pretty sure he's dead, though not one hundred percent.” Death had many subtle variations in their world. “I can't get close enough to tell.”

“Why not?”

She explained an irate parrot was blocking her attempts to look for a wallet.

“Parrot? What the heck is a parrot doing in Reiko Sömmerhaulder's house? And a dead man. She's a Potion Maker.”

“Is potion making a dangerous profession?” Nessa asked.

Her father had kept her away from clans, covens, and the Infernal Court. She was only now understanding exactly how clueless she was about the traditions of the supernatural community.

“Not normally, no. You've never heard of the Sömmerhaulders?”

“Nope.”

“Very old and powerful clan of Potion Masters. They accumulated their modern fortunes selling products in the human marketplace. They make soft drinks, Kombucha, a range of green and oolong iced teas, mineral water...” He rattled off a list of brand names.

Nessa knew a lot of them.

“No way, they're made with magic?”

“You really are clueless. The two biggest potion clans on the West Coast are the Sömmerhauleders and the Villanovas. Rivals.”

“Any other bodies?” Barracuda demanded.

“Nope. None I can see at least.”

“Good. Don’t call the police. Call the Infernal Court. They’ll take care of it.”

“Daddy!” screeched the bird before making the sound of a fire engine complete with the “honk, honk,” of the emergency horn. “Daddy!”

“And put the dang bird in a bag.”

He hung up abruptly.

“*Ooookay*,” she hissed out. “Let’s look around before I call the Court,” she told Pim.

Pim nodded.

The bird screeched out the sounds of different emergency vehicles, one after the other.

“I think the bird wants us to call 911.”

Pim shook his head, turning away with a flick of his long gray tail.

“Sorry, bird. Too late for the EMTs.”

Together they walked through the living room looking carefully around.

A single white sports shoe lay on the floor. Leather. Nessa kneeled to get a closer look.

A tiny little tri-color French flag was sewn into the side and the back sported a blue rooster motif. She recognized the brand. Le Coq Sportif. Expensive.

There was a strong smell in the air. Not a bad smell. Nessa tried to place it. Not perfume. Not flowery. Not dope. Smokier.

All the living room furniture seemed in place: sofa, love seat, throw rug, side tables, lamps. A mix of mid-century modern and Ikea. All in shades of gray and white. Magazines on the coffee table. Knick knacks, photos, and a wide built-in set of shelves.

And that was where normal ended.

An altar had been set into the tall shelves. An ornate gilded wooden piece at least three feet tall. Two large doors were open on either side. This explained the smell.

Long sticks of incense, partially burned, stood in brass stands.

She and Pim exchanged perplexed glances. Nessa had grown up watching Japanese anime like every other American kid her age. Since she preferred the supernatural themes to the romantic ones, she knew this was a Butsudān. A Japanese Buddhist altar. They were set up in the

home to honor family members who had passed away. Memorial photos of these people stood in or over the altar depending on how many generations the family was remembering.

There were no photographs.

Their bail jumper's first name was Reiko. Nessa hadn't given it any thought when she read the file. Now though... Reiko was a popular Japanese girl's name. Either her parents really liked Japan, or the girl was part Japanese which might explain the altar. Except this was the girl's home, not the family's main residence. Traditionally Butsudan altars were kept by the head of the family.

"Why would it be here?" she asked Pim.

Her Familiar shook his furry head looking as confused as her.

As they approached, a sharp jolt of pain raced through her nervous system head to toe then back again. She jumped back with a yip. Whatever it was hit Pim as well. He spun in a somersault, his hair and whiskers sticking straight out.

"An excellent question," said a woman's voice.

Nessa yipped again pulling out the police baton clipped to the back of her jeans. She flicked it out, taking an aggressive stance.

"What..." she started to say then stopped, mouth open in surprise.

A woman in a pale green kimono with a pattern of white and pink spider mums and a contrasting gray obi sash walked out of the dining room. She was a few inches taller than Nessa. Very trim with a thin, elegant face. Her thick black hair was in an elegant French twist held in place by lacquer combs.

Nessa and Pim stood poised on the tips of paws and toes ready to run.

This woman, unlike the house, buzzed with magic.

