

EDEN CROWNE



👤 BOOK FOUR: GHOSTED 👤

# GIRL'S GUIDE TO VOODOO BOUNTY HUNTING

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## CHAPTER ONE

“I’m going to burn it, I swear. Come closer and I will.” The man waved an old-school Polaroid-style photograph in one hand and a lighter in the other.

Nessa skidded to a stop, both hands out. “No. Don’t. Please. *Please.*”

“Help,” called a tiny voice. “Help, help.”

Barely visible in the photograph a woman wearing a Unicorn Onesie was jumping up and down beating against the film.

The day was not going well. Not at all.

Nessa Scott’s boss, Roman Barracuda, owner of Barracuda Bail Bonds and L.A.’s reigning Voodoo King, had handed her a new case this morning. Not Infernal. The Infernal Court policed supernaturals. Enforcing the rules, lax as they were, about interfering too much in human affairs. This was a strictly human court matter. Or so they’d thought.

Nessa and her Familiar, Pim, were only a few weeks into their new careers as bounty hunters. Her deadbeat dad had skipped town owing Barracuda big time. Only the debt wasn’t money, it was magic. And guess who he left as collateral?

Peg Porter’s court date was yesterday afternoon. She had not shown up nor phoned her lawyer. Ms. Porter was charged with disturbing a burial site. Grave robbing, not to dress it up. The cops hadn’t found any objects on her besides an old Polaroid camera which she claimed was to take pictures of ghosts. She wasn’t charged with theft, but they’d hung trespassing on top of disturbing a gravesite

It was a low-level bond which was why Roman Barracuda had given it to Nessa and Pim. His enforcers, the formidable and only marginally human sisters Pansie and Rose Marie La Rue, got the toughest bonds. Though now they divided some of the work with Jun Hee Kim. Jun Hee was from a rival supernatural Bail Bonds office in Denver. He’d decided to try his luck in Los Angeles. Since Jun Hee was both adept at martial and magical arts, Mr. Barracuda was delighted with the addition.

Barracuda handed Nessa the paperwork on Ms. Porter. “Just a simple...”

“Don’t say it!” Nessa interrupted, putting a hand up to stop him.

“...apprehension.”

“You said it.”

He’d jinxed it for sure.

In Nessa and her Familiar Pim’s short careers as bounty hunters, every time her boss said ‘easy’ or ‘simple,’ Nessa had nearly gotten killed. First by Skinwalkers. Then zombies. Followed by Baron Samedi, the Voodoo Loa of the Dead. The reincarnation of a dead samurai. A hit-and-run *plus* kidnapping by Warlocks. More zombies. And let’s not forget being claimed by the Faerie Court of Air as their newest Princess. Though to be honest, the last one wasn’t entirely Mr. Barracuda’s fault.

“Her address is in there. Boyle Heights. She wrote ‘self-employed’ as Place of Work.” He gave a snort. “I’ve included a list of cemeteries. That’s most often where she can be found after dark.”

Ms. Porter had been arrested on this charge twice before. She should have gotten away with an ankle bracelet until her court date, but the judge said he was tired of her bull and imposed bail.

According to Mr. Barracuda, people hired Peg to circumvent burial wards to find enchanted objects or bones or God knows what.

He pointed at the file. “Read the sticky notes.”

Nessa held the file so Pim could see it too. Pim was an intelligent, well-read feline. He wasn’t her pet; he was her partner. He was also invisible. This unfortunate situation was the result of a shipboard romance with a winsome calico over a century before. The calico belonged to a gypsy witch who cursed poor Pim. Since then, only his witch and a few select others could see him in his feline form. He could also transform into a rather terrifying werecat. As a beast, he was fully visible. Though anyone who had the bad luck to see the werecat up close would probably prefer otherwise.

The sticky notes let them know Peg was a Diviner. She used her divining talent to locate lost objects, specifically those tied to burial sites and corpses. She wasn’t a necromancer since she couldn’t reanimate or manipulate dead flesh. However, her magic blurred a little into those dark arts.

“Have shovel, will travel?” Nessa said, surprised. “For real?”

“For real.” Barracuda shook his head. “Stupid girl. Flipping off the dead has consequences. She’s going to pay for her disrespect one day.”

As Nessa left the office, she sincerely hoped it would not be today.

She had hoped in vain.

Boyle Heights was conveniently close to Evergreen Cemetery. One of Miss Porter's places of business. This was Los Angeles's largest, oldest, and currently most neglected graveyard according to various news sites Nessa looked through on the way there.

Fiona drove her and Pim in the witch's sleek silver Audi. Fiona was a rich young witch currently working off a Community Service sentence from the Infernal Court at the bail bonds office. Fiona had used black magic to compel the price down on a house she wanted to buy in Glendale. Assorted acts of mayhem with some hospital-centric side effects had resulted in her official censure by the Infernal Court.

The Infernal Court was both the police and judicial arm of supernatural life in big cities like Los Angeles. Magic was far more pervasive than run-of-the-hill humans knew. The Court's job was to keep it that way.

Nessa didn't understand how pursuing felons for Mr. Barracuda translated to Community Service, but no one had asked her opinion. Mostly Fiona drove Nessa and Pim around greater L.A. as the two of *them* did the pursuing. Nessa did not have a car and as she had learned the hard way, transporting felons on the back of a 40cc scooter – her only mode of transportation – was no easy task.

Boyle Heights was about ten miles from the bail bonds office in Compton. Nessa noted a KFC and a McDonald's on the way. She had a feeling today was going to be especially hungry work. She and Pim had stopped at Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf for some espresso and a fat, buttery croissant on the way to Barracuda Bail Bonds in the morning. That wouldn't last long. Magic took a toll and summoning spells quickly sapped a witch's body of energy. After ending up in the hospital several times, Nessa had learned to keep herself fed and hydrated. That included scouting places for possible fuel stops.

Peg Porter's house was a tiny white cottage on a postage-stamp-sized yard. Neat and pretty with violet hydrangea bushes blooming along the front wall. A pair of picture windows looked out on the street.

Nessa felt a pang of envy. The cottage was exactly the sort of home she'd longed for growing up. Small and private. No midnight scramble for possessions from cheap motel rooms, one step ahead of the local police. Life with her magical scam-artist father coupled with the curse

she'd inherited from her mother meant they'd never had a home. Frank the Fallen already had her mother's soul and wanted a matched set. Every time Frank got close, they had to run.

At least now she had a glimmer of hope. And from such an unlikely source. Only last week, a group of thieving Warlocks told her the legend of three enchanted objects: a sword, a stone, and a mirror. If bound together, they might be able to break her dark legacy. Free her from Frank. She knew where the sword was. The location of the jewel and mirror were still a mystery.

Pim sat on her lap. He pressed his head under her chin, meowing an encouraging mew. He could always sense her moods.

She stroked him between his ears. "I'm okay. I was thinking what a nice little house this is."

Pim meowed in agreement. They often strolled neighborhoods in whatever city they'd found themselves before settling with her Aunt Emerald when Nessa started college. They liked to look at houses and gardens. Pim was especially keen on flowers.

Fiona snorted. "Are you joking? It's like the size of our pool cabana."

Nessa ignored her. Fiona was from old money. Lots of it. Her family lived in Bel Air or Beverly Hills or some other luxurious Los Angeles neighborhood. She dressed in designer clothes and her Audi was barely a year old.

An electric blue Ford EcoSport sat in Ms. Porter's driveway. Nessa knew a lot about cars. Deadbeat Dad had taught her to recognize and remember the make of cars since she was a toddler. His criminal career meant they had to be always vigilant for vengeful victims and/or plainclothes police.

Nessa pulled the papers from Barracuda out of her backpack checking them again. Peg Porter owned the house. It wasn't a rental. Ditto the car. A nice car *and* a house? Dang. Grave robbing paid well.

As soon as Nessa stepped out of the car, she gagged. The sidewalk smelled like rotting meat. Pim sneezed repeatedly, rubbing frantically at his nose with one paw.

"Oh my god. Shut the door!" Fiona shouted.

Nessa barely had time to shut it before Fiona sped away. Pedal to the metal.

Nessa crossed her fingers hoping Fiona would return at some point. You never knew with that witch.

It was hard to blame her. What a stink! Pulling her shirt up over her nose did not help stave off the stench. Her eyes started watering from the ferocity of it. Since no neighbors or police were outside exclaiming over the stink, Nessa assumed it was supernatural in nature. Probably affecting only magic users.

She walked the border of the front yard. The smell stretched from one side to the other. Taking a few steps beyond, the stink abruptly dropped to nothing.

“Pim, check around the back.”

Gagging, Pim scampered off.

When he returned, she asked, “All around the house?”

He nodded.

Something had marked the property boundary but not ventured inside. Maybe because it couldn't. Peg Porter was a witch who played on the dark side of magic. She'd have powerful magical wards to protect her home.

“Does it go anywhere else?”

Pim gave a meow of protest, still sneezing, but tracked the scent to one neighbor's yard up a tall oak.

The tree faced a picture window in Peg's house. Judging from its placement, Nessa guessed it was the bedroom.

Nessa had no trouble crossing Peg's protective wards. They must be set up against someone or something with malevolent intentions. That way the mailman or delivery people could still come and go from the sidewalk. Nevertheless, she knew from the prickling along her skin she had set off the house's silent supernatural alarm system. Anyone at home would know she was here

She went up to the front door to knock. It swung open slightly at her touch.

Not good.

Another thing Deadbeat Dad had taught her was never stand directly in front of a door if she didn't know who was on the other side.

Carefully she positioned herself on the door's outer edge.

“Hello?” she said again, pushing it open with her elbow.

“Miss Porter? Barracuda Bail Bonds. It's about your court date.”

No answer.

Pim slipped by her gliding soundlessly inside. There were many advantages to having an invisible Familiar. Stealthy reconnaissance was one of them.

She waited until he returned meowing an ‘all clear.’

The open plan of the cottage let her see the living room, dining room, and much of the galley-style kitchen from the doorway.

Trouble had found Ms. Porter. That was immediately obvious.

Glasses and plates were broken and scattered on the floor. Wine bottles tipped over on the table. One had spilled its contents leaving red puddles. A dining chair was overturned.

There was no lingering stink from the entity that had circled the outside of the house. Whatever it was hadn’t caused this mess.

Directly in front of the entryway down a short hall was another door, and one more to the right. The door at the end of the hall should be the bathroom. There was probably only one in a small house like this. The other door was open. A bedroom.

Nessa was careful not to touch anything in case the police became involved.

She followed Pim into the bedroom. Blankets, sheets, and pillows lay strewn around the bed and floor. An ashy, smokey smell lingered that wasn’t present in the rest of the house.

“Do you smell blood?”

Pim shook his head.

They looked around the bed. She checked the closet and bureau. Pim meowed an alert pointing with a paw.

Nessa squatted down, looking at his find. A burned *something* lay crumpled near the window. Not paper or it would have been ash. This was where the smokey smell was coming from. That was a lot of smell for such a small thing. Nessa held her hand over the crumpled black object. The tingle was unmistakable.

Magic.

Pim crawled out from under the bed pushing a set of keys with his nose.

Nessa walked back to the front of the cottage, pressing a button on the black key fob. The blue Ford beeped and flashed its lights.

She closed the front door, got in the car, and turned it on. This was a deluxe model with all the bells and whistles. Her dad had rented one before. She flicked through the onboard navigation and entertainment display screens looking to see what apps had been installed.

Nessa crossed her fingers and said, “Hey Siri?”

Nothing.

“Siri?”

Silence.

“Hey, Alexa?”

“Uh-huh,” came the chirpy reply.

Nessa fist-pumped the air. Ms. Porter had taken advantage of connecting her cell to the car’s onboard system. Hopefully, she had taken it one step further.

“Alexa, find my phone.”

“Give me a moment,” came the reply. Shortly a map with a blinking light appeared on the screen.

Nessa called Fiona.

“Are you dead?” Fiona said.

Last week Nessa had been kidnapped by a gang of warlocks fighting Baron Samedi, the Voodoo Loa of the Dead, for a cursed sword. Predictably, mayhem and blood had ensued. Since then, this was Fiona’s annoying stock answer to Nessa’s calls.

“Will you stop? Gawd. No. Not dead. The lady isn’t here. Something bad happened. Pim found her car keys. We’re going to track her phone. According to the map, she’s not far. Will you follow?”

“I guess,” she said after a lengthy pause.

Nessa backed out of the driveway, pulling in front of Fiona.

Technically she was sort of stealing Ms. Porter’s car. It was for a good cause, Nessa reasoned. The woman had likely been kidnapped. Or worse.

The onboard AI sent them to Evergreen Avenue and then onto Caesar Chavez. Cesar Chavez bordered Evergreen Cemetery.

Of course, it did.

Peg Porter couldn’t be sitting around Starbucks sipping an iced latte, could she? No, no, no. Had to be in a creepy-ass graveyard. Full of creepy-ass spirits that thanks to her Scott blood, Nessa could see exactly like her Aunt Emerald. Ah, the wonders of DNA.

The cheerful voice guided them around the corner, through the cemetery’s main gate.

“You’ve arrived,” droned the AI when Nessa pulled up to a faded, maroon-colored Scion sedan.

Both spots near it were taken. The cemetery parking lot was awfully full for a weekday afternoon. A funeral, perhaps?

Nessa parked next to a fat white van with the logo, ‘Back from the Dead. Paranormal Investigators. Follow us on YouTube,’ painted in black across one side.

Ghost hunters. Wonderful. Why did people think ghosts wanted to talk to them? Most spirits had little to say according to her aunt. And she should know. Emerald was the real deal. Able to not only speak but see and hear the dead.

Fiona parked a few cars farther away. She stayed inside the Audi with the windows up and the engine running. Fiona was all about quick getaways. Often without Nessa.

She peered inside the Scion’s dusty windows. There was a handbag on the backseat.

Maybe whoever took Peg Porter was going to bury her in the cemetery. Pretty good hiding place except it was just after one in the afternoon. People might notice someone dragging a body and carrying a shovel in broad daylight. Even in L.A.

Nessa drew a question mark in the air for Fiona to ask if she was coming.

Fiona made a gesture back.

Clearly not.

Pim walked on scouting for Miss Porter. Living or dead.

The drought had not been kind to the cemetery. The grounds looked like a schoolyard in a poor neighborhood. Lots of bleached dirt with scraggly patches of dead brown grass brightened only occasionally with a well-tended plot of green. There were a few skinny palms and some hardy evergreens holding on despite the neglect.

Glowing balls of greenish light hovered around gravestones here and there. Contrary to popular belief, ghosts did not only come out at night. If a spirit was tied to a graveyard or anywhere, it hung around twenty-four-seven.

Nessa saw two human-shaped spirits drifting between the plots. They were a little too clear for her liking.

A group that had to be the ghost hunters was huddled together filming a bunch of graves far from her. Good. She hoped they stayed away.

A few more random people walked around with their phones mounted on gimbals. The little automated machines featured a long handgrip to give the user a steadier shot and full rotation of the camera at the touch of a button. Nessa knew how they worked. She'd used gimbals in making fake films for some of Dad's scams. They must be amateur ghost hunters.

After about fifteen minutes of wandering around the grounds, she and Pim spied a solitary man standing by a new grave talking to himself.

At first, she thought it was another ghost hunter.

As they came closer, she realized he was talking to a Polaroid-style instant photograph.

A little closer and she heard the photograph talking back.

A shiver ran down her spine.

"Hey," she said waving a hand. "Barracuda Bail Bonds. Um, bond recovery agent." She always forgot to add that. "I'm looking for Peg Porter."

Though she had a horrible feeling she knew where Ms. Porter was.

The man jumped.

"Go away," he shouted, waving the photograph.

"Do you know where Peg Porter is?"

He looked directly at the photograph.

Nessa rolled her eyes. What an amateur.

"What's your name?"

"Keith."

"Okay, Keith. I am guessing Peg Porter is inside that," she pointed at the photo. "She missed her court date yesterday My boss can help her get a new one."

Which might or might not be true. Mr. Barracuda probably wouldn't want to take another chance on Peg Porter. Though looking at the current tableau, Nessa thought missing court might not be Ms. Porter's fault.

The man was bouncing nervously up and down on his feet looking from the photograph to Nessa and back again. "You can't have her."

"Why?" Nessa asked moving closer.

He held up a cheap lighter in his other hand. He flicked it on waving the flame under the photo. "I said stay back. Come any closer and I'll burn it."

"No, don't. Please. *Please.*" Nessa backed away slowly.

The lighter blew out. He flicked it on again. The breeze blew it close to the photo.

A tiny voice squeaked, “Eep.”

“Careful.”

Keith squinted at Nessa, declaring, “She has to pay for what she did.”

“You don’t want to do that, Keith. Burn the photograph and the Infernal Court will have you in for homicide.”

“Homicide,” screeched the tiny figure in the photo.

“Justified,” said the man.

“Homicide is never justified,” Nessa said righteously.

Keith seemed to think about that. “Unless it’s a troll. Or a ghoul.”

Nessa rolled her eyes. “Okay, okay, I admit, ghouls and trolls are evil.”

“And zombies,” said the guy warming to the subject. “No such thing as a nice zombie.”

“Granted. But not girlfriends or boyfriends. Past or present.”

Keith frowned. “Not even when you catch them having sex with a car salesman from Irvine? Irvine for chrissakes.”

“He’s not a salesman,” the tiny woman said, shouting to be heard. “Brad owns the dealership.”

“Not anymore,” Keith said grimly.

Nessa saw now he had a classic instant camera slung around his chest.

Oh crap. That must have been the burned *something* on the floor. An instant photo with poor Brad in it.

Pim was creeping closer to the man. His invisibility was a true advantage in their new line of work.

“Why, Peg? Why?” Keith was looking into the photo at the little woman. “What could Brad give you I couldn’t?”

“Mortgage payments,” said Peg firmly.

“Besides that.”

“A car.”

“Besides that.”

“Hot sex.”

“Stop,” Nessa yelled, “enough.”

“Yeah, enough,” said Brad. He lit a corner of the photograph.

The tiny woman screamed shrilly.

Pim sprang. He transformed to his werecat form in mid-jump clamping his jaws around Keith’s wrist holding the photo.

Keith yelled in surprise and pain. Nessa dove for the Polaroid catching it before it hit the ground. She slapped it against her hoodie to put out the flame.

Keith was on the ground clutching his wrist. Pim took up an aggressive stance in front of the man.

One corner of the photo had completely burned away.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“It broke my wrist!” yelled Keith.

“Not you, idiot,” Nessa said. “Besides, it’s only sprained. If he’d broken it, you would have heard the snap.”

She held the photo closer. Peg Porter was crouched in the far corner, her arms over her head, sobbing. Nessa could see now that the room in the picture was Peg’s dining room. She must have run in there trying to escape Keith. That’s why it was a mess in the real world.

“Hey, hey, Ms. Porter, are you hurt?”

The woman lifted her face. She had a lot of dark brown hair. She was pretty, Nessa saw. Or would be if she wasn’t three inches tall.

Peg wiped her nose on her sleeve, “I’m okay.”

Nessa turned back to Keith. “The Infernal Court is going to have you for one murder today. Do you really want to make it two?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “Tell me how to get her out.”

“Um,” he hesitated, stammering a bit. “Uh, um.”

Nessa rolled her eyes. “You don’t know, do you? Why am I not surprised?”

“Uhh...” was the reply.

She looked at the photograph, raising an eyebrow.

“I don’t know either,” Peg said, sniffing wetly and wiping her nose on her sleeve.

Great. Just great.

## CHAPTER TWO

She called the one person who might have the information she needed.

“Dad, I’ve got a cursed instant camera that shrinks people and puts them inside a photo. I need to get someone out.”

“Give me a couple of minutes,” he said. “I’ll call you back as quick as I can. Are you safe?”

“Nope!” she chirped.

“That’s my girl.”

Dad was in hiding at Aunt Emerald’s. He’d shown up after a phone call to Nessa two days ago. It was the first time she’d heard from him in over a month. Belencourt, a powerful L.A. demon who dealt in rare supernatural objects, was after him. For what he had not explained, Nessa suspected it had something to do with her dead mother’s bargain with the Fallen Angel.

Her mother, Genevieve Chevalier, had been born without magic to a clan of powerful Elemental Air Witches. Magic skipping a generation happened every couple of centuries. No one knew why.

Consumed by jealousy, she’d made a dark and dirty deal with a Fallen Angel. She didn’t Nessa was already nestled in her womb. Like most wagers of this kind, the House always wins. Genevieve died in childbirth. The Fallen Angel decided Nessa was also part of that bargain and came to claim her. Nessa’s father disagreed.