## CHAPTER FOUR

She was holding a closed black folding fan in one hand and pointed it sharply at the altar. Weaving the fan in the air she sketched out a series of runes. Each took the shape of a complex Chinese character. They hung in the air glowing fiercely.

Esoteric Asian magic outside of anime cartoons was a mystery to Nessa.

The woman slapped the fan into her palm with a *pop* like a handgun going off.

“Jeezus,” Nessa screeched, nerves jumping.

The runes rushed at the altar, trying to burn through the protective wards. At first, it looked like they might do it. But after pressing forward a few inches, they burst into flames. Black ash rained down in a half circle before the altar.

Turning her steely gaze on Nessa she said, “You did not set these?”

“No way,” she declared. “I only walked in a few minutes ago.”

“My daughter is not capable of setting wards of this strength.”

‘My daughter’? Was this Reiko’s mom?

Her English was softly accented. Not Japanese American, Nessa thought. Native Japanese.

“Mrs. Sömmerhauler?”

“Yes,” said the woman her attention still on the altar.

“I’m Nessa Scott from Barracuda Bail Bonds.”

She snapped her attention to Nessa. A prickle of energy crawled up from Nessa’s toes to her eyebrows.

Yikes.

“Bail Bonds? Why are *you* here?”

She said ‘you’ like Nessa was a lower form of life.

Nessa was just impressing all the moms today.

“Your daughter missed her date at the Infernal Court. She needs to report there as soon as possible.”

The woman’s lips became a hard, thin line.

“Do you know where she is?” Nessa asked even though she figured the question was futile. Reiko seemed to be keeping mom out of the loop. “You did notice there’s a dead guy in the hallway?”

The woman hissed out sibilant phrases in Japanese.

Nessa’s hair stood on end at the words.

Pim crouched, baring his teeth.

Not answering either question, the woman turned back to the altar.

Exchanging a quick look with Pim, Nessa did too. Mentally running through her considerable knowledge of Japanese anime, she knew altars like this usually had a statue of Buddha in the center or maybe Kannon, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy. This one had neither.

Instead, a fierce-looking man-like creature with oversized fangs jutting out of his upper and lower jaws posed fiercely. His upper chest and muscular arms were bare, robes draped from the waist down. The figure was carved from wood, maybe a foot and a half tall. The wood was darkened with age and probably candle smoke and incense. Candles and incense were necessary parts of Buddhist worship.

“Oni?” she whispered to Pim.

He peered at the statue, curling his lips back over his teeth. Pim, she guessed, was sensing bad Juju.

Oni were Japanese demons, however, some protective gods looked demonic. Generally, you could tell the good guys by the swords they held. She’d studied up on the subject after Mr. Barracuda lent her the Fudo binding cord to catch the Soul Eater a few days before.

Fudo were Fire elementals, semi-divine beings who protected people from demons. Though looking at them you’d never know. They had jutting fangs exactly like the one in the altar. They were super muscular and wore a lot of heavy jewelry. Fudo statues were shown with their demon-binding cord in one hand and a sword in the other.

This one didn’t have either.

Mrs. Sömmerhauler pointed with the fan to the open altar doors. “Notice there are no lotus blossoms or Buddhist angels.”

She was right. Instead, complex carvings of skulls and bones were arranged to look like flowers.

The candles on either side of the figure were black.

Somebody had set up a magic circle around the altar and armed it with defensive wards. Or offensive wards. Or both. Maybe it was set up to keep whatever they summoned *inside* as well as prevent others from reaching it. If they were summoning a demon, safety precautions would make sense. Demons liked nothing better than to turn on their summoner.

“Oni?” Nessa said. “Demon altar. What kind of shi... um, stuff was your daughter in to?”

Opening and closing the fan with a sharp snap, Mrs. Sömmerhauler walked out of the room on quick small steps. Despite the constraints imposed by the close-fitting symmetry of the kimono, she was out the door in seconds.

She didn’t even glance at the dead guy on the way.

Nessa sucked in her breath as she followed the woman to the front door. Outside under the bright sun, Nessa thought she saw a shadowy shape around the woman. Nessa clenched her fists, concentrating. A white furry tail peeked out of the kimono swinging in rhythm to Mrs. Sömmerhauler’s steps.

“Fox, fox, fox!” squawked the bird. She’d waddled over to stand in the doorway with Nessa.

The bird was right. Reiko Sömmerhauler’s mother was a shapeshifting Kitsune Fox Spirit hiding behind a *glamour*.

*Glamour* was how supernaturals of the not-quite-human persuasion hid in plain sight. The spell twisted perception until humans saw only what the magic user wished.

*Glamour* spells did not work on Nessa. Her dad said it was a side-effect of being able to see ghosts. Supernatural beings appeared exactly for what they were to her. Nessa had never encountered a *glamour* capable of almost fooling her until today.

What manner of amulets could suppress such powerful magic?

The woman walked to a black Mercedes parked one house up, engine idling. Slipping artfully into the back seat, no easy feat in clothes that turned women into an elongated tube, she sat back as the door closed automatically.

The Mercedes sped away.

“Fox, fox!” screeched the parrot again.

“How did you know?” Nessa asked the bird. “Her *glamour* is crazy strong.”

The bird bobbed its head up and down in an agitated manner.

“Can you see through *glamour*?” Nessa asked.

Cocking its head, the bird squawked, “Clever bird,” and flew back to sit on the dead guy’s chest.

“Why didn’t you sense her when you walked through the house?” Nessa asked Pim, shutting the door behind her with a swing of her hip.

Pim’s eyes went wide, his whiskers at attention.

“You didn’t, right? Jeez. Wonder where she buys her amulets?”

She had to have them. Shield amulets like the ones Aunt Emerald crafted for Nessa. Aunt Emerald’s amulets suppressed Nessa’s witchy aura, keeping her safe from Frank, the Fallen Angel after her soul. He had Sniffers out constantly hunting for traces of Elemental witch magic. Hunting for Nessa.

Perhaps Reiko’s mother had sniffers hunting her too.

Whipping out her phone Nessa went back to the demonic altar. Careful not to get too close, she snapped a dozen pictures from various angles.

Pim snagged her pants leg. A signal he had things to say.

She set the Speak and Spell on the floor.

“Does the shrine play into the energy drink effects on supernaturals?” the flat female voice droned.

“Oh, you’re typing much better,” she said, patting him on the head.

He gave a feline shrug.

“The altar is obviously demonic,” he typed.

Her stomach did a deep dive at the thought. Asking demons for favors was a good way to get murdered. The body in the hall a case in point.

“Most Potion Makers are not magical,” Pim typed, his clever paws once again flying easily over the keys. “They have a witch in-house to give the potions their special zing. The lore is having magic would impair their potion-making skills. Contaminate them.”

“Sounds stupid,” Nessa declared with a snort.

“Stupid or not, the tradition has been followed in many Potion Clans for thousands of years.”

“Then why is Reiko’s mom super magical?”

“We don’t know she works with the clan’s Potion Masters.”

“We don’t know a lot of things,” Nessa said flatly.

“The shrine is not a good object. We know that much.”

Glancing at the altar, she had to agree.

“Come on. Let’s look at the rest of the house. We still need to call the Infernal Court.”

Pim switched off the machine with a flick of his paw. Nessa packed it away.

Everything was in place in the dining room.

All six chairs were pushed into a rectangular modern wooden and metal table. Three coffee mugs were at one end and a half-full cardboard box of oversized cinnamon rolls. Reiko, the dead guy in the foyer, and one more person had been here.

It no longer smelled like incense.

Pim sneezed, rubbing his nose with one paw.

“I smell it too.”

They moved cautiously into the doorway connecting the kitchen.

This room told an entirely different story.

The kitchen had been ransacked. Cupboard doors were open, drawers pulled out. the cupboards empty. Everything had been thrown or dumped on the floor. A gallon-sized bottle of bleach lay on its side with two more in the sink.

This explained the smell.

Pim sneezed two more times.

Nessa stepped carefully around the piles of broken glass, dishes, groceries, and silverware. A clumpy white powder coated the kitchen counters and the wood island in the center.

Running a finger through the powder she thought it didn’t feel like either flour or sugar. Holding her fingers to her nose she couldn’t smell anything. She wasn’t going to taste it. Reiko was studying to be a Potion Master; the powder could be anything including poison.