They’d been on the run until Nessa decided she wanted to attend college. All her schooling until then had been digital. Dad had dumped Nessa at his older sister’s house. Aunt Emerald could ward like nobody’s business. She’d made amulets for Nessa to shield her from Frank. Frank was what she called her mother’s Fallen Angel. True names had great power, particularly angels.

Aunt Emerald’s home was the most protected place Nessa had ever seen. Even her Grandmother Hattie’s home hadn’t been that strong. Maybe if it had, Frank wouldn’t have murdered her.

Dad reasoned if the wards could hide Nessa from a Fallen Angel, they could certainly cloak him from a powerful demon.

So far, he'd been right.

Next, she called Fiona. The only other person she knew who dabbled in dark magic.

"Are you dead?" Fiona said.

"Damn it, you just saw me fifteen minutes ago."

Fiona snorted. "As if that wasn't enough time to die."

Nessa winced. "Could you *not* say things like that?"

Fiona made a contemptuous sound.

"I am not dead. However, my skip is trapped in an instant photo from a cursed camera. I want to know if you ever heard of a spell to get someone out of that situation."

"Why do you want to get her out? If she was stupid enough to get herself trapped an all."

"Because handing her over to the police is the only way I'll get my money."

"Oh, right. You're poor."

Nessa took a deep breath.

'Stay calm,' she silently told herself. After a couple of deep, steadying breaths, she said, "Fiona, can you help me?"

"Maybe." She hung up.

Pim paced back and forth in front of Keith. He was still in werecat form which meant he was fully visible.

"The camera is cursed, right?" she asked Peg Porter.

"Yes," shouted the tiny woman.

"Did you know?"

She shook her head emphatically. "No. Or not precisely. It had to be magic because somebody contracted me to find it and dig it up."

"From a coffin?" She couldn't tell how big Peg Porter was but that would take *a lot* of digging for one person with a shovel.

She shook her head. "Not a coffin. It was in a waterproof container under about two feet of dirt. Near the headstone."

"That's when the security people caught you."

“Not until I’d taken the camera out and reburied the box. When they found me, I just had a few spadefuls of dirt around me. They assumed I’d only started digging. I said the camera was mine. After I got out on bail, they gave the camera back with my stuff.”

“And the stink around your house? Was that the guy who contracted you to get the camera?”

She winced. “You smelled that? No,” she went on not waiting for an answer, “something came to the house. I have pretty good wards around my place. Disturbing graves can rile up some nasty things. It couldn’t get on the roof or through the doors.”

“It climbed your neighbor’s tree.”

She looked surprised. “Yes. It talked to me from there. Told me where to put the camera.”

“Not take it back where you found it?”

“No. I was to bring the camera here. Gave me the geolocation of one of the plots. Made sure I wrote it down and repeated it several times. The thing said to place the camera in the hands of the angel statue. Or it would...” she paused, looking down, “do things to me.”

Nessa threw one hand up in the air. “And after that graphic warning, you decided to have a fling with Brad before going to the cemetery. Because sex was on your mind rather than possibly being dismembered by a dark entity?”

Peg shrugged. “He came over, one thing led to another. We were drunk. And high. Brad is very persuasive. *Was*. He was very persuasive.” She sniffed, wiping her eyes with a sleeve of the unicorn onesie.

“What was Brad’s last name?”

“Zwingley.”

She knew that name. Everyone in Greater L.A. with a television knew that name.

“Swing a deal with Zwingley, Zwingley? The car dealer?”

“Yes. Number one on the 101.”

“Number one on the 101,” Nessa automatically repeated. He was going to be missed big time. Guys like him didn’t just disappear.

Keith took a deep breath. “Do you smell that?”

Pim looked up, growling.

Nessa sniffed the dry air.

“It’s the entity that told Peg to return the camera. If it’s here, we better start walking. Pim, get the camera.”

Keith, who was still on the ground, swung the camera away.

Pim bared his fangs, crouching low, ready to spring.

“You better give it to him,” Nessa warned.

Keith, proving he was not as stupid as he looked, tossed the camera to Pim.

Pim jumped, catching the strap in his teeth. He trotted to Nessa.

“Tell me where to go,” she said to Peg.

Peg had memorized the numbers but had no idea what to do next. Nessa Googled ‘how to find GPS coordinates.’

Keith, following at a distance, kept shouting directions as he tried to do the same thing on his own phone.

“Stop helping,” Nessa yelled at him as her cell buzzed.

Fiona.

“Look on the back of the photo,” Fiona said.

Peg gave a little screech and grabbed the dining table to keep her balance as Nessa flipped the photo.

“There should be a circle of sigils.”

“There is. Looks like Enochian. Maybe.”

“Don’t care. You need to draw those sigils on the ground. I mean, in the dirt, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Exactly as they are in the photo. Make it big enough for a person to stand in.”

“Then what?”

“Not sure. Still looking.” She hung up.

Nessa went back to the instructions. She typed in the numbers and zoomed in on the map that came up. Hoping she’d done it right, she followed the arrow, careful to walk around the graves rather than over them. Witches were a superstitious bunch.

She didn’t worry about turning her back on Keith. Werecat Pim kept himself between them.

“Tell me more about the camera,” she asked Peg as they walked.

“A guy contacted me via my website. A man. Or at least a man’s voice on the phone once we made contact. He was looking for the camera. He paid half upfront for the job. Good money.”

“Why didn’t he get it himself?”

She shrugged. “Didn’t think to ask. I have a reputation and he had money. I earned it,” she added, frowning. “Took days to locate the dang thing. None of my locator spells were working. I ended up having to go to a spell broker to buy a boost. I was going to charge the guy extra for that!”

A boost would have been expensive. Her dad had purchased a couple of spells from a broker in Oregon once. Brokers were elusive figures. You had to know somebody who knew somebody who knew somebody *else* to find one. That’s because a lot of their spells were on the dark side. She’d heard the infernal Court arranged ‘accidents’ for any spell broker they found.

“But you got caught.”

She shrugged. “It happens. After I got out on bail, it went quiet. The guy who contacted me never called back. I couldn’t believe it. After all the trouble I went to. Then that stinky thing showed up.”

“How did Brad get in the photograph? Was it Keith?”

She shook her head. “Brad came over like I said. We were playing around. He saw the camera on the bureau and said let’s take pictures old-school style. I took a picture of Brad. Naked in bed with his...”

“Do not need details,” Nessa said quickly.

“And it just happened. One second, he was there. The next he was in the photo, yelling. I was frantic. Holding the camera, trying to figure out what to do. That’s when *he* came in.”

“Keith grabbed the camera and took a picture of you?”

“Eventually. Yeah.”

“In your unicorn onesie.”

“Brad and I were role-playing.”

Nessa shook her head. “Too much information.”

Keith must be a magic user as well since he understood exactly what was going on.

“He called me names,” Keith said.

“Who?” asked Nessa.

“Brad. He shouldn’t have called me names. Especially standing there naked with his...”

Nessa held up her hands to stop him.

“So, I burned the photo. Then I took a picture of *her*.”

Peg gestured around her. “And here I am.”

Her phone’s directions took them on a circuitous route to the opposite end of the cemetery. This area looked slightly better tended. Large gravestones, more green grass, fresher flowers. Probably the part of the cemetery movie companies liked to shoot in. Evergreen had been in a lot of films and television shows.

Pim growled, his fur rising. He was looking beyond Keith, back along the way they had come. Nessa walked faster.

“We’re going to need the camera to get you out. Unfortunately, whatever’s following *wants* the camera.”

Peg pressed against the film. “I don’t want to stay here forever. You’ve got to help me.”

“I’m trying.”

Once they located the general area, they found the angel without too much trouble. It was literally head and shoulders above the gravestones on either side.

About ten yards away Nessa saw someone kneeling beside a grave. A man she guessed from the short hair. His back was to them. She hoped he’d stay there. Things were going to get weird fast.

Her phone buzzed.

Dad.

“I know about the ring of sigils on the back of the photo,” she said before he could speak. “We’re supposed to reproduce them in a circle on the ground.”

“Right. Good. Put the photo you have inside the circle. You have the camera, yes?”

“Yes. Then what?”

“I’m still checking. There’s another photo involved somehow. Emerald is helping me translate the text from Latin. Either you burn the copy or the original. Not sure which.”

Peg gave a tiny yelp of fear.

“Sort of an important point, Dad.”

“I’ll get back to you.”

“Hurry.”

A whiff of rotten meat floated by on a current of hot air. The apparition dropped out of the sky. A swath of darkness, swirling in a pocket storm. No form or face Nessa could see.

It began to circle them. Pim kept pace with the entity stalking its every move.

‘Never leave home without a marking pen’ was one of Nessa’s rules. She grabbed the Sharpie from the front zipper of her backpack. With the cap on, she used it as a pointer to carefully copy the sigils from the back of the photo into the nearest plot of dirt.

Nessa was no lightweight with magic spells. If threatened she had the magical muscle to take this thing on, she was sure. Air answered her call. But air was all about movement. If she summoned a tempest, it would blow away the runes. Lightning might do the same. She had no way and nowhere to draw the spell except here in the dirt.

She completed the circle except for one last rune. The closing rune would seal in the magic. No point closing the circle until she had the whole ritual.

“Come on Dad,” she whispered, staring at her phone and willing it to ring.

Nessa felt a change in the air currents. Air spoke to her and suddenly its voice turned savage. The entity lunged forward, the black currents reaching for Nessa. Forewarned, she jumped rolling up and over the grave, swinging the camera out of its reach.

Pim reared up on his hind legs. He sliced at the entity viciously with his scythe-like claws. The thing howled and pulled back. It hovered about six feet away, the dark wind whirling fast.

It must have a body hidden inside the darkness if Pim had hurt it.

Her phone buzzed making her jump.

Dad. A Facetime call. She tapped the app.

“On the picture with the person, write this rune,” he said without preamble.

He aimed his phone at a drawing. Nessa knew that rune. It meant ‘empty’.

She popped the top off the sharpie to copy the symbol on top of the photo. Peg squeezed herself to one side.

“Take the film out of the camera. Before you fill in the last rune in the dirt to close the circle, light the photograph on fire. Close the circle and take a picture with the empty camera.”

“Understood,” she said, tapping off and shoving her phone into her back pocket.

“Keith,” she called, “give me the lighter.”

“No.”

“Keith, we don’t have time for your crap. Give me the lighter!”

“She cheated on me.”

“That doesn’t mean she should die, you idiot. Stop thinking with your dick.”

Pim, who had been following the conversation while keeping pace with the entity moved so that Keith was suddenly in the path of the phantasm.

The thing howled, surging close.

Keith screamed like a little girl, tossed the lighter to Nessa, and dove behind Pim.

Nessa couldn’t see what happened next. Judging from Pim’s growls and Keith’s screams, battle with the entity had commenced.

She ejected the film pack, knelt in the dirt, and put the picture with Peg in the center of the circle.

“Go to the far side of the room,” she ordered the woman. “It’s going to get hot.”

Praying her father was right, she lit the edge of the polaroid, completed the last rune, and nudged the magic circle awake with her will. She pictured it glowing in her mind.

A shimmer of silver let her know the circle was active.

The picture began to smoke and burn.

Peg started to cry.

Nessa jumped to her feet, aimed the camera, and pushed the lever, chanting, “Please, please, *please* work.”

A burst of light inside the circle made Nessa shield her eyes with her hand. When she opened them, she saw Peg, normal sized again, coughing and crying.

Half-crouching, half-standing, Nessa scrambled over to sweep aside the runes, releasing the magic. The trapped energy in the circle burst out knocking her head over heels. She fell onto her back and into the entity.

For a millisecond she was inside the swirling darkness. A man’s face came into focus through the churning darkness. Handsome in the way Frank, the dark angel lusting after her soul, was handsome. She’d been right. The swirling black darkness was an illusion, a spell hiding his real body. She was suddenly sure the smell, like the cascading darkness, was camouflage as well.

Pim pounced to bite. There was a yell of pain confirming a solid body was indeed inside the whirlwind.

He twisted around trying to grab the werecat. Pim nimbly ran around the man's body like he was in a log rolling competition.

Nessa scabbled forward, tossing the camera to Peg.

"Put it in the angel's hands," she shouted.

Peg blinked at Nessa. The camera laying at her feet.

"Pick it up," she shouted. "Put the camera where the thing told you."

Wavering uncertainly, Peg picked up the camera. Keith looked like he was going to try and stop her.

Nessa struggled to her feet and tackled him. They rolled over and over in the dirt on top of a grave. His heart wasn't really in the fight. Sobbing, he stopped struggling almost immediately.

"I didn't mean to kill him, I didn't," he sniffed.

Nessa pushed away from him rubbing her elbow. She'd hit it hard on the edge of a headstone.

"But you did." She didn't feel like sugarcoating it. "You killed a human man over some stupid sex."

Peg wobbled to the angel statue like she was having a hard time keeping her balance. On the second try, she managed to place the camera in the angel's cupped hands.

Pim jumped away from the entity. The specter levitated as if it was weightless. One second he was in a face-off with Pim, the next the phantasm was by the angel. Darkness enveloped the statue.

In a heartbeat, the entity soared into the air, out of sight.

The camera was gone.

## CHAPTER THREE

Nessa turned to see Keith hightailing it across the graveyard at a full run. She certainly wasn't going to chase him. Her job was to bring in Peg. Period.

Peg, looking ridiculous in her bright pink and purple unicorn onesie, chanted "Thank God, thank God, thank God," nonstop.

Nessa kicked at the circle of dirt, smudging the runes. As she did, she noticed the man was still kneeling by the grave nearby.

They'd made a lot of noise over the past few minutes. A shiver ran from her fingertips, up her arms, over her shoulders, and down her back.

"Come with me." She took Peg's arm.

Peg started to twist away. Now that she was free, perhaps she'd decided she didn't want to go back to jail.

Before she could act on the thought, Pim closed the space between them in a single leap. He was still in his formidable werecat form. Growling low in his throat, he gave Peg a toothy smile.

That was all it took for Peg to fall into step shoulder-to-shoulder with Nessa.

They approached the kneeling figure.

"Excuse me," Nessa said loudly. "Um, sir? Is everything alright?"

No answer.

She came right up to the man, walking around the grave, careful not to step on it.

He wasn't praying. He wasn't breathing either. His hands were stretched out in front of him as though to push something away. His face was frozen in a mask of fear. Eyes bulging, mouth wide open.

Peg took one look, squeaked, "Jeezus, Joseph, and Mary," and ducked behind the nearest tombstone.

Nessa and Pim exchanged ironic glances. For a graverobber, the woman seemed awfully squeamish around corpses.

The dead man was maybe in his seventies. Paunchy, with a prominent nose, lined face, and thick eyebrows as gray as his hair. He was wearing a black suit and tie like he was dressed for a funeral. A leather cord hung from one of his hands, swinging in the warm wind blowing through the cemetery. The cord wasn't knotted. Whatever it had held was gone.

Nessa glanced at the tombstone.

Elizabeth Rourke. Beloved wife.

The death date was 2012.

Well, he certainly hadn't been to her funeral today.

There was no sign of a lingering ghost.

She hated her ability to see ghosts. What made Aunt Emerald so good as a spiritual medium was a creepy nuisance in Nessa's life.

Nessa reached out to touch him, wondering if he was still warm and his death had just occurred. If he was cold, the shade could have already moved on. As her fingers brushed his neck the old man's body shivered convulsively.

Nessa jumped back in surprise.

The man's clothes fell to the ground in a heap.

Peg, peering over the headstone, screeched, and ducked back down.

Nothing was left of the body. Piles of gray ash filled the sleeves and collar.

Pim ran in front of Nessa, his teeth and claws bared.

"That was unexpected," she said out loud.

"Why did it do that?" Peg called, still hiding behind the tombstone.

Wide-eyed, Nessa said, "No idea."

For a moment she hesitated over what to do. Should she alert the police? Call the cemetery administrative office?

She picked up the leather cord, feeling a residual tingle of magic.

Werecoat Pim growled a warning, pointing with one paw. She followed the direction and saw a group of people moving toward them. They had what looked like camera equipment and a boom microphone. The ghost hunters.

Pim turned back into his invisible feline form. He tugged at Nessa's jeans with one claw

"I think we'd better go." Without thinking, she tucked the leather cord in her back pocket.

Pim meowed agreement, running in the direction of the parking lot.

Wrapping a hand around Peg's arm, Nessa pulled her out from behind the gravestone  
"We're leaving him?" Peg said, looking over her shoulder as Nessa began to walk quickly away.

"Nothing we can do. I don't want to call the police and explain why we're in a cemetery with you in a unicorn onesie. Or what happened to turn a body into a pile of dust. Also, don't forget about Brad." She gave the other woman a significant look.

"Oh," she gasped, "yes, Brad. There will be questions."

"Lots of questions," Nessa agreed.

Keith's beat-up Scion was gone. At least he'd tossed Peg's handbag out before he left.

A satellite van from a local news station was unloading equipment on the sidewalk. The reporter, a man in slacks, collared shirt, and lightweight navy jacket with the station's call letters was reading something on his phone.

Nessa heard him repeating, "Full physical manifestation, full physical manifestation," over and over as she pushed Peg into the front seat.

A full physical manifestation was when a specter took on recognizably human form.

She stopped Peg's Ford at the exit, waiting for someone to turn in. As the other car passed an older woman in the back seat met her eyes. Her skin seemed to be stretched tightly across high cheekbones and a narrow, aristocratic face. Her lipstick made a bright red stain across her pale skin. She had masses of silver hair piled high with curls tumbling down the side like an antique Victorian doll.

The woman's eyes passed over Nessa without recognition.

Nessa, however, knew exactly who this woman was.

Madame Katerina Valencia.

A television Medium with a dozen books to her name

Though Nessa had to admit she looked a little different without a half-dozen darts sticking out of her face like on the back of Aunt Emerald's kitchen door.

There was no love lost between Madame Valencia and her aunt.

News crews, ghost hunters, a TV Medium, and a dead man. What the *heck* was going on today?

Nessa drove them to the police station as Fiona reluctantly followed. Peg started crying soon after they pulled away from the cemetery.

“If Keith hadn’t burned the picture, we could have saved Brad, too,” she sobbed. “Poor Brad. He was a nice man.”

Pim sat in the woman’s lap giving what comfort he could. She stroked the invisible cat as she cried.

“You have to tell the Infernal Court what happened, including Keith’s part in it. The disappearance of Zwingley Auto’s owner is going to be a problem.” Nessa considered the fallout. “Do you want to talk to Mr. Barracuda before we get to the police?”

She nodded.

Peg didn’t use the speaker setting so Nessa could only hear one side of the conversation as the woman explained the events of the past two days.

“Yes, yes. He’s been missing around twenty-four hours I guess... Send the Infernal Court number to this phone, I think my battery is dead... Yeah... Yeah...He handles both Infernal and human court cases. Okay.”

The phone buzzed with a text almost immediately.

Peg held up Nessa’s phone. “Do you mind if I call the Infernal Court?”

“No. Go ahead.”

By the time they pulled up to the courthouse, Peg had explained the situation to an officer of the Infernal Court and gotten the process for handling Brad’s disappearance started.

After Nessa had filled out the official paperwork and received the police receipt for Peg’s return, she drove back to Boyle Heights, followed by Fiona. Nessa had promised Peg to make sure the front door was locked then put the keys around the back under a pot of red geraniums.

When that was done, Fiona drove them to the little yellow bungalow near the 91 freeway that was home to Barracuda Bail Bonds.

Home in every sense of the word for her boss. As far as Nessa could tell, he lived at the office. It didn’t matter what day or time; he was always there. So were Rose Marie and Pansie La Rue. When they weren’t out on a job they were invariably at their desks in the back room. There was always a stock of food and drink in the kitchen plus Mr. Barracuda regularly ordered pizza for all of them.

Fiona parked in her usual spot under the large neon green barracuda sign that randomly flashed “Barracuda Bail Bonds” in bright yellow letters.

Fingers crossed she could pick up her check and go home. Ms. Porter had been a lot of work for a payout of only a hundred dollars.

Roman Barracuda gave her a narrow-eyed stare over the granny glasses always perched on his broad nose. Mr. Barracuda was a big black man with big black hair in a classic afro. He dressed in bright polyester wide-collared shirts and bell bottoms with the crease ironed in.

Roman Barracuda lived and breathed the nineteen-seventies. Nessa knew he'd lived through several centuries of that decade, but it was the nineteen-seventies that he loved.

His music of choice was classic rock and R&B from that decade: Kool and the Gang, K.C. and the Sunshine Band, Stevie Wonder, all the greats. Vinyl, never digital. The stereo system sat on shelves within easy reach of his desk.

Nessa thought Mr. Barracuda's fixation was not such a bad thing. After all, he could have gotten stuck in the 1770s. People in L.A. were used to weird, but tricorns and pantaloons would be a bit much even for them. With his authentic Seventy's vibe, Mr. Barracuda was retro-modern hip instead of weirdo eccentric.

"Don't look at me like that," she said as she handed him the receipt. "None of this was my fault."

"Hmph," he said, the crease between his eyebrows deepening.

"Hmph," echoed Fiona who had followed her in.

"What do *you* know?" She turned on the other witch. "You sat in the car the whole time."

"I'm the designated driver," Fiona countered, settling into one of the guest chairs across from Barracuda's desk and pulling out her phone, "that's what I do."

Fiona's role at Barracuda Bail Bonds was not really defined by the court or their boss. She never let Nessa forget she was slumming it with both Nessa and the Bail Bonds office. Fiona wasn't only Nessa's frequent partner. She was also her roommate since Aunt Emerald had decided to offer the second bedroom in Nessa's little place in the carriage house as a halfway house to the Infernal Court.

Today, Fiona had on a short black-and-white boucle jacket with pearl buttons over slim black pants and a sleeveless white turtleneck. The outfit looked like Chanel and probably was.

It was three o'clock. Nessa sincerely hoped no more felons lay waiting for her to track. She had some experiments to write up for chemistry and a geography paper. Luckily it was

Spring Break. The break gave her two weeks to catch up without having to worry about making time for classes.

She was just beginning her second year at Santa Monica City College. The grand plan was to transfer to Cal State Long Beach after Santa Monica and get her degree in Meteorology. Weather was an obvious career choice for an Air Elemental. Fingers crossed, of course. Nobody knew better than Nessa she should not, *could* not plan too far in advance. The legacy of her mother's curse was always haunting her steps.

Pim rubbed against her legs, sensing her shift in mood. She leaned down to stroke his silky gray fur.

Barracuda cleared his throat. Nessa stood, looking at her boss. His stern look had softened.

“Here, I put in a little extra for the trouble.”

She took the check, looked at the amount then back at him. He'd doubled it.

“But...”

The phone rang and he made a ‘shoo, shoo!’ motion with one hand, picking up the receiver with the other.

“Barracuda Bail Bonds,” he said in his rich baritone.

Nessa waved goodbye to the twins who were gearing up for a job loading various weapons in sheaths and holsters. They were in their usual tight black leather jumpsuits. The women were as big as Mr. Barracuda and all muscle. Their bright red hair piled bee-hive style added almost a foot to their already statuesque size.

They waved back.

Nessa almost felt almost sorry for their quarry. The sisters preferred it when the felon didn't come easily, especially supernatural ones. Infernal Court bounties were not bound by the strict rules of human bounty hunting. In the Infernal Courts, ‘Dead or Alive’ was still an option.

Nessa had ridden her bright orange scooter to the office, so she didn't need to depend on Fiona to get home. Compton to Hermosa Beach was around a half-hour by scooter.

Stomachs rumbling, she and Pim stopped at a KFC for a late lunch. They'd been longing for chicken filets since seeing one on their way to Peg's earlier.

Nessa had used very little magic today. That was a good thing. Wielding spells was exhausting, and she had some homework to get a head start on for when school started back up.

They sat in a corner of the patio in the afternoon sunshine enjoying their food as traffic whizzed past on the Pacific Coast Highway, PCH to locals. Nessa cut Pim's meat in bite-sized pieces, the potatoes too. He sat on her lap, front paws on the table so Nessa could shield him with her own food. He was invisible; the food disappearing was not.

Later Pim napped in his basket as Nessa motored the rest of the way to Aunt Emerald's house.

Her tummy full of fried chicken sank into her socks when she caught sight of the two blond women standing near her aunt's front gate

## CHAPTER FOUR

She'd been dreading this. The women, who Nessa was sure were not human, had been the muscle for a group of thieving warlocks responsible for the theft of a cursed sword. The sword had been under the care of a powerful L.A. demon. He was not happy about the theft. To make matters worse, the warlocks lost the sword to a small-time car thief named Tommy Baptiste.

Nessa got involved when her boss sent her to bring Tommy in after he missed his court date. When she confronted him, he'd unsheathed the sword, unleashing the curse. The sword turned its user into the warrior they most admired. For Tommy, this was the legendary Japanese samurai, Miyamoto Musashi.

The warlocks kidnapped Nessa thinking her air magic could help them steal the sword back from Samurai Tommy. They weren't wrong. Their mistake lay in not letting Nessa take charge. They trusted in the power of their magical orb. Big mistake. The men were sliced to pieces inside a tornado she'd conjured on their orders.

Idiots.

Just because you could use magic didn't make you smart.

Nessa parked the scooter in the driveway. Staying close to the fence, she approached the two women.

Pim silently took his place between the two women and Nessa. They couldn't see him until he changed. By then it would be too late. His fur rippled in anticipation. These women had abandoned Pim and their friend Ravi after ramming Ravi's car to snatch Nessa for the warlocks. Pim was a big believer in payback.

They stood solidly, side by side. They weren't quite identical but close. Six feet tall or a bit more. Solid as L.A. Raider fullbacks. One kept her blond hair in a ponytail, the other had it cut in a bob ending below her ears. The last time Nessa saw them they were dressed in mannish suits. Today they wore black leggings, walking boots, and matching lightweight cotton hoodies in green camo.

"Give us the orb," said the woman with the ponytail.

She had a thick accent, either German or Scandinavian.

“The...the orb?” Nessa stumbled over the words, automatically looking to Pim. He swished his tail and cocked his head.

“*That’s* why you’re here?”

“Why?” said Ponytail Woman. “What did you think we were here for?”

Certainly not that. Nessa figured they’d come for payback after somehow surviving an encounter with Frank, the Fallen Angel lusting after Nessa’s soul. She’d used hair from Ponytail Woman to trick Frank in a bargain for an enchanted glove. The glove allowed Nessa to hold Samurai Tommy’s cursed sword without falling under its spell.

Blood, hair, skin, all those boosted tracking spells exponentially. Frank thought he was bargaining for Nessa’s hair. Of course.

‘There’ll be hell to pay’ is not just an expression when dealing with an angry Fallen Angel. Since both women had all their limbs and both eyes intact, Nessa assumed Frank hadn’t used the hair in a tracking spell yet. If that was the case, she needed to get these women far away from her. Her aunt’s amulets kept Frank from zeroing in on Nessa’s witchy aura. But he wasn’t blind. If his minions saw her in Los Angeles, he’d throw everything he had into the city to find her.

“You want the orb? You can have it,” Nessa said with no hesitation.

The women looked surprised. Obviously, they’d been expecting a fight of some sort.

Nessa had found the orb lying by Tommy Baptiste in an alley full of blood and body parts. Miraculously, Tommy was still alive. The orb, on the other hand, felt dead. No tingle of magic. Not a whisper. She figured the warlocks had used all the object’s power for one big spell. The only reason she took it was she thought she could sell the jeweled bauble on eBay. Every penny counted when saving for Cal State Long Beach.

“From what I can tell it doesn’t have any magic left,” she said honestly.

They gave her suspicious looks.

“Really. Wait here, I’ll get it.”

“We’ll come with you,” said the other woman.

Before they could move, Nessa hopped the white picket fence.

The two women stepped forward. At the same moment, an unseen force swatted them across the sidewalk like bugs. In seconds they were back on their feet crouched in fighting stances, faces flushed. One drew a dagger, the other a gun.

“A gun?” Nessa said, with a sneer from her side of the barrier. “*Really?* You’re going to shoot me? Here on the street in Hermosa Beach?”

Even as she said it a white Pick-Up turned the corner and slowed to stare at the little scene playing out a dozen yards from the busy PCH. Nessa waved at the driver making an ‘okay’ sign.

The women hastily hid their weapons.

“What’s going on?” a voice called from the house.

Aunt Emerald banged out the front door, her arms crossed over her chest. She was dressed for work in swirly skirts, a paisley shawl, and a bell-sleeved lace blouse. Her long brown hair was artfully arranged in an up-do. Aunt Emerald did an excellent business in seances, tarot readings, and anything else involving the spirits. The reason business was so good, of course, was because she could honestly see ghosts.

“No worries, I’m just going to get something they lost,” she said to her aunt. Then, speaking to the women. “Since you are not full of sweetness and light, you cannot cross the threshold wards. Wait a minute and I’ll be back.”

Pim stayed by the gate, playing sentinel as Aunt Emerald waited on the porch. Her dad hadn’t come out which was good. He mustn’t take a chance of being seen here in town. The same demon who had owned the cursed sword was after her dad. Plus, he still owed Roman Barracuda big time.

She went to her apartment above the garage. How did the women know where to find her? That was information few people possessed. A P.O. box at the nearby UPS store was where all her mail came. The address on her driver’s license was fake. She’d been unconscious for a time when they kidnapped her. Her phone had been locked, no joy for them there. Nothing in her backpack had Aunt Emerald’s address.

She’d had the file for Tommy Baptiste with her that day. Barracuda Bail Bonds’ address was on the form. Had they followed her from the office to her aunt’s? She’d have to be more careful. Aunt Emerald’s was the first safe home she’d had in a long time. She didn’t want to lose it.

The orb was in the top drawer of her bureau with the socks and bras. Still quiet when she picked it up. No buzzy tingles. No nothing.

Skipping down the steps she went back to the front gate.

Pim had stayed where he was, ready to transform. He moved next to Nessa as she approached the gate.

“Don’t open the gate,” her aunt called. “Stay on this side of the wards.”

“Understood.” Inching her hand just across the slats, Nessa held the orb for the other woman.

Ponytail Woman tried to take it. Emphasis on the word *tried*. Nessa dropped it in her hand and the woman snatched it back.

“It’s burning,” she cried.

The orb hovered in midair.

Nessa looked from the orb to her and back. Cautiously Nessa reached out to tap it with one finger.

Cool. In fact a little cold.

Grasping it in her hand she held it out to the woman again.

Ponytail Woman Nessa, reaching out a finger. Just as quickly, she snatched her hand back, swearing in another language.

“Hot?” asked Nessa.

“The thing zapped me. Like electricity.”

The orb continued to hover, pulsing with quiet magic.

“What did you do?” the woman with the bob demanded.

Nessa looked at them genuinely confused. “Nothing. Not a buzz of magic since I picked it up until right now. What is it you think the orb does?” It sure hadn’t saved the Warlocks from death inside the tempest.

The women looked at each other.

“We think it can be used to find the jewel.”

Nessa’s heart skipped a beat.

The Warlocks had been on a quest to assemble three magical objects: sword, jewel, and mirror. This was apparently a well-known quest in the magical community. Since Nessa had grown up on the run without a coven or magical connections, that was the first time she’d heard about it. According to legend, assembling the appropriately linked – not just any jewel, mirror, and sword – items, allowed you to break a curse.

Any curse.

Nessa had endured an omega-sized curse since birth. The quest for the sword, jewel, and mirror was one she wanted to get behind one hundred percent. After the Warlocks failed to secure the sword, Nessa took some magical steps with the help of three fairies to make sure she knew where the sword was. Now she needed to find the jewel and the mirror. And the orb could help? This was big news.

“Why don't you come out and try again,” Ponytail woman said.

Nessa snorted a laugh. “Right, so you can grab me along with the orb.”

Instead, Nessa opened the gate and rolled the orb to them.

They eagerly bent to snatch it up. Sparks jumped from the orb to snake up their arms.

They jumped back. The orb stayed where it was.

“Stop trying to touch it,” Aunt Emerald suggested. “Hover your hands nearby. See what you feel.”

Ponytail Woman did just that. Keeping her hands first a foot away then slowly inching them forward.

She gave a hiss of exasperation.

“Nothing. I feel nothing.”

“Right?” said Nessa. “No tingle. No buzz.”

Unless they touched it.

Ponytail Woman looked suspiciously at Nessa. “How can you handle it?”

Nessa shrugged. “No idea. I honestly thought the magic had been used up by your pals.” She thought about the warlocks. “Are you witches?” she asked.

Maybe only witches or warlocks could handle it. Nessa had never heard of such a spell but that didn't mean anything. Her information on most witchy matters was sketchy at best.

Without answering, they conferred briefly with each other in their own language.

“We must do some research,” said Ponytail Woman finally. “We will return.”

Oh, great. Just great. The closer they were, the greater the chance Frank would find her.

After the women drove off in a shiny brown jeep with a canvas top, Nessa stepped across the gate threshold to pick up the orb.

No sparks. No zapping. The pulse of magic was gone once again.

At least from the orb.

With an ominous shiver down her back, she felt a nudge in her aura. Like an astral finger poking her. She looked up to see a hazy form slowly sharpen into the outline of the paunchy dead man at the graveyard.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“You can’t bring that thing in here.” Aunt Emerald stabbed a finger at the spirit.

“He must have followed me home from Evergreen,” Nessa said like the ghost of the gray-haired man was a stray puppy.

“Evergreen Cemetery?” shrilled her aunt. “And you didn’t salt yourself?”

Nessa shook her head. She hadn’t.

Aunt Emerald threw her a scornful look. “Didn’t that no-account scoundrel of a father teach you anything? Always salt yourself and especially your shoes when you leave a graveyard. Never know what may tag along otherwise.”

Stupid, stupid, stupid. She hadn’t even thought about that most basic step to discourage hitchhiking ghosts.

“Did I hear my name being taken in vain,” said a man’s voice. Nessa’s dad looked out from the shadow of the front door.

At first glance, no one would think they were father and daughter. Nessa had fair straight hair, Dad’s was dark brown and wavy. He was tall and rangy; she was petite and lightly built. His eyes were green. Hers would have been as blue as her contacts if she’d been allowed to evolve in the womb without the Fallen Angel’s influence. Instead, they were black as a demon’s.

It was in the set of their mouths, the soft curve to the upper lip. The dimples punctuating both of their cheeks.

“Look what your daughter brought home,” Aunt Emerald continued in the same shrill voice. “As if I didn’t have enough spirits in my life.”

Nessa eyed the paunchy man. Another shiver ran down her back. “He was kneeling by a grave when we got there. After I got my…” she paused. How to describe Peg? “Uh, the lady Mr. Barracuda sent me to get, I went up to see if he was okay. When I touched him, his body turned to dust.”

“Dust?” said Aunt Emerald looking alarmed.

“Dust?” echoed her dad with the same expression.

“Dust,” Nessa affirmed.

Pim meowed in agreement.

Emerald turned to face her brother. "Soul Eaters," she said in a flat voice.

"Soul... soul eater?" Nessa spluttered. "What the hell is that?"

"A kind of sorcerer," her dad said slowly. "They use a terrible magic. Very close to necromancy."

"Why would they want a soul?"

"Same reason as Fallen Angels," he said. "Power."

"And eternal youth," added her aunt. "Eating souls extends life by centuries. Terrible magic. The spell tears the soul and spirit asunder. Soul Eaters leave behind wandering spirits. These spirits can never go on to the afterlife. What makes the spell worse is they are aware of their state. They know they will be trapped here forever, wandering the earth without form or purpose."

"There's no way to send them on?" Nessa asked.

"Not that I know of," said her aunt.

"Can we banish him?" asked her dad. He was holding a white ceramic mug and took a sip.

Could be coffee, Nessa thought, could be vodka. Dad had a taste for both.

"Not yet," said Aunt Emerald, almost reluctantly.

She strode forward, stopping at the gate with her hands on her hips. "Gosh darn dang and dirty words. All right shade, spill it. Talk to me."

The shade of the paunchy man drifted closer to Aunt Emerald.

Nessa could see ghosts but not speak to them. Thank God. That was her aunt's exclusive provenance.

Dad stayed where he was in the doorway, safe from observers.

Aunt Emerald listened, speaking softly occasionally. The man's shade seemed to have a lot to say.

She watched her aunt's expression change from annoyance to concern and finally something like alarm.

This couldn't be good.

She turned away from the shade, saying sharply, "Nessa come inside and tell me everything that happened at Evergreen."

Nessa started to open the gate.

Wait,” shouted her aunt. “Don’t move. Either of you.”

Nessa knew she meant her and Pim. Pim swished his tail impatiently.

Emerald jogged into the house, returning with a yellow and green Chinese porcelain urn. Reaching in, she threw several handfuls of sea salt over Nessa from head to toe.

“Your shoes.”

Setting the orb on the sidewalk, Nessa took off her beige canvas Chucks. She held them out to be salted.

Then she picked up Pim and held *him* out, directing her aunt where to salt her invisible familiar.

Pim sneezed and squirmed. He was not fond of being doused in salt. She set him down. He shook his fur out. He bent to lick one of his front paws, tasted the salt, and gagged.

“Okay,” said her aunt, “now you can come through.”

She handed the pot to Nessa as she opened the gate. “First go salt the steps and your apartment. Just in case. And put that thing away,” she waved at the orb.

Scattering salt here, there, everywhere, Nessa replaced the orb in her sock drawer. Glancing at the gate on her way to the kitchen door, she saw the shade still hovering. The wards would keep him out unless her aunt summoned him directly.

‘Poor man,’ Nessa thought. Lonely. Old. All he’d wanted was to talk to his dead wife.

Be careful what you wish for.

There were no truer words in magic.

Her aunt was at the kitchen table opening a bottle of red Italian Barolo. She poured it into an oversized glass. Poured rather a lot. The ghost had upset her. Or maybe it was Nessa. Probably both.

Her dad stood in the doorway to the family area. He was keeping his distance. This was good. Neither Nessa nor her aunt was ready to forgive him for leaving Nessa as collateral with the Bail Bonds office. Why had her father even needed the bond? Was it Infernal or for the human court? She didn’t know and she wasn’t going to gratify him by asking.

Nessa and Pim took their places at the kitchen table. Even Pim kept his back to him. He was Team Nessa ride or die.

Opening the backpack, she took out Pim's Speak and Spell to set in front of him. What was once a simple toy had been transformed over many years into a sophisticated communications device for him. Cats, even magical cats, cannot talk. This does not mean they do not have many things to say.

Nessa's Grandmother Hattie had discovered the alternate use for the toy when Pim was *her* Familiar. The wide buttons made a perfect fit for Pim's clever paws.

Nessa explained the bizarre sequence of the day's events.

Her father's first comment was, "Too bad you had to give the camera back. That was a sweet find."

Typical. Like most scam artists his take on any situation was, 'how can this work to my advantage?' In fact, he'd probably figured out a half dozen scams with the camera within five minutes of her first call.

Her aunt listened to Nessa's story running her index finger around and around the wine glass. "This camera doesn't sound directly related to the ghost outside or the Soul Eaters. The entity? Hmmm, not sure."

"But wait, there's more," Nessa said holding up a hand. "We saw a ghost hunter's van there. They were roaming around the cemetery filming. Then a TV news crew was unloading as we left, *and* you will never guess who we saw driving in." She paused for effect before announcing, "Madame Valencia."

"No," said her aunt, suitably surprised.

"Yes. In the flesh," typed Pim. The Speak and Spell spoke in a cheerfully bland female voice.

"Not surprised," said her dad, sipping from his mug.

Nessa twisted around in her chair to give him a narrow-eyed look. "Why aren't you surprised?"

"Haven't you been watching the news?" her dad asked.

She shook her head.

"Ghosts. Spooks. Spirits, Apparitions. Halloween has come early to L.A."

Emerald stood, abruptly walking away from the kitchen table into the family room. Carrying the wine glass in one hand, she took out the pins holding her brown hair with the other, tucking them in her skirt pocket. Thick brown curls spilled to her shoulders.

She grabbed the remote to switch on the television.

“Channel five,” her dad said, trailing behind Pim and Nessa.

The TV opened onto commercials. “Turn the sound down,” he said setting the mug on the coffee table. “Let me grab my tablet. I’ve been following it online.”

He set his mug on the coffee table, returning moments later tapping a touchscreen.

“Here. Look.”

Nessa set the Speak and Spell on the couch before squeezing next to her aunt. Her dad sat on the other side, placing the tablet computer on Emerald’s lap. Pim sat by his machine, paws ready.

Nessa recognized the call letters for the TV news truck she’d seen as the file opened. ‘Apparition at local cemetery. Spooks or hoax?’ scrolled across.

The clip showed a group of headstones at night. In the middle stood a hazy form, wavering in the dim light of a flashlight. Another specter drifted into the frame followed by one more. The trio floated aimlessly. Two women and one man. Nessa could almost make out their faces.

Now she understood why the reporter at Evergreen had been practicing the words ‘full physical manifestation.’ That’s what the ghostly figures on the screen were.

“How are they doing that?” Nessa said, “Is it fake?”

Her aunt stared at the screen as the camera slowly followed behind the ghosts.

“Nope,” she said after a time. “I see dead people,” she gave a laugh.

“How do you know they’re real?” persisted Nessa. “CG is easier to believe than a Full Physical Manifestation.”

“You think so? How about our gentleman caller outside? He’s pretty fully manifested I’d say.” She held up her hand forestalling Nessa’s answer. “Your ability and mine are slightly different.”