The trail led to the kitchen door. The door stood slightly ajar. Nudging it open with her elbow, she waited as Pim slipped out ahead of her. They followed the trail to the big wooden shed at the end of the driveway.

Pim made a ‘stay here’ motion with his paw. Silently he padded out to scout around the shed. He disappeared for maybe a minute before running to the shed door. Nessa joined him. He jumped up, pressing both paws against it. The door fell inward.

Pim jumped, twisting into a back-breaking somersault in midair. He ran back into the kitchen, sneezing.

Nessa gagged. Her eyes and nose immediately began to water. She pulled off her backpack, unzipped her hoodie and reversed it, putting the hood in front. Dashing to the scooter she grabbed her helmet. Putting it on, she pulled the clear face shield down while shoving the hoodie up around her nose and mouth to block off as much air as she could from her eyes.

Cautiously she edged inside the shed stepping around the fallen door. The wooden frame was splintered along the hinges. First, they'd physically broken the door down, then replaced it to look like it was closed.

Getting as close as she dared, she saw the shed had been turned into a laboratory. Reiko had probably started brewing her energy drink in the kitchen, expanding to the shed as her idea took off.

The shed was a wreck. Jars, beakers, gas burners, and labeled jars were scattered across a long metal worktable. A large industrial size sink to the left of the door was filled to the brim with glass bottles.

Reiko, she assumed it was her, had been destroying her stock of the energy drink. And not just emptying it down the drain. She'd used bleach and the white powder to remove any traces of the liquid.

Looking to the right she jumped, swearing. Two men lay rigid on the floor. Both face up. She began to reach for her taser then stopped. These guys were no danger to her. Not anymore. They were petrified, exactly like the guy in the hall. Well, not exactly like him. Because these dead guys were dead *again*. The skin on their faces sagged and had even peeled away on their forehead and cheeks. No gas had done this.

They were zombies. 'Were' being the operative word.

She walked around the back of the shed. Broken bottles littered the ground. Some still had the yellow and purple Bee Buzzed label on them.

Cavalier must have been here. He was the South Bay's very own zombie wrangler. Reiko's potion supercharged zombies, making them faster and more coordinated. Cavalier and his master, the Voodoo Loa of the Dead, Baron Samedi, were very interested in Bee Buzzed. Cavalier must have sent the zombies to get more of the formula – or Reiko herself.

He hadn't petrified the guy in the hall. Nessa guessed the zombies interrupted whoever did that and gotten zapped. Cavalier had wisely cut and run.

She went to find Pim.

He'd retreated to the foyer, desperately rubbing his muzzle on the hall carpet.

Time to call the cops. Witch cops.

The supernatural community didn't have a lot of laws except regarding exposure. Nessa and her month-long magic ban a case in point. Investigators like Ravi handled supernatural crimes threatening their community with being outed to the public.

"Petrified?" Ravi said, echoing Barracuda's surprise after Nessa explained about the body.

"Sure looks like it. Stiff as a board from what I can tell. No bodily fluids or blood."

"What's this about?"

"Reiko Sömmerhauler missed her court date. She's one of the people behind the energy drink making supes go wackadoodle. You know the one. The Infernal Court charged her with reckless potion making."

"Wait, wait. *You're* after Reiko?"

"Why are you surprised?" Nessa bristled at his tone. "I'm capable." Sort of, she thought.

"Yeah, sure, I know. Only, the Sömmerhaulers are a powerful family. Like powerful with a capital P. We belong to the same country club. Our moms golf together. The dads play tennis. I'm sure Fiona knows them as well. I'm the one who brought Reiko in. What? A week ago?"

The wheels of justice turned fast in the Infernal court.

"And she didn't show up for her court date?" He gave a shake of his head. "Jumping bail doesn't sound like Reiko at all. When I brought her in, she said it was all a misunderstanding. She'd clear it up in court ASAP."

"Well, she didn't."

Nessa heard the soft click of keys on a keyboard. "You're right, her court date was two days ago."

"Mr. Barracuda said she wouldn't give me any trouble."

Famous last words.

"And the dead guy is in her house? The one in Pasadena?"

“Why is there another one?”

“Hell, yes. The family has an estate in Beverly Hills, a beach house in Malibu, a place in Big Sur. And that’s just the West Coast.”

“Can you send me the address in Beverly Hills and Malibu? Maybe they’re hiding her.”

More clicking drifted over the speaker. “Sure. Okay but I doubt it. They have no reason to hide her. The Sömmerhauleders and the Court have an understanding if you get my drift. I can’t believe they even allowed Reiko’s case to come to trial.”

“Are the Sömmerhauleder’s trouble?”

He blew out an audible breath. “They’re rich which is its own kind of trouble for us. They run a beverage empire. Everyone knows they spike them with spells. Keeps the public coming back for more.”

“Well, their alchemists, of course they’d spike it with spells.”

“Yeah, not the Potion Masters, though.”

“What do you mean? Are we talking about the same kind of alchemy?”

“What kind of alchemy do you think we’re talking about?” he countered.

“You know, the kind that empowers magical objects to turn back time. Or cause earthquakes or floods, lift up trains and toss them at the enemy. A flame alchemist or a silver alchemist, or, or...”

“Are you talking about Full Metal Alchemist?”

Nessa paused at his tone, “*Maaaaybe.*”

“You do know Full Metal Alchemist is a Japanese anime.”

“Well, yeah, of course, but...”

“Have you ever met a real alchemist?”

He definitely had a tone.

“Ummm, no.”

Ravi started laughing. Nessa felt her cheeks flame as he laughed on and on. Thanks to dad, her understanding of magical hierarchies was incomplete to say the least.

“Okay. Listen. The Sommerhauleders are an old, old, *old* potion clan who have gone corporate. They have a different way of doing things than individual alchemists or Japanese animated alchemists. Their Potion Masters are not magic.”

“What? That’s crazy. How can you create a potion without magic?”

“The Potion Masters create the base formulas then witches or warlocks on their staff add the magic. They think using magic would contaminate the base alchemy.”

Nessa couldn't help snorting in surprise. “That's so stupid and weird. I prefer the Full Metal Alchemist version.”

“Who wouldn't? And there are kick-butt alchemists out there. However, the corporate potion clans do things differently.”

“Well, this is all super disappointing. But getting back to my runaway girl. Is it weird she was summoned to the Court?”

“Normally, I would say yes. Money can buy your way out of almost anything in the real or magical world. Except, this was a very public mess. Supes going crazy all over the South Bay. You were there. You know.”

“My personal favorite was the witch who caused all the Slurpee machines to go crazy at Seven Eleven while an enchanted flock of ducks quacked out a song. What was it?”

Ravi laughed. “Blue Danube, by Strauss. It was awesome. The machines shot colored slushies in time to the music. Red, green, blue, red, green blue.”

“The file from Mr. Barracuda is bare bones. Her address, school, not much more. Anything you can give me?”

“*Ummm*, let's see. She's the youngest of the Sömmerhauler children by the oldest brother, Phillip. He's head of the clan. She's from his second marriage to...umm, Izumi Kotani. Reiko is their daughter. Rieko has a much older sister, Elizabeth. She's an executive at Sömmerhauler Holdings. Reiko is going for her master's in chemistry. That's about all I've got.”

“UCLA, right. I read as much. Her mom was here. She didn't seem to know about the Bail Bonds thing. Gave me *such* a look. Could Reiko be keeping her family in the dark about the summons?”

“Possible, yeah. In fact, it makes a lot of sense. Given their position, I never would have expected this to go to court. No Potion Clan lawyers have been here pounding on the judges' chamber doors as far as I know. Mrs. Baptiste was mentioned in the original deposition. You know she was working with them?”

She sure did. Nessa had met Mrs. Baptiste in pursuit of her bail-jumping cursed-sword-carrying no-good son, Tommy. Tommy was a small-time car thief who missed his court date

after triggering a cursed sword he'd found in a stolen car. Predictably, chaos followed as Baron Samedi and a herd of zombies plus some Warlocks tried to get the sword for themselves. Nessa and Ravi barely made it out alive.

"The Court decided Mrs. Baptiste didn't understand Miss Sömmerhauler was making an unlicensed drink and removed her from the warrant. The charges are only against the other two. I can't remember the other woman's name. I was only on the Sömmerhauler side. Let me look."