Nessa nodded. “You can hear them. I can’t.”

“More than that. I see more than you. Spirits are surrounded by a ghostly halo of hex markings. They’re identifiers. No two hex markings are the same. Often the markers are the only way I can recognize one wispy apparition from another.”

“And the figures on the screen have those hex markings,” her dad stated, edging closer to the couch.

“How do you know? Nessa asked, deciding to acknowledge him.

“I’m a Scott. I see them too.”

Nessa stared at him as if he were a stranger. “You never admitted you could see ghosts. I thought it was only Aunt Emerald and me.”

He shrugged. “Didn’t seem relevant.”

From what Nessa had observed, Dad’s skills lay in divination and transfiguration. Both extremely handy in carrying out magical scams. Now suddenly he admits he can see ghosts? If he was like Emerald, he could hear them as well. “How is this not relevant to our life when I was growing up?”

Her aunt tapped the pause button. “Shush. You two can argue about James’ failings as a father later. Right now, this is more important.”

Aunt Emerald restarted the video.

Nessa crossed her arms in front of her, tightly gripping handfuls of her hoodie to keep from yelling at her father. God damn it. Why did he have to be such a lying liar?

A voice off-camera said, “Who are you? Can you communicate with us? What do you want?”

Emerald snorted derisively. Ghosts had no voice of their own. To speak to run-of-the-mill humans, they needed to communicate through a Physical Medium.

The person holding the camera approached the specters who began drifting farther away. He, because it sounded like a man’s voice, stumbled, almost falling. After righting himself, he aimed the camera at the ground. A pile of clothing lay in a heap next to one of the headstones.

The commercials on the TV finished. Emerald paused the video once again. They all looked up.

‘New mystery at local cemeteries,’ flashed on the television in big letters.

“Yet another pile of clothes was found next to a grave here in Greater Los Angeles today,” announced the news anchor. “We’re live with this story in Boyle Heights.”

The screen cut to a man standing outside yellow police tape marking off an area in the graveyard.

Nessa pointed. “He was at the cemetery when I left.”

“Circumstances are similar to three other piles of clothing found in different cemeteries around Los Angeles earlier this week,” the reporter said. “Although the police have refused to comment, our sources say the dust is made of...” he paused dramatically, “human ash.”

“Can they identify DNA through human ashes?”

Her father answered. “You bet. It will take the police a little time. Depends on how busy the lab is. If they have I.D.s from the clothing, they can speed up the process with DNA swabs from blood relatives. To check for a match. They’ll also be able to tell if the ashes were from just one individual or more.”

Pim raised a paw to get their attention before typing. “Corpse powder, AKA human ashes, are a powerful accelerant for dark spells. Why would the sorcerer leave them behind?”

Her aunt got up, walking to the kitchen. She returned with a full glass of wine. “Ashes were not the objective. The sorcerer wielding this magic has no need of them.”

Her father looked grim. “Coupled with the solidity of those spirits we saw on camera, sounds to me like there’s a Soul Eater in town.”

“Because?” prompted Nessa.

“Because that’s what happens when a soul is stolen by a Soul Eater. After the entire soul has been devoured, the body turns to ash. A body can’t live without its soul. Or not in the normal sense. The spirit is left behind to suffer for eternity.”

“Those spirits are fully conscious of their surroundings. Or will be once they calm down.” “

“That’s not normal after death,” Pim typed. “They shouldn’t have a fully conscious sense of self.”

“No, they certainly should not,” agreed her aunt sounding angry. “The cruelty of this act makes me sick. Most people go on to the afterlife with both soul and spirit intact. Others, as we Scott’s know too well, remain fractured. Tied to this earth, unable to fully move on because of trauma, unfinished business, whatever.”

“Their souls wait in limbo,” her dad continued. “Waiting and more importantly *wanting* to be rejoined. That is something Mediums like your aunt attempt to do. Reconcile the fractured spirit so it will rejoin the soul and move on into the afterlife. If the soul is taken and converted to power by a Soul Eater or...” her dad trailed off as if only now realizing where this conversation was heading.

Nessa finished the sentence for him. "A Fallen Angel? Like Mom's soul?"

"Yes," her dad said looking at the floor. "If the soul is taken in that way, their spirit can never be joined."

"Those apparitions," droned the electronic voice of the Speak and Spell, "in the graveyard online have had their souls taken by this Soul Eater?"

"Yes," brother and sister answered at the same time.

"What did the ghost outside say?" Pim typed.

"He said the Medium allowed him not only to see his wife. He could speak to her and she answered in return." Her aunt took a slow drink of wine. "The Soul Eater is not summoning the dead. His magic is an illusion. Don't ask me how it works because I don't know. In exchange the victim agrees to help *channel*," she put air quotes around the word, "the energy for the Medium. This will involve a verbal contract of some kind. What they don't realize is the spell the Soul Eater uses draws on the energy of their soul."

"The mark," said her dad using the term he and other con artists called their victims, "gets addicted to the high of seeing their dead whomever. They want more and more. Before they know it, they've given over their entire soul."

"And poof?" Pim typed.

"Poof," her dad agreed. "You must understand people disappear in America all the time. There are hundreds of thousands of missing person cases a year. Normally a Soul Eater would make painfully sure no evidence was left behind to trace. Whoever this is, he or she doesn't seem to care who finds what's left of the bodies. That is *not* normal procedure for these people."

"Soul Eaters are a clever bunch," said her aunt waving her wine glass. "This is drawing far too much attention."

"What about the cursed camera?" Nessa asked.

Her aunt shrugged as the news came back on. "Not sure that has anything to do with the Soul Eater. Could be you were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Our specialty," typed Pim.

"You know it," agreed Nessa.

On-screen the camera was following the reporter as he walked through the cemetery. He described the odd happenings at other cemeteries before stopping by an angel statue.

Nessa and Pim exchanged looks, recognizing it as the same statue they'd left the cursed camera at for the entity.

The perspective changed to reveal a small group of two men and two women. They were weighed down with an assortment of electronic equipment and a couple of high-grade cameras. Each of them had on a camo-patterned vest with *Back from the Dead* printed across the front. Same as the logo on the van she'd seen in the cemetery parking lot.

Probably the same people who had been running toward her and Peg after the paunchy man turned to dust.

Pim put a paw on her hand. Had she and Peg been caught on camera?

The reporter introduced the group. They spoke briefly about ghost hunting and their investigation at the cemetery.

To people who actually saw ghosts, most of what they said was nonsense. Not that they weren't sincere. God knows ghost hunters wanted to believe and they tried so very hard. Waving around Electromagnetic Field Detectors, Geiger Counters, and thermometers. Looking for hot spots, cold spots, negative energy, positive energy, *anything* to use as evidence. But unless someone in their group had the true gift – or curse depending on your point of view – it was pointless.

After a few soundbites with them babbling about resonance and electromagnetic pulses, the reporter turned to the screen. The camera zoomed in on him looking all serious. “What you are going to see is unedited footage from this afternoon.”

The screen switched to a film of what had to be the paunchy man in the distance. The film had the fuzzy, blurred quality of cell phone cameras straining to focus on distant objects. He seemed to be talking to someone, gesturing broadly. A second figure stood a little to the side. A few frames later showed the old man kneeling on the grave.

“Pim and I didn't see any second figure,” Nessa said. “This must be before we arrived.”

The crew cut back to the ghost hunters.

“We continued filming in the area we'd been exploring,” said one of the men, tall, heavy with a double chin and thick blond mustache. “After a short time, we aimed the cameras in that direction again. This time the man was alone, kneeling by the grave. Watch.”

The newsroom camera played more of the grainy film. A purplish haze surged up around the kneeling figure, blocking him from view.

“And this film was of the grave where the clothing and ash were found?” asked the reporter as the screen cut back to him.

“Yes,” a sturdy woman with a thick mop of brown hair said. “That entire area blurred. Not only on camera. We couldn’t see anything. By the time we could see our way across the cemetery there was only a pile of clothing by the grave.”

The man with the mustache held out a little machine that glowed green and yellow. “Our spectrometer picked up definite signatures from some sort of apparition around the grave.”

Her father laughed. “Signatures my ass. All that doohickey does is track fluctuations in electric fields bouncing off power lines. I should know. I’ve used it myself on jobs.”

“Substitute jobs for scams,” Nessa whispered to Pim.

“We saw a man running from the scene,” the woman continued. “However, he hadn’t been near the other man we filmed.”

“The police will want to see that,” said the reporter.

“We’ll cooperate in every way,” nodded the woman.

“Tell them about the horse spirit,” the man with the beard urged, nudging the woman with his elbow.

“That’s really exciting.” Her expression became animated. “Long before this was a cemetery, the land was frontier. We believe we caught some sort of horse spirit.”

One of the other men fiddled with a camera before holding it out for the TV crew to zoom in on. Film a figure moving away from the camera appeared on the screen with the *Back from the Dead* logo URL scrolling across the bottom. They were too far away to get anything but a vague shape of tail and ears.

“We’re very excited about this,” said the woman.

Pim chuckled, typing, “They wouldn’t be so excited if they knew it was the back of Peg’s unicorn onesie.”

Because that’s exactly what it was.

Nessa sighed with relief. She didn’t show up at all.

The camera swung back to focus on the reporter. “The man leaving the cemetery is a person of interest to the police. If anyone has any information, please contact this number.”

Numbers flashed onscreen.

The camera panned from the reporter to a different gravesite.

Madame Valencia was standing with her eyes closed and her hands in a prayerful stance. Mist swirled mysteriously around her feet.

Aunt Emerald snorted. “Antonio, her eldest, sets up a battery-powered fog machine off-camera for these things.”

Nessa and her dad exchanged knowing glances. Scammers gonna’ scam. Then Nessa remembered she was still mad at him and turned away with a frown.

The reporter rattled on about strange sightings and the mysterious piles of human ash.

Nessa kept her eyes on Madame Valencia. She had to be as old or older than Aunt Emerald. Yet her skin was smooth and unlined. That wasn’t magic, that was Botox paired with a good plastic surgeon.

“Speak to me, spirits,” she said in a dramatic whisper. “I am your conduit to this world.”

Aunt Emerald made a sound like she was choking.

Madame Valencia’s face and body relaxed until she almost sagged. Her shoulders slumped forward. Her head followed until her chin touched her chest.

Daddy Dearest had taught her to pay close attention to facial expressions and body language. Was the woman faking a trance?

Madame Valencia began speaking.

“Something is here,” she declared dramatically. “It feeds on souls, stalking the bereaved.”

“Is she talking about Soul Eaters?” Nessa asked.

“Shh,” her aunt shushed.

“...feast three times three. Three times three from the abandoned shall come to him. The lost...” she mumbled something unintelligible, “...never united...” again mumbled words, “souls are the cost.”

Her head popped up. She looked directly into the camera. “Emerald. The darkness hunts the weak. Royal born must hunt it back or more will die. The princess in the air must speak to me.”

And she sank elegantly to the ground, one hand pressed to her forehead, the mist swirling over her like a blanket.

The camera immediately cut to the reporter.

Emerald turned off the television.

Nessa and her dad said nothing, waiting for Emerald to speak.

Her aunt took a long sip of wine before saying, “Damn that woman.”

“Was that for real?” Pim typed.

“Not the fainting part.” She rolled her eyes. “Such a drama queen.”

“Her message?” Pim typed.

Emerald nodded. “I believe she was channeling something. Her statement and the ghost outside seem to confirm a Soul Eater of some sort is preying on people. She spoke of three times three. Nine souls. That’s a lot of souls.”

“She said your name. You hate Katerina,” Nessa’s dad stated. “Why would she draw attention to you?”

Nessa had never asked for details about the dartboard with Madame Valencia’s picture on it. No time like the present.

“Why do you hate her?”

“Stole my man,” Emerald said and took a fierce drink of her wine.

Pim and Nessa exchanged, ‘*Ohhhh*,’ looks.

Her aunt didn’t add to her statement. Nessa didn’t press for details. Today was not the time or place.

Her dad picked up his mug, walking to the bar cart in the corner nearest the kitchen. He took a bottle, pouring out a generous measure.

Nessa exchanged looks with Pim, “Vodka,” she mouthed.

Pim nodded, whiskers twitching.

“But royal born?” He laughed before taking a sip. “She’s sure not talking about *us*.”

Pim hissed.

“Actually,” typed Pim, swishing his tail in a way Nessa knew meant he’d taken offense. “The Chevaliers were aristocrats. Royal knights gifted with land and titles for service to generations of French royalty.” His little paws flew over the keys. “They fled their estates in France for England during the revolution to escape the Guillotine.”

“She didn’t mean human aristocrats,” Emerald said. “She’s talking about Fae royalty.”

Nessa’s mouth went dry.

Her dad waved a hand. “That makes even less sense.”

She and her aunt shared a significant glance. Emerald lay a finger against her lips. With a curt nod, Nessa indicated she understood.

Her aunt was aware of Nessa's recent elevation to Princess in the Fae Court of the Air. Dad did not. Better to keep it that way for now. Knowing him, he'd only start planning some scam involving the Fae. After what happened to all those suckers he'd sent into the Inferni World with the Djinn's coin never to return, she felt she should keep that information from him as long as possible.

"Maybe you should give Madame Valencia a call," he said.

Aunt Emerald made a sour face. "I have not spoken to that woman in more than twenty years. Two-timing hussy."

"She spoke to you," her dad pointed out. "On the television. That could have been a plea for help."

Nessa counted on her fingers, holding them up with a flourish. "Four. Four bodies in a week and those are just the ones we know about. Madame Valencia said three-times-three. Nine souls. Who suddenly needs that many? They're either serial killer crazy or in a big hurry to ramp up their power."

"The ghosts are restless," Emerald declared.

Nessa looked at her aunt waiting for clarification. When nothing came, she prompted, "What does that mean exactly?"

Shrugging, her aunt got up off the couch, smoothing her clothes and putting her hair back up in a simple French Twist. "Lots of unease in the spirit realm. I hear murmurings. Probably the Soul Eater upsetting the balance. The spirits he leaves behind are trapped in a way others are not. There is no way for them to pass on to the next stage of their afterlife. They can be..." she paused, "disruptive."

"Disruptive how?"

"Screaming, crying, blundering into the other spirits. You know."

Nessa did not know, nor did she want to.

"I have a client," Emerald said putting a stop to Nessa's questions by walking out of the living room.

Nessa was surprised. After two glasses of wine? That was not normal for her aunt. She took her readings seriously.

"This late? Do you need me?"

In exchange for room and board she helped her aunt with seances. Using her Elemental powers, Nessa summoned warm or cold breezes, mist, clouds, whatever her aunt asked for. This wasn't to cheat the clients. Emerald Scott was a psychopomp of real skill. She could talk to ghosts and they, according to her, would not shut up once she summoned them. The special effects were to make the clients feel more in touch with the spirit world.

Emerald shook her head, "No, just a Tarot reading. Margareta can only come in after she finishes her shift at the drugstore. Anyway, Tarot benefits from a bit of relaxation on my part."

"Here," Nessa held out her hand. "Give me your glass. I'll wash it."

Nessa took the glass into the kitchen with Pim pacing behind her.

Her dad followed. Clearing his throat he said hesitantly, "Hon, can I talk to you?"

"No," said Nessa gruffly.

"Baby," he said in a cajoling voice.

"What?" she turned on him, the heat rising in her cheeks. "What could we *possibly* have to talk about? You left me as collateral for Barracuda Bail Bonds like a piece of Medieval chattel. Here," she gestured roughly, lowering her voice to sound like a man, "take my useless daughter in place of payment for my debt."

His face paled. "No, Nessa, that's not what it was like."

"Wasn't it? *Wasn't it?*" she shouted, slamming her hands on the countertop.

"No. It wasn't."

"And now I find out you have the Scott's ghostly abilities? What the hell dad. We both know the only reason you're here is to hide from Belencourt after one of your schemes went bad."

"There were circumstances..." he said, trailing off.

She faced him, her eyes stinging, "Dumping me with Aunt Emerald I can understand. You're sick of Frank and my stupid curse holding you back from your best criminal life. I get it. I'm sick of mom's curse, too. But making me an indentured servant? That was cruel."

He closed the distance between them, reaching for her. "Honey, let me explain."

Pim ran between them hissing, his back arched, his tail sticking straight up.

Nessa's dad paused understanding Pim was a few beats away from taking his anger to the next level. He was channeling Nessa's emotions as any Familiar would. Only most Familiars couldn't transform into seventy pounds of spitting, biting werecat.

Nessa turned and ran from the kitchen. With a final angry yowl at her dad, Pim followed. Upstairs in her own apartment, door locked and bolted, she sat on the couch and cried tears she didn't even know needed to fall.

"I know I'm a burden, Pim," she said shakily to him as he rubbed against her. "Knowing and having it thrown in my face are two different things. I'm trying to be a grown-up. I really am. Look after myself and all that, you know? But it still hurts."

Pim nodded. She'd left his Speak and Spell on the couch.

He looked behind her, pressing a paw into her thigh to let her know they were no longer alone.

"Why are you crying?" Fiona said. She was wearing a diaphanous silk kimono patterned in chrysanthemums. Her hair was tied up in a silk bonnet. She must have been putting on her makeup.

Nessa hadn't heard her come in from her side of the apartment. The rich witch's Audi was in the driveway so she shouldn't have been surprised.

Nessa wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her hoodie. "I'm not crying."

Fiona gave an unladylike snort. "Yes, you are. Is your dad being a dick?"

Nessa swiveled around as Pim hopped up to balance on the back of the sofa.

"You know about him?"

Fiona rolled her beautifully lined, highlighted, and false eyelash enhanced eyes. "Of course. You do realize I go to your aunt's side of the house most evenings to have dinner? Sort of hard not to notice a strange man lurking in the kitchen drinking vodka on the rocks in a coffee mug."

Nessa went cold. "You can't tell anyone."

Fiona came around the couch. "I just had my nails done at a new place. What do you think?"

She showed Nessa her nails, plum-colored with silver swirls and a crystal at the tip of each slender finger.

"Fiona."

"Swarovski," she said with a superior smirk. "Going out to dinner tonight with a delicious new warlock."

*“Fiona.”*

“OMG, calm down. Who would I tell and why would I care about your low-life criminal relatives?”

She walked back to her room with a dismissive wave of her hand. Pausing with her back to Nessa she said, “Though if he keeps making you cry, I might have to kick his ass,” and she shut the door behind her.

Pim and Nessa exchanged surprised glances.

“Did she say something nice?” Nessa asked her cat.

All Pim could do was meow.

## CHAPTER SIX

At eleven a.m. the next morning Nessa handed her scooter key to the parking valet at Valliard's Coffee Lounge on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills.

She'd called Madame Valencia's office number last night identifying herself to the receptionist as Emerald Scott's niece. After a very short time on hold listening to piano muzak, the receptionist came back on the line. She rattled off the name and address of the coffee lounge saying Madame Valencia would meet her there the following morning.

Feeling disloyal to her aunt who genuinely disliked the other Medium, Nessa with Pim in the basket scooted over as fast as her little engine could rev. The woman had made a plea directly to Nessa on local TV. Feud or no feud, such an appeal was hard to ignore. Especially since the ghost of the man in the cemetery had followed *her* home. Something nasty was going on here in Los Angeles. With Nessa's luck, it was poised to bite her in the butt.

She had never been to a coffee shop with valet parking before. In fact, she'd never been to Rodeo Drive or this part of town. Beverly Hills? Out of her league. And not a place she'd chased any of Mr. Barracuda's runaway clients.

Popping the basket lock for Pim, she placed her helmet inside. Without so much as a blink, the valet took charge of her scooter, handing her a claim check with a smile.

The entrance to Vailliards was white and gold with lots of gilt trim beneath a white and gold striped awning.

A tall woman in black slacks and a palomino turtleneck sweater approached as Nessa entered.

"I'm meeting Madame Valencia," Nessa said quickly.

"Of course," smiled the woman. "If you will follow me?"

They threaded their way between the tables. Pim trotted ahead, an alert set to his ears and tail.

The main salon was decorated in muted yellows and pale blue. 'Frou-frou French' would be how her dad would describe the décor. Every table had a tablecloth fringed in tassels color coordinated to match the room's theme. Tables of two or four chairs upholstered in the same pale shades of yellow and blue were set at discreet intervals around the room.

Madame Valencia was elegantly draped in an upholstered high-back chair at a table by the picture windows overlooking Rodeo Drive. She was dressed in white silk and what looked like cashmere. Her long dark hair was in soft beach curls, pulled into a side ponytail and draped over one shoulder. She looked younger than she had on television. Better lighting probably.

“Miss Scott,” she said slowly, extending a slim hand, her nails a subtle blush of color with swirls of white up the center. “How nice to meet you. I knew your father.”

“He’s not dead,” Nessa said automatically.

“Isn’t he?” she said with an attempt to raise one eyebrow. The Botox only allowed it the slightest elevation.

She swept her hand to the chair before Nessa could shake it. “Sit. What would you like?”

“I’d like to talk to you about...”

“To drink,” Madame Valencia said easily. “What would you like to drink?”

Nessa felt herself blush.

The lady in black stood attentively to one side.

“Um, a double espresso, please.”

“And Madam?” asked the woman.

“My usual. And bring the dessert tray, would you?”

“Of course, Madam.”

The woman bowed herself away.

Nessa scooted a little away from the table to make room for Pim. He jumped onto her lap, silently regarding the woman across from them.

As Nessa was about to speak a tray of cakes was brought over by a different staff member, also in black and palomino.

“Have a piece of cake, dear,” Madame Valencia said. “I will as well.”

She was not going to refuse. Nessa chose what looked like a black forest cake of creamy chocolate and cherries. What she really wanted was the crispy Napoleon layered in strawberry cream but there was no polite way to eat a Napoleon. The crusty layers inevitably collapsed and chaos ensued.

Madam Valencia pointed to a decadent fruit custard and whip cream pudding.

“With your coffee or after?” the server asked.

“With, I think.”

The older woman relaxed back in her chair tilting her head to indicate Nessa should speak.

“Yesterday on television, you were talking to my aunt and me.”

“Was I?” she said.

Nessa shifted in her chair. Great, Madame Valencia was going to play games.

“Have you seen your fairies lately?”

“Whaa... what?” stuttered Nessa taken by surprise.

The other woman looked out the window. “Your fairies. You have three bondmaidens I understand.”

‘How could she know?’ Nessa thought, meeting Pim’s eyes. His tail began to lash back and forth.

The server brought their coffees.

After he left, Madame Valencia took an elegant thumb-sized clear crystal container from the quilted tan leather bag at her side.

Hermes? Nessa thought. No, Chanel. Definitely Chanel.

Unscrewing the top, she shook golden flakes on her coffee until the latte positively sparkled.

“Gold is a wonderful purifier, don’t you agree? But only twenty-four carat.”

Nessa nodded dumbly; her eyes so wide she felt them straining her contacts. The woman was putting gold flakes on her coffee.

“Would you like some?” she held the container toward Nessa’s double espresso.

Nessa nodded again. Why the heck not?

Smiling sweetly, the woman sprinkled a generous measure over the dark roast.

Pim put a paw on her arm, crowding close, as she reached for the cup. Not caring what the woman thought she offered the cup to him first. He would know if the flakes had somehow been spelled.

He lapped delicately at the coffee, paused, then nodded to Nessa.

Madame Valencia raised her eyebrows but made no comment.

Nessa took a sip and another, the flakes dissolving to a velvety whisper on her tongue.

“How does it taste?”

“Expensive,” said Nessa before she could help herself.

The woman took a slow drink of her coffee. Setting the cup down with a deliberate motion, she dabbed at her lips with a linen napkin. “The Queen of Fire has your fairies.”

Nessa blinked a few times, before saying with a shake of her head, “She does not.”

“I assure you she does. Would you like to come to the Fire Kingdom and see for yourself?”

Nessa stared at the elegant woman, completely at a loss for words. “I don’t understand,” she said at last.

“The Queen of Fire has kidnapped your fairies.”

“What? Why? Is this about the attack on the Court of Air?”

During Nessa’s swearing-in ceremony to the Queen of Air, the palace had been attacked by fire soldiers seemingly intent on kidnapping Nessa. The Queen had declared Fire would pay for the assault. Nessa hadn’t heard anything more about retribution.

Madame Valencia took another sip of her coffee. “It was not the queen behind the attack but her rival, Princess Nepenta. She wished to acquire you.”

“Acquire me?” Nessa said. “I’m not an object.”

“Aren’t you?” She waved one hand in the air. “Princess Nepenta’s failure brought you to the attention of the Queen of Fire. Her Majesty has taken your measure and requires your help.”

“She couldn’t just ask?”

Madame Valencia laughed. “That’s not how things are done in Fae.”

“How do I know you’re even telling the truth?”

Reaching into her bag the older woman pulled out her phone.

“What is your email?” she asked in a matter-of-fact voice.

Nessa read off an email she used for strangers.

Madame Valencia tapped her phone. “There.” She looked at Nessa, nodding her head slightly. “What are you waiting for? Open your phone.

The email was from [madamevalencia@madamevalencia.com](mailto:madamevalencia@madamevalencia.com). Not exactly subtle.

After a few taps, Nessa’s screen opened onto what looked like a prison cell. Or a dungeon. Inside, her three fairies were chained to a stone wall. Their faces were bloody, their beautiful fluffy dresses shredded, wings wilting down to the ground. The Red Fairy looked at the camera defiantly. The Blue Fairy was crouched crying and being comforted by the Green Fairy.

Anger rose in Nessa’s chest.

“Why?” she demanded.

“The Soul Eater currently stealing souls here in L.A. is working with my Queen’s rival, the Princess Nepenta. When he has enough souls, he will help her attack the royal court to topple its queen. He will succeed. Soul Eater energy is almost unstoppable.”

Nessa glared at her. “Maybe *my* Queen will have something to say about you kidnapping my fairies.”

It felt very weird to say the words ‘my Queen’ but there you are. The Queen had promised Nessa protection after she swore fealty.

Madame Valencia took a long sip of her coffee, dabbing again at her upper lip before she spoke. “It is to the Queen of Air’s advantage the current status quo be maintained.”

With a sinking sensation, Nessa understood the implications of those words. “The Queen of Air is helping the Queen of Fire?”

“Behind the scenes. Let us say she is not interfering in the Queen of Fire’s play to recruit you directly.”

The server appeared with their cakes putting a temporary halt to their conversation while he set them on the table.

With a little bow, the waiter murmured “*Bon Apatite*,” and left them alone.

“She *let* my fairies be kidnapped?” Nessa said, returning to their conversation.

“Correct.”

“And won’t help me get them back?”

“Also correct.

“What a bitch.”

“Such is Faerie,” Madame Valencia said lifting a creamy bite of custard to her lips.

“*Mmm*, lovely.” She waved the spoon in Nessa’s direction. “Go on, enjoy.”

The only thing Nessa wanted to do with the beautiful little cake was shove it into Madame Valencia’s face. She kept her hands in her lap wrapped around Pim. His body was stiff with tension.

Madame Valencia savored another bite of custard, this one crowned with a sugar-dusted strawberry.

“You could go looking for them. Useless, since your Portal Crown only allows you access to places you can identify with several visual markers. A random stone cell will not be enough to ground your Portal.” She cocked her head coquettishly, “Difficult to mount a rescue.”

The silver filigree crown operated as a Portal key between her world and Faerie. A gift presented to Nessa the night she swore fealty to the Queen.

The other woman’s cellphone vibrated. Madame Valencia picked it up, flicking on the screen. “Oh, look. Here’s a new video. Let me send it now.”

A few seconds later Nessa opened the mail.

“Taco, taco, taco,” sobbed the Red Fairy piteously, her hands over her face, her knuckles raw and bloody.

Nessa stood, physically unable to contain her rage. With anger came power. Whether she wanted it or not. Dark energy pulsed through her veins burning through her blue contacts exposing their black centers. Black as a demon. She raised her arms, the cage holding her legacy popping open.

Madame Valencia must have felt it. She carefully put her phone back into her bag.

Energy radiated from Nessa like a bomb blast as she released her enormous black wings. She swept them forward cracking every window facing the street. Tables and chairs toppled over sliding across the slick marble floor. China plates, cups, and saucers shattered. Tablecloths and napkins sailed into the air

People shouted, screamed, and swore. Some ducked to the ground, their hands over their heads, others ran to the entrance. They couldn’t see Nessa or her wings. She was cloaked in angelic *glamour*, the only time Nessa could summon that ability. No one was hurt. Scared, yes. She had deliberately avoided shattering the glass, though the effort at reining in her anger was choking her.

Madame Valencia remained seated though their table now lay on its side, the lovely pastries splatted on the floor.

Nessa leaned so close her face was only inches from the older woman’s. “Tell your queen if she hurts my girls, I will summon my powers, come to her damn kingdom, and beat her royal ass into the ground.”

Madame Valencia stood. With a snap of her fingers, she summoned a circle of flames around her head and shoulders, forcing Nessa to step back.

She was a Fire Elemental. Well, well. That explained her tie to the Fire Kingdom. All Elementals had Fae blood.

“Find the Soul Eater and bring him to me. Your fairies will then be released to you.”

“Unharméd!” Nessa spit out the words.

“Unharméd,” agreed Madame Valencia.

“Promise.” The energy building around her had caused the floor to begin to shake.

“Earthquake,” people shouted.

Madame Valencia’s flames flared brighter as she spoke, “On behalf of my queen, I promise your fairies will be returned to you unharméd if you bring me the Soul Eater.”

Nessa stormed across the room, shoving people out of her way as they ran into the street. Pulling her wings back into their invisible pocket, she walked out, slipping on a pair of dark glasses.

Pim had remained invisible. Hidden from view by her magic, no one had seen anything. Not really. They’d blame it on an earthquake or whirlwind or whatever. A terrifyingly large werecat was far more difficult to explain away.

The parking valet was still at his station. Red-faced, breathing hard, Nessa handed him her ticket. He smiled as though this was a perfectly normal sort of day with explosions and earth tremors and people screaming hysterically. Probably what they paid him for. Deadbeat Dad had taught her parking valets were a wonderful resource of information and gossip.

He was still smiling as he reappeared pushing her scooter. Nessa dug in her pocket for a couple of dollars, pressing them into his hand.

“Thanks,” she said popping the lock on the basket so Pim could jump in.

“Anytime,” he said with a smile, handing her back the money.

As she took it, she saw a miniature flame take shape in his hand. He winked before walking away.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

She had to stop several times on the way home, her body trembling from the encounter with Madame Valencia. The sight of her fairies bloody and hurt had triggered Nessa's dark energy as easily as flipping a switch. She hadn't stopped it. Hadn't wanted to. That was the truly scary part.

Pim sent waves of calming thoughts to comfort her, for all the good it did. She had exposed herself publicly. Wrecked the coffee lounge. Scared people who did not deserve to be scared. Not only was she a careless idiot, but she was also acting suspiciously like her father. Whether it was people or property, he never cared about the damage he left behind.

"I have to do better," she said to herself over and over.

Her aunt was standing on the porch when Nessa motored into the driveway.

Dark clouds were swiftly moving inland from the ocean on a chilly wind making the temperature drop. Emerald was wearing a red puffer coat over her work outfit of a flowy skirt and lace blouse. She was pointing imperiously at the street.

"Oh no," Nessa groaned, following her aunt's finger.

It was like a rerun of the other day. The two blond warrior women were once again standing outside the front gate. Except this time, they looked like they'd been in a car wreck or an avalanche. Or both. Each of the women's faces was cut, swollen and bloody.

Ponytail Woman had bruises around her throat like someone had tried to strangle her and the knuckles on both hands were a bloody mess. Their clothes were torn. The other woman had a thick bandage around her wrist and hand.

Popping the lock on Pim's basket, they ran to join her aunt.

"I don't care how beat up they are. I'm not dropping the wards so don't ask." Emerald made a sound of disgust, "As if your father isn't enough of a problem."

Had Frank found the women? Exacting his revenge for Nessa's trickery? If so, they were lucky to be walking. Before she could feel sorry for them, she did a quick reality check. These women had rammed Ravi's car in a crowded intersection not thinking of the other drivers. They

had left Ravi and Pim in the wreckage and gleefully kidnapped an injured Nessa. Unlike the people at the coffee shop this afternoon, these two were not innocent victims.

With a finger on her summoning belt, she readied a spell to call the whirlwind in case they were here for payback.

Ponytail Woman held up a hand, "Peace. We come here to warn you, not attack. Belencourt wants the Orb."

Aunt Emerald scanned the horizon warily. "He followed you here. It was a trick. Letting you escape." ‘

"No one followed us."

Her aunt snorted. "Of course they did."

"We fought our way free."

"Sure," sneered her aunt.

"I came to warn you about Belencourt and the orb."

Nessa snorted, "No surprise there."

"He wants the Sword or Eternal Blood returned to him. The orb is dormant unless in proximity to the sword's magic. With it, he can track the sword and reclaim his property."

Though the sword had been stolen from Belencourt, Nessa knew it did not really belong to him. The real owner paid the demon to keep it safe. Word on the street was Barracuda was the true owner.

Nessa did not have the sword on her. She'd hidden it on purpose with Baron Samedi, the Voodoo Loa of the Dead. With the help of her faeries, she had created a spell tying the sword to her. One day she hoped to get it back. Break her mother's curse.

"You know where the sword is?" Ponytail Woman said.

"I can't get it, so don't ask."

"You plan to acquire it at some point."

"Not now though."

"The orb is the key."

"To what?"

"The jewel," the women said together.

"My orb?" Nessa pointed at the Carriage House above the garage.

“Yes. From Belencourt’s questions, we believe the orb acts as a guide to the jewel in conjunction with the sword. We are not sure of the exact process. Neither is Belencourt.”

“This is not our game,” said the other woman. “We are not Sorcerers, we are fighters. You may keep your jewels and your sword. We wish to have no more part in this.”

“Well, thanks for the warning.”

Her Aunt snorted.

“You fight well,” the woman said eyeing Nessa. “In another place, we could have called you comrade.”

Guilt smacked Nessa up the side of the head. She’d used hair from this woman’s head to fool Frank. He was going to set a tracking spell on her thinking it was Nessa.

“Watch your back,” she said over the roar of the engine. “I have a demon tracking me. He could follow my trail to you. If you have any masking amulets, I suggest you use them or buy some.”

The Ponytail woman gave her a searching look but only nodded before revving the Harley’s heavy engine and taking off.

“Sorry,” she said to her aunt.

Emerald turned on her heel, slamming the door as she went inside.

Upstairs she and Pim immediately went to her dresser, pulling out the orb. They sat on the bed turning it over and over.

Pim touched it with his paw. Nessa poked it looking for a hidden button.

Pim finally signaled he had things to say.

Nessa got the Speak and Spell from her backpack.

“Use the glove from Frank,” the machine’s voice said as Pim rapidly typed. “Maybe it has enough residue from handling the sword.”

Nessa jumped up and ran to her closet. She’d hidden the glove in her second-hand pair of black Ugg boots. She only had three pairs of shoes. Running back to Pim, she slipped on the glove and picked up the orb. She had handled the cursed Sword of Eternal Blood when it was out of its scabbard and in full magical reveal. Coming into close contact with the magical object could have tied her to the orb. Now that the sword was in its scabbard and somewhere with the Baron Samedi, Nessa was as close to a magical connection the orb was going to get.

Immediately the orb buzzed and shook in her hand. Coming alive with magic. It glowed with a soft purple light.

Not even sure why, Nessa said, “Jewel, reveal yourself to one in need.”

Nothing.

“Open for me.”

Nada.

“I command you.”

...

“The sword commands you.”

...

“Try...” Pim typed. “Try saying show me what lays within.”

“Oh shiny useless orb,” Nessa said sarcastically, ‘show me what lies within.’

The top of half of the orb shimmered revealing a simple smooth stone the color of amethyst nestled in a bed of shining spun gold inside.

Pim popped up on his haunches to see better holding out one paw. Nessa high-fived him.

Smaller than her little finger, the stone was round at one end, curling in a half-circle to a narrow bottom. A leather cord was threaded through the round top.

“Should I touch it?” she asked looking at Pim.

He shook his head, putting his outstretched paw forward. Testing for any dangerous reaction was part of his job.

It bounced off an unseen barrier.

He tried again. A few sparks jumped at his touch.

Nessa tried, encountering an invisible glassy surface protecting the stone.

“Well, your idea half-worked.”

Twitching his tail, Pim went back to the Speak and Spell.

“Perhaps it must be near the sword for the user to touch the jewel.”

“Makes sense. Do you think this is the jewel from the spell? The one linking to the sword and mirror?”

“It could be. Or it leads us to another jewel,” she paused. “We have no idea what we’re doing, do we?”

“Not a clue,” Pim typed.

They regarded the sparkling jewel for a time.

“Belencourt must have trackers on the jewel’s energy,” Pim typed.

A chill ran through Nessa. “Right. How do we close it back up?”

They gave each other identical, ‘No idea’ looks.

Luckily they didn’t need a magic spell. Nessa felt a tingle in her palm and the orb was once again solid.

“A timer, maybe?”

Pim shrugged, typing, “Keep it in a bag of salt to hide the resonance.”

“Good idea.”

She always had a stockpile of sea salt in her kitchen. She regularly had to douse against Franks Sniffers looking for witchy auras.

Orb in hand she dug out enough room for it in one bag, fastening the top with a twist of a rubber band.

Pim was still on her bed. “We need a better hiding place. Belencourt might be able to break your aunt’s wards.”

Nessa’s inside constricted in a knot. “You think?”

They both knew far too much about tracking spells thanks to Frank not to take the threat of Belencourt seriously.

“We are playing a dangerous game.”

“Do we have a choice?” she sighed.

This was not a redundant question and Pim knew it. She was the third Chevalier witch bonded to him. He was vastly more experienced than her in magical matters.

Pim took some time before answering. “I think...I think this is at least a chance for you to be free. Before the idea of the three linked objects, we didn’t even know there was a spell to break your curse. We must take the chance.”

She took a deep breath. “Okay. Put find a better hiding spot on our ‘to do’ list. For today, we keep it here. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” he typed.

She tucked the orb inside its bag of salt, nestling it back under her socks. An idea was tickling the back of her mind. What was it?

The orb.

No.

The stone.

No.

The gold in the coffee?

Nope.

Tracking spells and the Soul Eater.

The man had been kneeling at the grave holding out his arms. Poof, dust. Pile of clothes... The cord. The leather cord he'd been holding.

Nessa patted the pockets in her hoodie and jeans. There. In her back pocket. She pulled out the cord feeling the slight tingle of magic still running through it with her fingertips.

“Pim, the leather cord from the dead man.”

He looked at her expectantly.

She dangled it in the air. “It’s buzzy. With magic. I feel it. Maybe it held an enchanted object from the Soul Eater?”

He gave an excited meow, jumping back to the bed and his keyboard.

“A jewel to target the soul magic,” he typed, “tied directly to the Soul Eater.”

“And it still is. Tracking spell?”

“Oh yes,” he typed.

She’d worry about the orb later. Right now, she needed to focus on the Soul Eater and getting her girls – annoying as they were – out of the dungeon.

“Come clean to Aunt Emerald?” she asked Pim.

“Come clean,” Pim typed.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Once she got over the initial rush of anger from Nessa going behind her back, her aunt had no trouble believing the threat Madame Valencia represented.

“Soul Eater for the fairies?” she said jumping to her feet and bristling with such a rush of energy the furniture in the seance room started to dance.

Her crystal ball trembled, rolling off the table. Nessa dove, catching it just before it hit the floor. The object wasn’t magical. It *was* expensive. The ball, like the paisley shawls, flowing skirts, heavy upholstered furniture, and tassel curtains were all for show. Her aunt needed nothing but herself to channel spiritual energy.

Carefully placing the crystal ball on one of the high back chairs, she set a pillow in front of it for safekeeping.

Pim jumped onto the table, pacing nervously around the Tarot deck wrapped in a green silk scarf.

“That’s the deal. Bring her the Soul Eater and the Queen of Fire will release my fairies. Pim and I have an idea. About finding the Soul Eater I mean.”

She explained her theory for using the residual magic on the leather cord to track the Soul Eater

“Get your father,” Aunt Emerald ordered, still standing.

“Dad? Why?”

“He’s the best scryer in the family. Bring him here.” She checked the clock on the wall. “We’ve got an hour until my next client. Go!”

Reluctantly Nessa went to the guest bedroom at the back of the house. She stood in front of the door, hesitating. She was so angry at him. She hadn’t realized how angry before their confrontation in the kitchen. Her hair began to lift off her shoulders, floating in wispy tendrils in response to the magic her anger triggered. Pim nudged her with his head.

“Okay, okay,” she breathed. “Calm down. I know.” Raising her hand to knock, the door flew open before she touched it.

“Nessa, sweetheart.”

She held up a hand before he could go on. “Stop. This is not about ‘the talk.’” She put imaginary quotation marks around the last two words. “We need your help to find the Soul Eater.”

He looked surprised. “Oh, okay. Why? Is this for Barracuda?”

“Yes,” she lied, still reluctant to explain her connection to Fairie.

They walked into to the séance room.

“I need a street map of Los Angeles,” Emerald barked as they entered

“On it.” He pulled a keyring from his pants pocket.

“No.” Nessa pulled him back. “Stay out of sight. I can get it.”