A flurry of quiet clicking followed.

"Found it. Reese Villanova. Wait...what? A Villanova and a Sömmerhauler working together?"

"Why wouldn't they?" Nessa had no clue about witch clans or coven politics. Witches didn't like Elementals like her. Too much Fae blood. Nobody seemed to like the Fae.

"Traditional rivals. The Villanovas are another Potion Clan. They work primarily in vitamins and supplements for regular humans. Since the Sömmerhaulers are in the beverage business they don't compete directly in the real world. Magical world is a different story."

Nessa did some quick thinking. "An energy drink sort of combines those two fields, though. Wouldn't the formula put the two families into competition or..." she thought, "or maybe a partnership?"

"Like a Capulet and Montague, Romeo and Juliet thing?"

Nessa snorted, "Not sure if there is kissing involved." She thought of the dead guy lying stretched out. "Poison maybe."

"Like Romeo? Or was it Juliet?"

"I always forget who drank what and who stabbed who. Anyway, not relevant. Did the Villanova girl show up for court?"

Ravi hissed out a breath. "No. No, she did not. Someone else put-up bail for her, not Mr. Barracuda."

"Who?"

"Regency Bail Bonds. Glendale."

"Do you know them?"

"A little. They do Infernal Court bonds and regular bonds like your boss."

"Competition?"

He chuckled, "Competition. They must have agents out looking for Ms. Villanova."

“Can you check the details of the charges against Reiko? See if the Court ordered her to destroy all traces of the drink?”

“Sure, give me a minute.”

While she waited, she walked back to the entryway. The parrot squawked, flapping its wings, pacing back and forth across the dead man’s chest.

“Back,” said Ravi. “She has a cease-and-desist order to stop producing and distributing the drink. Nothing I can find about destroying existing supplies. Though I imagine the court would confiscate those or already had.”

“Not the court. Looks like Miss Sömmerhaulder and her partners were in the process of destroying them here at her home lab. They made a toxic gas with bleach and I don’t know what else. Your guys are going to need HazMat suits probably.”

She described the scene to Ravi ending with, “There are two petrified zombies inside the shed.”

“Jeez Nessa, maybe you should have led with that.”

“I was getting to it. The gas or whatever makes it impossible to set foot inside. I’m pretty sure the corpses are zombies. They look...” she paused searching for the right word, “decayed. Saggy skin. Scabby faces.”

“Well, crap.”

“I agree.”

Nessa had never encountered zombies of any sort before being shanghaied into the bounty hunting business. Now they were popping up all over the place.

“For sure Cavalier wants the drink to power up his corpses,” Nessa said. “He loved those fast zombies. They were smarter too.”

“And the last thing we want are fast zombies sparking all sorts of rumors,” Ravi agreed. “Let me see. You’re at the address in Pasadena?”

He read out the street and number.

“Yep. You’ve got it.”

“Poppy daddy, poppy daddy!” squawked the parrot.

“What was *that*?”

“Angry parrot. The dead guy has a parrot. It’s currently guarding the corpse.”

“Magical parrot?”

She thought of the parrot recognizing Mrs. Sömmerhauler's dual nature. "Maybe."

"Leave it. We can take care of it."

His tone made her pause. "Take care of the parrot how?"

"Well, the dead guy certainly isn't going to be needing a parrot anymore. Magical or not."

He clicked off.

The parrot squawked.

Her next call was to Jun Hee Kim. He was the newest member of the Barracuda Bail Bonds team. Even newer than her. Well, by a few days. Jun Hee was a bounty hunter from Colorado who'd decided to relocate to the bright lights/big city vibe of L.A. Her boss had been thrilled. Jun Hee could throw down a magic circle like nobody's business *and* kick serious ass with his martial arts skills. Plus, he was a bird whisperer. As in the magical sense.

Nessa and Pim learned this startling piece of information only a few days before. They'd been chasing the murderous Soul Eater who got her jinxed with the Infernal Court.

Jun Hee had been with Nessa – even though she hadn't asked for his help. Later she learned he was only there for the bounty Madame Valencia had registered with the Infernal Court.

Jerk.

Anyway, he'd produced a covey of magically enhanced California quail. With a little clever spellwork, the quail tracked down their quarry.