“Glove compartment.” He tossed her the keys.

The door to the garage wasn’t attached to the house making whoever went inside briefly visible from the street. The house could already be under observation thanks to Ponytail Woman and her friend. Despite dad’s silence on who was after him, Nessa was sure it was Belencourt. The demon held high-end auctions for magical items in Hollywood. Somehow her father was involved in a theft from him. Nessa thought it was the cursed Sword of Eternal Blood – an object she had contrived to not return. Now she wasn’t so sure.

Dad was currently driving an old model blue Volvo station wagon. The map was in the glove compartment like he said. On the way back into the house she snatched her backpack. It held her emergency spelling supplies. some heavy-duty magic

Back in the séance room her father and aunt were pulling the area rug from beneath the séance table. Carved into the wooden floor was a complex circular diagram. Three concentric circles each filled with esoteric runes and sigils. Nessa helped them move the table back into the center of the ring. Normally this was all Emerald needed to keep her and her clients safe from any malevolent spirit or demon trying to hijack her connection to the otherworld. The Soul Eater was an entirely different level of danger.

Nessa spread out the map as her aunt set four tall black pillar candles around the table with one more in the middle. Nessa had the leather cord in her hand, the tickle of magic still sparking inside.

“Since the cord is linked to the man’s death. Scrying could give us the position of the sorcerer or at least an indication of his movements.”

Nessa handed Emerald the cord. Her aunt raised her eyebrows.

“You feel it too?” Nessa asked.

Tight-lipped, Emerald nodded. “Yes. All right, James. Go ahead.”

Her father slipped a slim silver blade from a leather scabbard fastened around his ankle.

No surprise he was armed even in the house. She was beginning to suspect the threat Belencourt represented was real.

He briefly held the tip of the blade in the flame of one candle to sterilize it before slicing into the skin of his wrist.

Magic didn’t come for free. Ever.

As an Elemental, Nessa’s powers drew on the natural energy present within the elements. Payment came in the form of draining her own energy to shape and mold the magic. Hence issues with dehydration and exhaustion.

Other types of spellcasting had far harsher demands. For dark spellwork, human blood was the most efficient accelerator. Could be the spellcaster’s. Could be someone else’s. It all depended on the spell.

Nessa winced sympathetically watching her father’s blood drip into a small crystal bowl.

When he decided he had enough, he set the knife aside and swung his arm over to a different side of the map. Hermosa Beach. He let a few drops fall on the street for Aunt Emerald’s house. After that he slapped on a bandage her aunt had ready.

Aunt Emerald handed him the leather cord. Her father softly intoned a spell as he put the cord into the bowl, letting it soak in the blood.

“The salt is in the kitchen,” her aunt said.

“Getting it,” said Nessa, running into the kitchen. She grabbed the two-pound bag of sea salt from under the sink.

Emerald made a circular motion in the air with one hand. “Right around all of us.”

“I know the drill, Aunt Emerald.”

Who better? Nessa had been creating protective salt circles since she was four.

Opening the bag, she sprinkled it in a circle ringing the protective sigils on the floor.

“We’re going to need your calligraphy brush for extra protection within the salt,” her aunt said sliding over a glass dish identical to the one her father had used plus a sticky bandage.

Nessa sucked in her breath. She hadn't been expecting that. Pim bumped her with his head, looking up with concern. He knew this next part was not going to be fun. The runes of the circle must be written in her blood.

Reaching in the backpack she pulled out the bleached-white brush with its tapered head of soft brown animal fur. The handle was as long as her forearm and made of human bone. Only recently she'd learned it was a black magic item. Though she'd always suspected it was a nasty piece of work. How else to fight a Fallen Angel?

The brush needed very little blood for its magic. Which was a good thing. Nessa had an absolute zero desire for self-mutilation. Z-e-r-o.

A tiny silver blade in a sheath attached to her summoning belt was her tool of choice for this sort. Sharp as a vampire's tooth.

She copied her dad, sterilizing the tip in the candle flame.

Tensing her stomach muscles against the pain, she hissed out a breath as she pierced the skin on her arm. Pim hissed with her. As her Familiar, his emotions mirrored hers.

"Sorry," she whispered to him.

He head-butted her, rubbing his cheek on her calf.

Next was the hardest part. She pressed the blade into her skin, pulling it back an inch. In the world outside her aunt's house, the one without magic circles and dark curses she knew this was considered sick behavior. But what choice did she have? Her genetic dice were rolled while she was in the womb. This was the number that had come up for better or worse.

She counted to ten waiting until there was enough blood in the little glass dish before slapping a sticky bandage on the cut. Dipping the brush in blood, she painted the runes in the air.

The magic of the brush held the runes aloft, defying all the laws of physics. She painted four sets, starting at north then east then south, finally closing the circle at the west. The flames from the black candles jumped as she finished, burning brighter from the magic now sealed within the circle.

"Done," she said softly.

Her runes glowed a garish red as if they were made of cheap neon.

These were the same runes she used to hide from Frank when the Sniffers got too close. Fingers crossed they would be effective against the magic of the Soul Eater.

Her aunt took a diabetes-style finger stick and pricked her finger. She let a drop of her blood land on top of her father's mark. This would center the spell to begin from Emerald's house and work outwards.

Her father, who had been quietly chanting under his breath the entire time, picked up the string. The magic held the blood onto the cord as her father laid it on the map.

A shadow blew into the room, tossing the curtains. It whirled around and around, darting this way and that trying to find a way through Nessa's circle. This had to be a sending from the Soul Eater. The sorcerer was looking for who'd come knocking at his door - metaphysically speaking.

Nessa balled her fists, clenching them tightly until the nails dug into her palms. 'Keep your focus on the circle,' she told herself. 'Not the fear.'

A raspy sound slithered up from the table behind her. She couldn't afford to lose her concentration to look at the map.

The shadow wind grew stronger, knocking over the chairs they'd moved away from the table. A picture on the wall fell to the floor shattering the glass in the frame. One of the lamps tipped off the side table.

"Almost there," her aunt whispered.

Nessa squeezed her muscles, willing that tension into her hands. Her fingers were spread wide, holding the sigils in place.

*Pop, pop, pop*, the lightbulbs in the chandelier burst one after the other, raining shards of glass to the floor.

Nessa held her breath.

A roaring sound built, louder and louder until it sounded like a scream. The door burst open.

"Now!" shouted her aunt.

Grabbing the brush from the floor at her feet, Nessa spun in a circle sweeping away the runes. Shattering the runes destroyed the link to the Soul Eater. The shadow shrank tdown to nothing but a dark spot. With a *pop*, it was sucked back to its own point of origin. Hopefully far from them.

The wind died to nothing. The room quiet once again.

Nessa leaned over, her hands on her knees, panting from the effort of holding the spell.

Her father soundlessly collapsed onto the floor.

“Dad!”

She moved to go to him, but her aunt waved her back.

“He’ll be fine.” She picked up a soft knitted throw and pillow from one of the high-back chairs that had managed to stay upright.

Lifting his head, she eased the pillow beneath before covering him with the throw blanket.

“It will take him a little while to recover.”

“Did we get something?” Nessa gasped, her heart pounding.

“Yes.” Her aunt pointed to the faint red trail left by the bloody leather cord as it snaked across the map, stabbing a finger where the trail ended.”

Nessa leaned close as Pim jumped up to join her. “Inglewood? What’s in Inglewood?”

“Another cemetery. Not as big as the one in Boyle Heights. Pretty good-sized though.”

“Is the Soul Eater there now?”

“Can’t be sure,” her aunt said staring at the same point on the map. “I’m assuming this is where the Soul Eater is currently grooming his or her next victim. That’s why the residual energy is strong. Doesn’t mean the final stroke will be today or even tomorrow. But it gives you a place to start hunting.” Emerald nudged her recumbent brother with one foot. “Better go before your father wakes up. He might try to stop you.”

“You won’t?”

“Not for me to tell you what to do with your magic. I’ll do my best to keep him here. He’s in danger the moment he steps out of range of my threshold runes.” She gave a resigned shake of her head. “If Belencourt suspects he’s here, even they might not hold. James either has to move on or deal with Belencourt. I have enough trouble, God knows.” Aunt Emerald turned a beady-eyed stare on Nessa.

Nessa, swallowed, saying softly, “Sorry.” She knew her aunt meant she had enough trouble with her niece.

Walking to the little closet in one corner of the room, Nessa took out the broom and dustpan to sweep up the salt.

Her aunt took them from her, making a *shooing* motion with her other hand. “Go on now, get moving. I’ll clean this up.”

“Any advice on dealing with the Soul Eater?” she asked as she picked up her backpack, Pim by her side.

“My advice? Run like hell the other way.”

## CHAPTER NINE

‘Run like hell the other way,’ Nessa thought as she buckled Pim into the basket of her scooter. If only she could.

Slipping onto the scooter’s well-worn seat, she felt a buzz in her pocket. With a start she realized with all the day’s drama, she’d forgotten about Barracuda Bail Bonds.

Mr. Barracuda had not forgotten her. There were a dozen texts and as many calls from her boss. She quickly pushed the ‘call’ button.

“What do you think you’re doing young lady?” Roman Barracuda yelled so loudly she had to pull the phone away from her ear. Even Pim winced. “I’ve got a stack of miscreants burning through my money waiting for you to bring in their sorry behinds.”

She stared at the phone silently.

“Well?” he demanded. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

What could she say? Barracuda had the power to yank her chain in a completely literal sense. Her father’s bond tied her to the Bail Bonds office with magic as solid as any iron chain. The first time Barracuda contacted her, she and Pim had tried to make a run for it. In a little demonstration of who was in charge, Barracuda yanked the chain. They’d nearly come to grief on the scooter in the middle of an intersection in El Segundo.

If he wanted, he could force her to come into the office.

“The Elemental Queen of Fire is holding my three fairies hostage,” she said in a rush. “Madame Valencia, who my aunt hates by the way, is actually a Fire Elemental working with the Fae Queen of Fire. If I don’t stop the Soul Eater here in LA, she says the Queen will kill them.”

“Soul Eater? Here? Explain,” he said shortly.

She told him of the conspiracy to use a Soul Eater to overthrow the current Queen of Fire.

“Come into the office. Now.”

Nessa’s heart sank. “Please, Mr. Barracuda. I can’t let her hurt my fairies. It’s my fault they were captured. I’ve got to save them.”

“Come into the office,” he repeated.

“But...”

“You misunderstand. I have something that can help you. *Come.*”

She went.

Pansie and Rose Marie were standing on either side of Roman Barracuda when Pim and Nessa walked through the door. The women had their arms crossed over their ample bosoms and a grim look on their faces. Her boss was equally serious.

“Soul Eater?” he said, cocking his head.

“He or she is responsible for those piles of dust at the cemeteries. The ones on the news.”

“And this sorcerer is a Fae?”

“Not sure. I do know the Soul Eater is working for a Princess in the Fire Court. She’s plotting against the Fire Queen.”

“And this Madame Valencia wants little bitty you to take the sorcerer out all by yourself?” Barracuda said meeting her gaze.

Harsh but all too true.

Her shoulders and hands came up in a helpless gesture, “I guess.”

“They have an entire kingdom at their disposal,” he continued. “Elves. Fae warriors. Monsters. And they ask *you* to fight one of the most powerful forms of sorcery in the magical world?”

Nessa whole body sagged. There was no logical answer to that.

“Could they want you dead?” Pansie asked, cocking her head to one side. “Use the Soul Eater as a way to take our Nessa off the playing field?”

“Possible,” said Barracuda nodding.

“Dead?” squeaked Nessa.

“Meow?” said Pim, jumping up on Barracuda’s desk, tail lashing.

“However, after what you told me, Miss Scott, the Queen of Air went to some trouble to secure your pledge of loyalty.”

Barracuda knew about her adventures becoming Princess Vanessa Chevalier Scott in a ceremony at the Palace of Air. He also knew they were attacked by soldiers from the Fire Kingdom.

“Could it be your curse that makes your skills so in demand?”

Nessa’s head snapped up.

Barracuda had seen her manifest her darker power, the one she tried to keep hidden. He'd looked into her terrible black eyes after her blue contacts dissolved during the fight with the Skinwalkers right here at the office. He hadn't asked for any explanation, but he was far older and more experienced than her. Barracuda could easily have put the pieces of her curse together.

The hair rose along Pim's back and he growled low in his throat.

Roman regarded the werecat with a calm stare. "Only thing more powerful than a Soul Eater is someone with divine blood. An angel, even a Fallen one, can fight a Soul Eater."

At his words it all became clear. The Queen of Air had seen her manifest her power and her wings. So had the soldiers of the Fire Kingdom during the attack. The wings alone labeled her DNA as divine.

Divine beings with ties to the Fae had to be extraordinarily rare. Which was why the Queen of Fire wanted her in this fight. She'd probably paid the Queen of Air a huge fee for the privilege of using Nessa.

"I'm screwed," Nessa said quietly. "So, so screwed."

"Not necessarily," said Barracuda. "The Fae Kingdoms and I have an agreement. I do not interfere in their matters and they do not interfere in mine. But if Rose Marie were to carelessly drop a package by the door..."

Rose Marie retrieved something from behind her boss's desk. It was a large, padded manila envelope. With exaggerated nonchalance, she walked to the front door and dropped it on the floor before returning to her place.

"And," continued Barracuda, "you were to pick up said package while we weren't looking..."

All three swiveled their heads up, intently examining the ceiling.

Taking the hint, Nessa and Pim went to the door to pick up the padded envelope. It was light, hardly weighing anything at all.

He looked at her again. "Let's say our curious Witch opened the package to discover a long, braided leather rope inside..."

Opening the bag as he suggested, she pulled out exactly a thin, supple leather cord of many colors, perhaps ten feet long. Magic hummed through the leather like a dynamo.

"If the rope turned out to be a Fudo Cord from the divine Fudo Kings in Japan which just happened to have the strength to bind a Soul Eater... well, hardly be my fault."

“No boss,” said Pansie and Rose Marie.

“If this light-fingered little witch looked further inside, she might find the words to activate the cord for both binding and release.”

She slipped her hand in again pulling out a small slip of paper. It said ‘Activate: *Tsukamaete*. Return: *Modotte*.’

“Tsuka...tuskai..tsuk...” she stumbled over the new word.

Pansie put her hand up to her mouth, “*Tsoo-ka-my-eh-teh*,” she pretended to cough. “*Tsoo-ka—my-eh-teh*.”

“*Tsoo-ka-my-eh-teh*,” Nessa repeated, sounding the word out like Pansie.

Rose Marie put her hand to her mouth. “*Moh-dough-teh*,” She pretended to cough into her fist as well. “*Moh-dough-teh*.”

“*Moh-dough-teh*,” Nessa said. “*Tsukamaete*. *Modotte*. Catch and release.”

The twins winked at her.

Nessa smiled at them. “Thank you...” she started to say.

“Uh,” Barracuda held up a warning finger, shaking his head. “Nope. Haven’t done anything. Have we ladies?” He looked at his two partners.

They smiled, saying in chorus, “Not a thing, boss.”

He looked up at the ceiling, shaking his head. “Such a mystery. How did she get such a rare artifact? Dang thing is like a heat-seeking missile for demons or dark magic. Just toss it and say the word. The Fudo cord does the rest. Even a half-grown witch could use a Fudo Cord. Lucky.”

“Lucky,” said Nessa, her voice breaking as she looked at the three of them, “so lucky.”

## CHAPTER TEN

“Ma’am? Nessa said politely to the gray-haired lady having an animated conversation with the air, “Hello? Ma’am?”

The woman gave a girlish giggle before laughing out loud at something her invisible friend said.

Nessa had followed the route laid out by the spellbound leather cord to a cemetery in Inglewood close to LAX. *Not* the best area of town. Pim was on his guard pacing nervously, looking for both supernatural and human threats.

Nessa had activated every stinging spell on her chain lock for the scooter. It sat forlornly on the broken tarmac of the empty parking lot. She could see it from where she was standing.

The cemetery was overwhelmingly brown. Brown dirt. Brown grass. This one seemed more neglected than most. Not like she was an expert. Cemeteries were full of dead people. Many of whom would not stay dead to someone with Nessa’s abilities. She tried her best to avoid them.

The front gates were wide open, and she could see gaps in the fence surrounding the property. Not good. Graveyards needed fences to keep things *out* as well as in. Probably why the Soul Eater had chosen this graveyard for some of his collecting activities. Unresolved spiritual energy ebbed and flowed across the grounds in unsettling waves.

The woman looked between seventy and eighty. Frail and a little stooped. She was wearing a green wool coat over a dress, stockings, and beige pumps. Her gray hair was pressed into those steely waves so many old women seemed to prefer. Dark circles hung in half-moons under her eyes. Her skin was dry and flaky and almost as gray as her hair. The Soul Eater looked perilously close to reaching his goal with this woman.

In her right hand hung a glowing jewel suspended from a leather cord.

“Oh Georgie,” said the woman in a raspy voice, “I was talking to Betty North yesterday and she says they’re going to add a pool onto the senior center.”

She waited while the invisible George must have exclaimed in surprise.

Despite her lively conversation, there was no ghost. Nessa could see even the most ephemeral of spirits. Nothing vaguely spirit-like was manifesting here. Not to say the area

around the woman wasn't suffused with dark magic. Good God. It was bubbling up around her like a toxic hot tub. Sickly green and purple. A hallucinatory circle, forcing her to breath in the spell.

This is how he must have trapped the other sad, lonely people. Reaching out to them as a Medium. Promising a true connection with their loved ones. The first time would be free. He would make sure it was spectacular. Like standing in the living room with them. Sight, sound, maybe even smell. After that, they'd be hooked.

Nessa wasn't sure how Soul Eaters locked them into the deal. It had to involve a contract. Generally, written and signed in blood. Verbal could work, too. They had to sign or agree willingly, that was one of the rules. *But* and this was a big but, they didn't have to understand all the details of what they were agreeing to. Working with Deadbeat Dad, she had witnessed all sorts of stupid people signing contracts on the flimsiest of explanations.

The blood part might be more difficult. Perhaps a thumbprint was enough. Or even one drop. If Nessa was running this scam, she'd say the blood was necessary to connect to their loved one in the afterlife.

These people would sign away not only their life but their afterlife as well. Never suspecting until it was too late.

She sighed realizing the process was not so different from what happened to her mother.

The coastal overcast had blown farther inland making it seem later than it was. Nessa held the thin Fudo Cord from Mr. Barracuda ready. It had been quiet until they approached the woman. Now the leather was generating a lot of heat.

She closed the distance with the woman intending to try and shake the woman out of her trance. Before she reached her, Pim jumped to snag the leg of her jeans and pull her back.

"What?" she said looking down. Only then did she notice the ring of black stones pressed into the dirt around the elderly woman.

Pim hissed, his fur rising stiffly along his back.

Kneeling she held out her hand close to the stones. A jagged spark of electricity jumped from the ring to her fingertips. Nessa yanked them back, "Ow," she said shaking off the pain.

Pim paced around the stones, shaking his head.

The spell felt like it was to keep others out, rather than the woman in. If Nessa tried to break the circle, the magic would attack her.

“Do you see anyone?” she asked Pim.

He shook his head again.

“Me neither.”

Did the Soul Eater need to be near his victim? Her lack of knowledge was putting Nessa at a disadvantage not to mention in danger.

Meanwhile, the woman continued chatting away with the invisible George.

The glow from the jewel shifted from purple to the same green as the haze. The woman put a hand to her forehead, swaying slightly.

“Oh Georgie, tell me I’m doing the right thing talking to you like this.”

“You’re not,” shouted Nessa earnestly, waving her hands in the air in front of the woman. “Please, listen to me!”

It was no use. The woman was locked up tightly in a dream world of the Soul Eater’s making. Lonely and heartsick, who knew if she’d stop even if Nessa could explain what was happening. She had her dead Georgie to talk to again.

The woman’s tense posture relaxed. She smiled, “You’re right, of course talking to you isn’t bad. You love me. You’d never hurt me.”

Nessa made a face. Geez, the Soul Eater was feeding the woman everything she longed desperately to hear even as the circle sucked the soul energy out of her.

“Seeing you again is wonderful. I miss you so much,” the woman dabbed at her nose with a handkerchief.

Nessa rocked from foot to foot, not knowing what to do. Even if she could break the circle, which she doubted, the sudden release of energy could be too much for the woman. Judging by her frail appearance, it wouldn’t take much to knock her fully into the next world.

Afternoon slipped slowly into evening. The parking lot had been empty except for a late model Corolla. The woman’s most likely. No other visitors were in the cemetery. A pile of fresh flowers and half a dozen large floral wreaths nearby meant there’d been a funeral earlier.

“We need to get under cover,” she said to Pim looking nervously for the Soul Eater.

Easier said than done.

Unlike Evergreen, this cemetery had few trees. If the Soul Eater was watching, he or she would already know they were there. She’d have to hope he was at a distance working his magic where no one could see.

Nessa eyed the wreaths and flower arrangements. Those would have to do. She shifted the standing flower wreaths surrounding the grave a few plots over. Bunching them in front of a headstone, she created a barrier. She crouched behind the headstone, peering through the flower petals. The Fudo Cord was wide awake. It kept sending tingling jolts of energy up her arm as if urging her to hurry up.

The glow around the woman shifted again from bright green to a dull yellow. She swayed on her feet. Her speech became erratic until she was finally silent, staring vacantly in front of her. Her stillness reminded Nessa of the paunchy older man at Evergreen.

What if they were already too late? Maybe she was supposed to break the circle and take the woman out. Maybe, maybe, maybe. Nessa's throat constricted; she had no idea what she was doing.

Pim's body tensed. She watched as the fur along his back stood on end. He stepped out onto the grave to look in the direction of the parking lot.

A figure was approaching.

Someone in a long, hooded gray cloak.

"Can you tell if he's under a *glamour*?" Nessa asked.

Pim shook his head.

*Glamour* did not work on Nessa, she wasn't sure why. Probably something to do with her ability to see ghosts. Because of their tie as Familiar and witch, *glamour* generally didn't work on Pim either.

The figure walked purposefully across the cemetery directly to the woman. She didn't seem to see him or anything else.

He spoke to her too quietly for Nessa to hear. Raising his hands, Nessa saw the purple arcs of power start to snap between his palms, sparking in the dim twilight.

The woman seemed to wake up, she clutched both hands to the side of her head and screamed.

Pim silently transformed to his werecat self.

Praying Barracuda knew what he was doing, she jumped to her feet. The Fudo cord buzzed and wriggled, eager to fly free. She threw it at the cloaked figure shouting, "*Tsukamaitte!*"

The cord sped straight and true like a spear tossed by an Olympic athlete. The cloaked man dodged in a blur of speed, but the cord tracked him. It was only inches from wrapping around his throat when a dark figure flew into its path, knocking the cord to the ground.

“No!” Nessa shouted.

A choking smell filled the cemetery in front of her. She knew that smell. The stinking entity from Evergreen. The one who took the cursed instant camera. Was he working with the Soul Eater?

The man in the gray cloak swept his hands around, conjuring a circle of purple flames with a snap of his fingers. Fire roared higher than his head, engulfing him.

Nessa called the cord back, “*Moddotte,*” catching it one-handed as it came flying. With her other hand she touched the sigil for lightning on her summoning belt. The unsettled sky almost joyfully let her bind the electrons. Her grandmother had taught her the atmosphere loves a bit of mischief. She sent and a jagged bolt of lightning at the Soul Eater.

To her dismay, it bounced harmlessly off the flaming purple barrier.

The stinking entity had temporarily disappeared leaving her alone with the Soul Eater.

Pim howled his war cry.

“Pim, wait!” Nessa cried.

Too late. The werecat threw himself at the cloaked man’s fiery barrier. He bounced off the flames in a good imitation of a rubber ball. The werecat rolled over and over to smack into the cement statue of a child twenty feet away.

Spitting out a spell that made Nessa’s stomach turn, the man in the cloak threw twin fireballs in her direction.

The fiery blasts hit the floral wreaths with a *bang* sending flaming chrysanthemums, lilies, and roses flying in all directions. Nessa rolled behind the headstone as a white ‘In Memory’ ribbon fell at her feet.

She’d held a second barrage of the lightning in reserve. Thrusting her hand in the air, she summoned it from the clouds flinging it at the Soul Eater. A trio of jagged bolts hit with the force of a sonic boom. This time they penetrated his barrier, throwing him a full twenty feet.

Shaking off his own fall, Pim sprang onto the figure. The two rolled in the dirt, over and over. The Soul Eater had a dagger in one hand and to Nessa’s horror, she saw him strike. Pim howled as blood spurted out in an arc.

Undaunted, Pim caught a mouthful of the sorcerer's cowl pulling it back to reveal a hideously grimacing face, red with white fangs and snarling lips, eyes as big as teacups. It was a split second before Nessa realized the hideous visage was a mask, she could see human ears and a long tangle of dirty blond hair framing the face.

There was no time to see more before he screamed out a hex. The words tore into her skin like needles. Pim howled, feeling their sting.

The rope was wriggling to be free. Squeezing her ab muscles against the pain, Nessa pulled her hand back to throw. Or tried to. One second, she was on her feet, arm ready. The next, she face-planted painfully into the ground.

What the hell?

Twisting around she saw a hand holding her ankle. A skeletal hand sticking out of the ground. Bits of flesh and clothing still clung to it.

Giving a horrified yell, Nessa kicked at the disgusting thing only to feel another bony hand take hold of her wrist.

Nessa struggled to turn over, twist the skeletal arms and force them to let go. It worked for the one on her wrist. In fact, its whole forearm broke off, though it still stubbornly held on. The hand around her ankle would not let go.

She kicked at it with her free foot. Pim, still in werecat form, came limping up, one shoulder smeared with blood. Opening his formidable jaws, he closed them with a snap on the hand holding her ankle, shattering the bone. She pried desperately at the bony fingers.

Around her the dark spell continued to spin its web, crawling in her ears and stinging her face.

He shouted another *word*, even viler than the ones before.

This time, a dozen bony hands shot up scattering dirt, reaching for her.

Nessa squealed, rolling to her feet. She danced and skipped trying to avoid their grasping fingers.

One of them snagged Pim's tail. He yowled.

Nessa stamped on the wrist, breaking its grip on Pim only to have the unattached hand scabble onto her pants leg. It started to crawl up her calf as Nessa stood momentarily frozen in horror.

Pim jumped, catching it in his teeth and flinging it to the ground. It popped up on its fingers like a spider and started to scoot back in Nessa's direction. She jumped on it with both feet, grinding the brittle white bones into shards.

"Gross, gross, gross," she screeched, her voice breaking.

The Soul Eater stopped chanting; the black spell shattered like it was made of glass. The bony hands fell over motionless.

She saw and smelled the black entity. It was skimming across the ground closing in on the Soul Eater. Waves of bright green energy emanated from the swirling black mist. He had to be the reason the black spell had fallen to bits.

Was he helping her or the Soul Eater?

No time to ponder the question. Nessa ran at the Soul Eater even as his hands filled with purple fire. She had to get close enough to throw the Fudo Cord before he closed the flaming barrier again.

Speeding over the graves, the dark entity cut her off before she'd gone more than a few feet. He hit her with a blast of energy knocking her and Pim off their feet. She rolled head over heels into a headstone banging her head so hard she saw stars.

Gagging at sudden nausea, it was all she could do to open her eyes. By then it was too late.

A black funnel cloud spun out of the sky with the roar of a locomotive to touch down only yards away.

She hadn't called this tempest. Nessa grabbed the injured Pim with her free hand and half crawled, half stumbled to the solid walls of a marble mausoleum two graves over. If she hadn't called the funnel cloud, she could be sucked inside like anything else.

Her heart was pounding so fast it was hard to breathe. The world tilted crazily as she flattened herself against the mausoleum. Abruptly the storm swerved in another direction, heading away from her.

She felt Pim transform back to his feline form. Rocking back on his haunches, he placed his paws on her temples letting his energy flow like cool water over her spinning head. Almost immediately the world steadied.

Thank God.

Taking a deep breath, she turned back to face the battle.

Between the two figures, the black funnel cloud roared, dancing back and forth.

A wall of purple flame surrounded the Soul Eater, rising at least a dozen feet in the air.

The entity had released the shadows cloaking him revealing a figure much like the Soul Eater, minus the hideous mask. Human looking. Two arms, two legs. Dark-haired. Tall and slim.

As she watched, the dark-haired man leaped into the tornado.

What the hell?

Nessa had done the same thing to take back the cursed Sword of Eternal Blood when the warlocks' plan failed. Air magic meant the tempests she called could not hurt her. If the man stepped directly *into* the funnel cloud, he had to be an Air Elemental. Fiona said Air Elementals could fly. That must be how he could skim over the ground.

The funnel cloud smashed into the wall of flame, absorbing both the flames and the man in a boom of energy. If he'd hoped to smother the flames with the funnel cloud, he made a terrible mistake. Fire and air merged igniting the cloud into a flaming maelstrom. Nessa could feel the heat from where she crouched. Sparks flew every which way igniting drought-dry bushes. From the bushes, the flames jumped to the dead grass. Soon flames were rolling over the cemetery like waves in the sea.

The chaotic energy of the two fighters raged across the graveyard. Headstones sailed into the air. Dirt and stones flew out of the ground. A brown curtain of dust rose into the sky.

"Crap, crap, crap," Nessa chanted picking up the injured Pim. She ran unsteadily with Pim under one arm to where the old woman lay sprawled on the ground. The circle of magic had bled away as the Soul Eater became preoccupied with more important matters regarding his survival.

She put a finger to the woman's throat. A pulse. Weak but still beating. Saving the woman had to be her top priority. Shouting to be heard over the roar of the spell-bound storm, Nessa called 911, asking for an ambulance, fire trucks, police, anybody.

The flaming maelstrom veered dangerously close to them. If she didn't keep the tempest away, the woman wouldn't need an ambulance.

Pim stood by her on three legs, his head into the wind. The flaming tornado was screaming with energy. Dirt, leaves, grass, and shards of rock flew around them. Nessa flinched as a shard cut across her forehead.

She tied the Fudo Cord around her waist. She needed both hands. With a finger on her summoning belt, Nessa whistled up her own storm. The cloud bank from the ocean were a godsend. California's perennial drought usually made her work extra hard to gather enough energy to form storm clouds.

Not today.

She pulled the clouds together building them with energy sucked out of the air high in the atmosphere. Finding the sigil for *Nimbo Cumulous* she concentrated on their name. Their real name. Like pushing a button, the clouds increased in size exponentially. Massive. Dark. Menacing. With a nudge of energy, the rain fell in a sudden drenching torrent.

It was like pouring water on an oil fire. The only effect the rain had was to energize the flaming maelstrom.

The tornado doubled in size and the flames were unquenched.

Well, that certainly hadn't worked out as she hoped.

The flaming tornado swerved coming at her as if attracted by her energy.

Every kind of wind had a secret name. Grandma Hattie had taught her all of them. Calling on the strongest ones she could remember, she held them kicking and bucking like wild horses. They fought to be free. To blow and blow and blow.

Bringing her arms together, muscles straining, she forced them into a barrier in front of her and the old woman.

The flaming tornado slammed into her summoning. Winds met maelstrom in an explosion of energy shattering a statue of an angel on a nearby grave.

Nessa dug in her feet; hands outstretched as if she was physically holding the tornado at bay. Straining as the winds fought against her will, she could see the two figures inside: dark-haired and light. They spun and tumbled in the whirlwind fighting with swords and daggers as well as magic.

The tornado began to push her inexorably back inch by inch. She dug her feet into the ground, resisting with all her strength even as the heat burned her hands and face.

She felt Pim come to her side. He leaned against her, joining his energy with her own.

It wasn't enough. She was going to lose. In a desperate move, she swept her arms to one side, hoping to push as much of the maelstrom as she could into the parking lot. At the same moment, she threw herself across the woman and Pim hoping to protect them.

There was a roaring in her ears, a terrible pressure against her back, then only darkness.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“I had him!” she snarled, pushing the dark-haired man back so hard he had to scramble to keep his balance.

Pim was beside her, all werecat. Judging by the blood running down the man’s arm and one leg, he’d already felt those claws.

She’d woken up hidden beneath the shadow *glamour* of the entity. At least he’d turned off the stink.

“Quiet,” he whispered fiercely. “The fire extinguishing people are on the other side of the cemetery.”

“Why?” she demanded again. “Why did you stop me?”

“He’s my friend,” he said not meeting her eyes.

Nessa gave a choked laugh. “The Soul Eater? I’m sure Hitler had friends too. This guy is a murderer. He’s stolen the souls of innocent people. No soul means no afterlife. He’s killed them *twice*. Turning them into ghosts with no hope of crossing over. If you hadn’t gotten in the way, I’d have had him.”

She got to her feet not caring if the firemen saw her or not. Her hair was floating around her head in a blond halo. Anger fueled her magic. She drew on the ambient energy flowing over the cemetery. A finger on her summoning belt and with the barest effort, she called the fog. A thick swirling mist would hide her and Pim. After all, the authorities would already put the damage down to a rouge tornado. What harm could a little fog magic do?

Besides she was crap at *glamour* and couldn’t hide herself any other way.

She started to walk away.

“I wish to capture him also,” he called, running after her.

Nessa snorted.

“I do. He is under a spell. His mistress is forcing Oliver to do this. She must be.” He said the last part more to convince himself than Nessa.

“Oliver? The monster has a name?”

The young man made a face. “He is not a monster. He is a person.”

“Sure he is. Are you not a monster either?”

“I am not a monster. I am Roland.”

“Roland,” she repeated. “So, Roland, was that you or him pulling the dead out of the ground?”

“I am not sure what you mean.”

“The skeleton hands grabbing me and my cat.”

He looked at Pim. “This beast is not a cat.”

“Irrelevant,” she growled.

Still looking askance at her Familiar he said, “Oliver cast the spell. I do not have power over the dead.”

Power over the dead? No wonder the guy was comfortable stealing souls.

“He’s a necromancer?”

“In a way. Transfiguration from inert to animated is one of his abilities. The spell is contingent on the object having been mobile at one time.”

Nodding she said, “I get it. Dead bodies were once running around so he can make them move again. The same power wouldn’t work on making a broom sweep the floor.”

“Yes, correct.”

Now he was no longer stinky, Nessa had realized something alarming. He smelled like roses and lavender with a nose-tickling hint of cinnamon.

Oh, damn.

She knew this exquisite mélange of scents. Frank, despite his fallen angelic state, smelled wonderful.

Then again, just because you smelled nice didn’t mean you were. Frank an obvious case in point.

“Is he like you in another way?”

He gave her a quizzical look as if he didn’t understand her question.

“You’ve got angel blood. I can smell it.”

This time he flushed. His fair skin turning scarlet.

“I...I...” he stammered. “We...”

“You know what? I don’t care.” She was worn out. Tired from the magic; frustrated over losing the Soul Eater. “Stay out of my way or next time I’ll throw the binding cord at you.”

Pim transformed back into his feline self. Nessa scooped him up and walked away.

The gash on his shoulder had mostly healed she was relieved to see. As a Familiar, Pim was practically indestructible. His superior state didn't mean he could not feel pain. She'd seen him wince as he stood guard between her and the man in the gray cloak.

Getting over the cemetery wall took a little extra effort as she had to boost Pim onto the tall cement. His leg was still too sore for him to jump. The cat was no lightweight.

Nessa intended to enter the cemetery from the front gate and retrieve her scooter. Better the firemen didn't see she'd been inside the grounds. Fingers crossed her little scooter had not been damaged in the chaos.

Cautiously approaching the entrance, she saw her scooter had fallen over from the whirlwinds. No surprise there. Some decorative azalea bushes in full bloom gave her a place to observe the action.

The EMTs finished locking the elderly lady on the stretcher inside the ambulance. Running to the front, they hopped in. With the siren blasting, they roared out of the driveway. Firemen and police were still filling the cemetery. No one stood near her scooter.

It took only a moment to release the spell-bound locks and pull it back up. She threw the chain in the basket almost braining Pim who had managed to climb in first.

"Sorry!" she apologized gunning the engine to speed after the ambulance as fast as a little 45cc motor could rev.

A black shadow sped by her riding the whirlwind. The entity. Roland. The back-blow from his passing nearly pushed her off the scooter.

"Jerk!" she shouted, shaking a fist. "You did that on purpose."

She scrunched as low as she could over the handlebars to avoid the worst of the wind as the whirlwind wove an erratic path in front of her.

Luck was with her. The hospital turned out to be barely two miles from the cemetery. No wonder the ambulance had arrived so quickly.

If the woman was still alive, they'd probably stabilize her in the Emergency Room before moving to Intensive Care.

The Soul Eater would follow, eager to finish the job. She'd be dust by morning if Nessa didn't do something.

Nessa pulled up to the ER driveway.

“Can you jump?” she asked Pim.

His answer was to leap out of the basket. He ran with only the barest limp into the hospital on the heels of the EMTs. He’d keep an eye out for the Soul Eater. What they could do in the middle of a hospital to stop him Nessa had no idea.

She parked her bike, locked it, and went into the ER waiting room. It was crowded with people of all ages. A baby was crying noisily. A couple of toddlers played tug-of-war with a toy while their mother thumbed through screens on her phone, ignoring them. In her experience, Emergency Rooms in LA were always crowded. She chose an empty chair at the back of the room. The staff would ignore her, assuming she was waiting either for treatment or another patient.

The Fudo Cord sat quietly around her waist. Fingers crossed it would let her know if the Soul Eater approached. Or the other guy. Barracuda’s cord didn’t seem to like either one.

The Fudo Cord buzzed making her jump. Speak of the devil.

“I could not gain entrance to the treatment rooms where they have taken the old woman,” the man said swirling his cloak dramatically before sitting down heavily next to her with a scowl.

“Stinky spell not exactly a go-to *glamour* for a hospital,” she pointed out.

“In my time the wounded smelled much worse.”

He wasn’t stinky anymore. Her witch senses tingled, recognizing a kindred spirit. He’d used Elemental magic at the cemetery, she was sure. Nessa looked him up and down. He seemed maybe in his late twenties. Dark hair, olive skin, not handsome but manly looking with a square jaw and broad forehead. His thick hair hung in tangled curls to his shoulders.

That’s when she noticed everyone around them was watching the man with interest.

Nessa scrunched down in her seat.

“Why are you wearing your stupid cloak?” she whispered. “Take it off. You look like a wizard.”

“I am a wizard,” he said a little defiantly.

“Don’t say it out loud. Only crazy people wear cloaks in public. Or call themselves wizards. You’re drawing attention.”

The security guard by the nurses’ station had straightened up to stare at their corner.

“Take it off, *take it off*,” she ordered.

“I am drawing attention?” he asked as if the thought had not occurred to him.

“Yes. Try to look normal.”

“What does normal look like?”

Nessa made a sound of exasperation, “Normal does not run around Inglewood ER in a wizard’s cloak.”

Pim hissed in agreement.

He slid the thick cloak off his shoulders, folding it carefully.

Nessa was relieved to see he was wearing a sort-of normal long-sleeved shirt – well, normal if you were going to a Renaissance Fair -- and trousers with a button front. Tucked into his belt was ...oh crap!

“Hide the dagger, you idiot.”

“Men do not carry weapons here?” he asked in the same surprised tone of voice.

Boy, was that a loaded question in today’s America. However, all she said was, “No.”

He placed the folded cloak strategically across his lap, hiding the weapon.

“All right?” he asked.

No. Very much not all right. Nessa’s hands were shaking. She felt like she was on the edge of a serious panic attack. Her body ached. She was frightened for her fairies. She hated hospitals. In fact, she hated them more than she hated police station.

Pim came racing across the waiting room leaping over a set of chairs to reach her. He’d sensed her distress, as he should. He rubbed his face against hers, gently kneading her stomach with his front paws as he purred soothingly.

The man looked on curiously.

“Is there a ghost on your lap?”

She nodded, then realizing what he’d said, shook her head. “No, no, no. Not a ghost. My cat. You already saw him.”

“I saw a monstrous beast who attacked me.

“You deserved it, ruining my capture. Now stop talking. I’m trying to breathe.”

He pressed his lips together.

It took some time and a lot of nuzzling from Pim to slow her heart to a more normal pace.

Pim touched the Fudo Cord with one paw.

“It’s reacting to him,” she said, indicating the man with a tilt of her head. “I think you should keep watching her, Pim. I’m okay now.”

After a quick head bump of solidarity, he scampered back inside the ER.

They sat in silence until Nessa remembered the afternoon drama in Evergreen.

“Why did you want the cursed camera?” she said to Roland.

“I am hoping to imprison Oliver within the enchanted object.”

“Were you the one who contacted Peg to get it for you? Wait. How did you even know about it? You live in fairyland.”

“Fairyland?” he replied, quirking an eyebrow.

“You know what I mean.”

He settled himself more comfortably in the chair. “I suppose I do. I was researching artifacts. Objects or spells to help me safely capture Oliver. With the help of one of the library novices, I found the camera. There was a tracking spell on it. The spell could only be activated with transfiguration magic. I do not wield such magic.”

“You came here and contacted Peg.”

“No. I came to this world and contacted a spell broker other Fae have used. This spell broker hired an intermediary to find the camera.”

“And that person contacted Peg.”

“Yes. He became greedy. Wanted to keep the camera for himself.” He shook his head. “After some persuasion he told me Miss Porter’s name.”