If anyone knew what to do with an angry parrot, Jun Hee should.

He picked up after the second ring. She half feared the call would go straight to voicemail when he realized it was her. They had a prickly relationship.

"I'm busy. What's up?" he said shortly.

She got directly to the point. "Bird trouble. Angry gray parrot cursing me out over the body of a dead guy. It already bit me once."

"You on a case for Barracuda?"

"Yes. Looking for a woman. She missed her court date. The usual. I'll send you a picture of the bird."

Snapping a photo, she texted it over.

“African Gray,” he said immediately. “Super smart. The dead guy must be the owner. Poor bird.”

“Well poor bird is in my way. What do I do? I mean Pim could probably take it down even without werecat powers.”

“No! Get a blanket. Drop it over the bird.”

Pim snorted a kitty laugh. It wasn't very different from Barracuda's suggestion to put a bag over the bird.

“Gently, okay? Emphasis on gently. Gather it up; put the bird in the car.”

“Scooter,” she pointed out.

“Where's Fiona?”

“No idea. She hasn't checked in today.”

“God, Nessa. You need a car.”

“I need money more.”

“What's its name,” Jun Hee asked.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out the bird's name must be Poppy.

“Poppy,” she said. “Can't I leave it here for the Infernal Court?”

“No!” he said sounding alarmed. “They'll probably kill it.”

She narrowed her eyes at the bird. Poppy gave her a beady-eyed stare right back.

“What do you think, Pim?”

“You're asking your cat?”

“We're partners. What do you think?”

As an answer, he trotted out of the hall into the living room. A moment later he backed in dragging a lap blanket. Probably from the couch.

“Looks like we're wrapping up the bird,” she said into the phone.

“Bring it to Barracuda's office. I'll pick it up.”

“I don't think the bird is going to like that.”

“It will be fine. Please, Nessa?”

Nessa paused. He never said 'please' to her for anything. She remembered his little covey of magical quail and how careful he was to keep them safe during the Soul Eater's attack.

“All right, all right. I'll get it there somehow.”

As soon as she dropped the blanket over the bird it began to scream hysterically.

She had to shout into the phone to be heard. “Jeezus Jun Hee, is it going to do this the whole time?”

“Maybe. Or it will quiet down. Where are you?”

“Pasadena.”

“I’m in Long Beach on an apprehension. I’ll get to the office when I can.”

Putting the blanket and parrot to one side, Nessa pulled a pair of disposable gloves out of a plastic bag in her backpack. She’d recently picked up a box at the ninety-nine cents store. Not all her cases were supernatural. Barracuda dealt in a lot of run-of-the-mill felons too. Fingerprints were not a casual thing she wanted to leave here and there. Years of staying off the grid had left their mark.

Grimacing, she looked for the dead man’s cell phone. He really had been petrified. His skin felt like stone. Cold and hard. The cell was in his back hip pocket. He was so stiff she had to cut it out with her silver pocketknife.

Thumbing the screen to open, she saw the security lock was set for his face.

“Sorry, dude,” she murmured, aiming it at him.

If he hadn’t died with his eyes wide open this never would have worked.

Silently the screen opened to the menu. Tapping into the settings she turned off the security lock timer, then put the phone in her backpack.

His wallet was in the other pocket.

The wallet was the flip-open kind with clear plastic inserts. Driver’s license on one side, student I.D. on the other.

Brian Samejima.

Japanese last name.

He hadn’t been mentioned in the court papers. Maybe he was a silent partner.

Age: 25. Height: Five feet ten inches. Hair: Black. Eyes: Brown. The address was here in Pasadena. His student I.D. said UCLA.

Damn. He must have worked hard to get in to such a competitive school. And for what? To end up petrified on a hardwood floor in Pasadena. Poor guy.

After snapping pictures of both cards, she checked for receipts. Receipts, she’d learned, were a good way to trace the activities of bail jumpers. Where they’d been. Where they liked to go. Two were from Dunkin’ Donuts. The one on Lake Avenue. Four drinks.

Four drinks, four people. The dead guy. Reiko. Reese Villanova. Who else?  
Someone had to know where Reiko was. Unless she was already dead.