“And the rest is history,” Nessa said sarcastically. “Especially for the go-between who is definitely history.”

He gave her a quizzical look.

She waved a hand in the air. “Never mind. You need the camera to catch him since Soul Eaters are super difficult to capture.”

“Precisely. The camera will not harm him. Once inside the photograph, I may speak to him. Understand why he is doing this.”

Nessa gave a little bark of laughter, “Oh, I know why. His boss, Princess What’s-Her-Name wants to take the Fire throne away from the current Queen.”

His eyes widened. “How could you possibly know this?”

“Because the Fire Queen is holding my fairies hostage. My bondmaidens as you guys call them. If I *don’t* catch your soul-stealing pal, she keeps my fairies. Or worse.”

Pulling out her camera she showed him the first and second videos from Madame Valencia.

“There is something behind the fairy in the second moving picture,” he tapped the top of the phone.

Nessa zoomed in closer. He was right. Words. They were a lighter color where they had been scratched into the stone.

“Can you read it?” she asked.

Squinting at the small screen he said, “I can make out two words. *Omnia pereun*. All is lost.”

Oh. ‘All is lost’ did not sound good.

“If I don’t stop Princess What’s-Her-Name...”

“Nepenta,” he corrected.

“What?” she snapped.

“Princess Nepenta. She is the Queen’s youngest sister. Oliver serves her. I have only recently learned this,” he added.

“Fine. Whatever. Don’t care. I have to stop the Soul Eater before he gets enough souls to power whatever spell is going to start the revolution.”

“Assassination rather than revolution, I think.”

“Again. Don’t care.”

“Oliver is her Paladin.”

“What’s a Paladin?”

“A knight in service to a liege.”

“Are you one too?”

“I am.”

“Who do you serve?”

“I am Paladin to the Queen of Air.”

Oh spit.

Willing her face to remain impassive, she did her best to hide her surprise behind the mask of her blue contacts.

She had sworn fealty to the same Queen a week and a half ago. He was an Elemental. It would be only natural for the Queen of Air to claim him just as she had claimed Nessa.

Madame Valencia hadn't said anything about a Knight from the Court of Air. "Does um ...I mean, did your Queen send you to stop him?"

He tightened his lips, his face becoming just as impassive as Nessa's. "That is my business."

Which meant he was here on his own.

A little spark of pain made Nessa jump. It was followed by another.

The belt.

Watching her, the man straightened, alert, looking around the waiting room.

"Ow, ow," Nessa whispered under her breath, untying the cord to coil in her hand.

Something nasty was approaching. Not by the front doors she guessed.

'I suck at *glamour*,' she said to him. "There's no way I can sneak by the nurses' station to get into the room with the old lady."

He looked away from her, considering. "Hmm, leave it to me."

The man stood, jumping up onto the chair. Flourishing his cloak in a circle, he fastened it under his chin.

"Have at me!" he yelled.

People around them gasped and shouted.

He leaped over a row of chairs as nimbly as Pim. Holding the dagger high, he ran in the direction of the hospital entrance.

People jumped to get out of his way, the waiting room suddenly in chaos.

Nessa knew a cue when she saw one. She pulled her hoodie over her head, low enough to hide most of her face. Running to the Emergency Room doors, she dropped to the floor, crawling by the reception desk.

"Pim?" she called as she slipped inside.

"Meow!" he answered faintly.

"Hey! What's going on," said one of the nurses looking sternly at Nessa on her hands and knees.

"There's a man with a knife in the waiting room!" she shouted pointing to the doors.

The nurse pressed what looked like a panic button on the wall next to the doors, at the same time yelling, "Security!"

Two guards came running.

“Stay here,” said the nurse.

Nessa nodded meekly.

The nurse followed the security guards into the waiting room.

“Pim?” called Nessa immediately moving into the receiving area.

The staff was busy with patients, charts, machines, etc. She wasn’t the only civilian.

Family members stood clustered around several beds.

Popping up on his hind legs, Pim waved her over. She followed him to a curtained bed on the far right. The lady from the cemetery was there. She was hooked up to beeping machines and a couple of I.V.s.

Pim leaped nimbly onto the bed pointing to the hospital bracelet around one bony wrist.

Nessa moved close enough to read it.

Ruth Anne Baker.

Nessa repeated it several times to commit the name to memory.

Mrs. Baker was still in a lot of danger.

“What are you doing in here?” said a voice making her jump.

A nurse stood in blue scrubs by the curtains.

She put her hand to her heart. “Geez, you surprised me. My grandmother,” Nessa said.

“I’m Ruth Anne’s granddaughter. I was waiting for my dad to come. I got scared and ran inside here.”

“Scared of what?” said the nurse crossing her arms over her chest.

“There was a weird man in the waiting room. He pulled a knife. Didn’t you hear people yelling?”

“What?” Her voice rose. “Now?”

Nessa nodded.

She turned away. “Let me check.”

“Shall I stay here?” Nessa asked sweetly, holding her hands in front of her in an innocent pose of sincerity.

“Yes, yes. Stay here.” The nurse rushed off, pulling the curtains closed as she went.

And the lights went out.

“Oh crap,” Nessa moaned.

Emergency lights flicked on then almost as quickly they turned off. The machines by the old woman were still glowing. Electricity was flowing somewhere.

A spell, Nessa guessed.

Pim growled, transforming into his werecat alter ego. By the dim glow of the machines, she saw him take up a position on the foot of the old woman's bed.

Nessa held the Fudo Cord ready. It was wriggling with energy. '*Tsukamaete,*' she said to herself, rehearsing the word to activate it. '*Tsukamaete. Tsukamaete.*'

The cord jumped.

He was here.

Nessa backed away to stand next to the machines, out of sight. Pim flattened himself to the bed, shielded by the darkness.

The curtains slid back revealing the outline of a person. Both she and Pim waited in case it was one of the doctors or nurses.

The figure approached; Nessa saw a pale purple glow near where the hands should be.

Doctors and nurses did not glow.

"Get him!" she shouted.

Pim attacked. The figure howled as Pim bit and clawed. They went down thrashing, pulling the curtains with them. Nessa jumped onto the bed, dancing to avoid stepping on the woman. She jumped to the other side of the room. The figure threw off Pim with a *word*. The hex ricocheted off Pim to smack Nessa all the way into the next cubicle. Empty, luckily.

Nessa threw the curtains aside. She saw the figure almost on top of the old woman. She tackled him, dragging him onto the floor with her. The bed was on wheels and apparently not locked because it went sliding through the curtains into the opposite alcove. People began shouting.

Flashlights had appeared but they couldn't cut more than an inch or so through the darkness of the spell.

Pim was with her in an instant. He got his jaws around the man's arm and bit. Bone cracked. The man gave a weird high-pitched scream and an acrid smell made Nessa's eyes water.

She had a suspicion this was not a man at all.

The figure threw her off and got up to run.

She ran after, knocking into machines and people. The Fudo Cord was shaking in her hands. Taking it off she hurled it after the man. Or thing. Whatever it was.

“*Tsukamaete!*” she shouted.

The cord flew straight and true. It wrapped tightly around his body, throat to ankles.

With a strength she didn’t know she had, Nessa grabbed the end of the cord to drag the attacker back to the old woman’s alcove. He bucked and wriggled making inarticulate growling noises like some large animal.

She half fell into the bed. The thing thrashed harder knocking the heart monitor machine onto the floor. His movements became frenzied. Nessa and Pim backed away as the body, even tightly wrapped in the Fudo Cord threw itself from side to side. The growls turned to howls and finally to one long scream. The scream was cut off by a horrible squelching sound. Something splatted against the bed, curtains, floor, Nessa’s clothes, and Pim.

The lights came back on.

The Fudo Cord was wrapped around a pile of empty clothing, green goo oozing over the floor.

Pim began coughing, wiping frantically at the slime on his fur. Nessa tugged over a handful of the curtains the demon had pulled to the floor. She wiped down Pim. Demon blood was vile stuff.

The attacker hadn’t been the Soul Eater. He’d *glamoured* a demon, sending it in as bait to spring any traps.

Nessa spotted a little jewel in the gooey mess. Not the same as the one she’d seen on the cord. It had to be from the Soul Eater. Snagging a handful of tissues from a dispenser, she wrapped the jewel inside, tucking it in her pants pocket.

The volume of yelling seemed to have increased with the return of the electricity rather than decreased. People were running back and forth. Someone was crying. Half a dozen uniformed police moved ran into the room. Nessa grabbed the cord, covered in goo, and backed into the alcove holding the old woman. She wiped off what she could on the curtains. Cringing, she tied it around her waist as one of the uniforms stopped at the wrecked cubicle.

“What are you doing back here.”

The Uniform was sour-faced and frowning. Nessa recognized the type. Keep the bull to a minimum.

“Grandmother,” Nessa said, pointing to the bed. “My Grandmother was brought in by ambulance. I was sitting in the waiting room for my dad could come. The weird guy in the cape came and sat by me. When he pulled the knife, I ran into the Emergency Room.

They’d see on the CCTV the guy in the cloak came and sat by her. When he brandished the dagger, he’d also see she ran.

“Did you see what happened here?”

“What part?”

He made an impatient sound.

“I mean what part of the guy with the knife or back here,” she said quickly.

“Here.” He was curt and to the point.

‘Keep the story simple,’ her dad always said.

“I figured there’d be doctors and maybe security in here. I was scared.” She gave a fake though she knew entirely realistic sob, squeezing out a few tears for good measure. She could cry on command. Another skill Deadbeat Dad had taught her.

“And what did you see in here?”

“Not much. I hid under there.” She pointed to the ER bed. “All I saw were feet. I was scared and closed my eyes.”

“What’s your grandmother’s name.

Her stomach cramped.

This was the tricky part.

“Ruth Ann Banks.”

“Can I see some I.D.?”

Dutifully rummaging in her backpack, she pulled out one of several I.D.s she carried for these sorts of emergencies. Neither the name nor the address was hers. After all, she was her father’s daughter.

“Your name’s not Banks,” he said curtly looking at the license.

“My mom’s maiden name.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s...she’s dead.” Or maybe undead would be a better term. “My dad is coming. He was at work.”

The policeman took a photo of the license before giving it back. Pointing at another of the uniformed officers he said, “She’ll take your details.”

“Okay. Can I wait for my dad outside?”

“After you talk to the officer.” He turned away, already dismissing her from his mind.

When she finished handing over her fake details, she headed for the door, scooping up Pim with one hand.

“Time to call Ravi, don’t you think?” she said as they headed out of the ER.

Pim meowed in agreement causing several people to stop and look around.

Oops.

Keeping her face impassive, she pushed through the main double doors.

The parking area was full of police cars and flashing lights. Night had fallen while she was inside. The cold air seeped right through her cotton hoodie. SoCal was a lot like the desert. As soon as the sun went down, the temperature dropped. She zipped her hoodie up wishing she’d brought a fleece jacket instead.

Sitting on the curb with Pim, she tapped ‘Ravi’ in her cellphone contacts.

Ravi Singh was an officer of the Infernal Court. Nessa called him a Witch Cop. He was also a Naga on his mother’s side. Nagas are giant shape-changing hooded cobras from Indian mythology. Semi-divine and very scary creatures. Not many people knew about Ravi’s Naga ability even in the Infernal Court Constabulary. Giant snakes freak out supernaturals as much as humans.

Nessa only learned of his dual nature in the middle of a fight with a gang of zombies during the battle for the Sword of Eternal Blood. The stupid sword was the cause of so much trouble. Ravi had saved her by transforming into his giant anthropomorphic Cobra alter ego.

“Hey Nessa, where have you been this week?” he said, picking up immediately. “I was hoping we could meet for coffee.”

Since fighting off a team of lethal Skinwalkers together on Nessa’s first assignment for Barracuda Bail Bonds, they’d become friends. He was barely older than her, going straight from graduating Pepperdine University into service with the Court, as new to law enforcement as she was to bounty hunting. Over coffee or lunch, they helped each other out with information.

“Ravi, I know who’s turning people to ash,” she said in a rush. She quickly explained about the mysterious deaths.

“A Soul Eater? Holy hellfire, Nessa. That’s bad.”

“Worse,” Nessa said. “He’s with the Elemental Fire Court. A Paladin. A Paladin’s a knight, right?”

“Wait, what? A Paladin? That’s the word he used?”

“Yeah. I met another one who’s chasing him and screwed up my capture. I *almost* had him Ravi.”

“Another Paladin? Whoa, whoa. Paladin, the historical ones, well, sort of historical, were divine knights in service to Charlemagne. Give me a sec. I’m at my desk. I’ll bring it up.”

Nessa and Pim exchanged expressions of surprise. She had the phone on speaker so he could hear more easily.

“Charlemagne,” Nessa said to him.

“Meow,” he answered back.

“Okay, okay,” Ravi said. “Um...Paladins. There were twelve of them. Like the twelve apostles. They were the precursors to King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table.”

“No way.”

“The saga, *The Song of Roland* originates from this story. Roland was the most valiant of the Paladin. There was also Berengier, Otton, Ivon, Girard, Gerin, Anseis, Oliver...”

“Wait, Ravi. Oliver? It says one of them was named Oliver?”

“Yeah.”

“The guy who got in my way said he was chasing Oliver. That’s the Soul Eater’s name.”

“Shit. Why didn’t you call me sooner? “

“I dropped into this mess on a job for Mr. Barracuda. Everything only started to synch up today. I’m only now putting it together.”

She wondered if she should tell him about the Queen kidnapping her fairies. He’d met them. Best to wait, she decided. She didn’t want to put him in danger directly.

“All right. Here’s more info. Supposedly the Paladins died in a battle against the Saracens in 788.”

“788? Long time ago.”

“For sure. Except these guys are thought to just be a story. A romantic invention.”

“Guess not. Divine, you said?”

“So the story goes.”

“Meow,” said Pim giving her a significant look.

“Yeah,” she said nodding at her Familiar. “The one I met had angelic blood. Not full. Not half. Some. Definitely some.”

“How do you know?”

“The smell. Angels have this wonderful smell. Even the bad ones.”

“Oh.”

Nessa looked up as a scuffle broke out by the yellow police tape cordoning off the area.

“Let me through,” shouted a familiar voice. “My daughter is inside.”

“Oh-my-gawd,” she moaned, “it’s my dad.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Nessa had only been lying to the detective about waiting for her father. She never expected him to show up. Especially with Belencourt on the war trail.

“Gotta’ go,” she said.

Ravi promised to send Court investigators to the hospital immediately.

Swallowing her anger, Nessa ran to the yellow police tape. “Daddy,” she cried throwing her arms wide. “I was so scared.”

He shouldered by the policemen like a linebacker to embrace her.

“Baby!”

Following her training, she hugged him back whispering fiercely. “What the hell, Dad. You’re supposed to be hiding.”

“Worried,” he whispered back. “What’s your name?”

He knew she would’ve used a fake ID.

“Rebecca.”

“Rebecca,” he said loudly, “your aunt and I saw the tornado on TV. We knew you were at the cemetery with your...”

“Grandmother Ruth...” she whispered.

“Grandma’ Ruth,” he said just as loudly.

The policeman on guard relaxed, waving them off.

She led him to the curb where she’d been sitting. Pim stood back giving her dad the stink eye. Her cat was never going to forgive him for indenturing them to Barracuda Bail Bonds.

“I wasn’t lying about seeing the tornado on TV,” he said, trying to take her hand. “Are you really okay?”

She tugged it away. “Yeah. Yes. The Soul Eater sent a demon disguised as him into the ER. I guess he suspected a trap. I vanquished it.”

“CCTV?” His concern was whether she might be caught using her powers on camera. Fighting a demon was a secondary consideration.

She rolled her eyes. “No cameras. The Soul Eater used some sort of dampening spell. The incantation made the room pitch black.”

“Good, good. Is she still alive?”

“Mrs. Banks? I mean the beguiled lady. For now,” she added ominously.

“Did you call down the funnel cloud?”

“Not me. Two sorcerers, one was an Air Elemental. The other I’m pretty sure is Fire. I was only behind a couple of lightning bolts.”

“Good. We don’t want to draw the attention of the Infernal Court.”

“Why? It’s not like I’m a demon or murdering anyone.”

“The Court frowns on creating havoc in urban areas. They police such matters, too.”

A shiver ran down Nessa’s spine. She realized she did not know much about the jurisdiction of the court. They’d never stayed in one place long enough to draw the Court’s attention. Or so she thought.

“Are we going back inside?” he asked.

Pim gave her a quizzical look, wondering the same thing probably.

“Dunno. I called Ravi Singh. He works for the Infernal Constabulary. They’re sending people to investigate. The Soul Eater is still out there for sure,” she waved at the parking lot and beyond. “Maybe he’ll finish another target instead and come back for Mrs. Baker later. I don’t know how sequencing on this sort of spell works. Like, does he have to finish one before harvesting another?”

“I don’t think it has to be in order. Soul Eaters often create a pack. Drawing a soul out is insanely difficult spellwork. They pool their energy then divide the soul between them.”

“This one’s on his own. He works for a princess of the Fire Court. I almost had him,” she said angrily. “At the cemetery. Then this other sorcerer interfered. Knocked my Fudo Cord off course.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Fudo Cord?”

Nessa explained about the loan from Barracuda followed by a quick rundown of the battle.

“He said he was a Paladin. Ravi searched online. They were supposedly romantic inventions of the Middle Ages, kind of like King Arthur’s knights. “

“*Le Chanson de Roland*. The epic poem Song of Roland glorified their exploits.”

“Roland?” said Nessa. “The second guy said his name is Roland. According to Ravi the Paladins died in 788 at some battle.”

Her dad nodded. “Yes, however, the poem was written in the Eleventh Century.”

She stared at him, “And you know this *how*?”

“Your great-grandfather specialized in forging illustrated manuscripts. The Song of Roland was one of his favorites. I loved watching him when I was a child. He would have me read the poem out loud while he worked.”

“You’ve never talked about him.” Or really anyone in his family. She didn’t even know she had an aunt until she was sixteen.

Pim jumped into her lap, his ears twitching, as surprised as she was.

Her dad looked at his hands, fiddling with his watch. A big Rolex. A real one. He liked nice things. “I didn’t think they’d be a good influence on you.”

“Also, I could put them in danger.” That was the truth, too.

“Yes, there was the whole dark angel thing.”

They were quiet for a time. Each looking into the past. Pim tucked his head under her chin.

“Hello,” said a deep voice behind them.

Nessa and her dad jumped to their feet, Nessa with a squeak, her dad cursing, Pim ready to transform.

“Jeezus, don’t do that!” Nessa scolded, realizing who it was.

“You were speaking of me.”

“The guy?” said her dad.

“The guy,” confirmed Nessa.

Pim hissed at him.

“This is Roland,” she said giving his name with a significant rise of her eyebrows.

“The... the Roland?” he asked hesitantly.

She shrugged. “No idea. Ask him.”

“Did you serve Charlemagne?”

He cocked his head as if surprised by the question. “I did.”

“You’re a myth. A story.”

He sketched a courtly bow, “Pardon me sir if I beg to disagree.”

Her dad stared at the other man. “You died in 788. Fighting the Saracens.”

Roland’s expression became guarded. “Death is a rather fluid term in my world.”

“You’re an Air Elemental. You also have some divine blood. Did you join the Fae or...” she let the question hang.

“I was taken by them after I fell in battle and...” he hesitated, “convinced to join their ranks.”

Nessa snorted a laugh. “I’ve met the Queen of Air. I can sort of imagine how the conversation went.”

Both men now stared at her, demanding answers at the same time.

“You have been to court?” said Roland.

“What the hell are you doing in Fae?” shouted her father.

“*Shhh*,” she shushed her dad. “Not so loud.”

“Talk,” he said tight-lipped.

Now she’d done it. No wriggle room here.

“The Chevaliers, Mom’s clan, are Air Elemental’s. No secret there. Turns out Air Elementals have Fae blood. If they are identified, Elementals are forcibly claimed by the appropriate Elemental Court.” She pointed at herself, “Air.” Then up, “Ride or die. No choice.”

“I have not seen you at the Queen’s Assemblies,” Roland said moving a little too close for comfort.

“I was there when the Fire Court attacked. Where were you?”

“*What?*” said her dad hoarsely.

“Come off it, Dad.” She felt her face twisting into an ugly sneer. “You ran off and left me to become a Bounty Hunter for LA’s reigning Voodoo King. You’ve made it pretty clear my safety is no longer a priority for you.”

“Not true,” he countered.

“Yeah, I think it is. Right now, I have more important things to worry about than your feelings. The Queen of Fire is holding my fairies hostage. If I don’t stop this Soul Eater, she might kill them.”

“You have fairies now?” His voice rose, “*Fairies?*”

“Yeah, Dad. Three of them. All addicted to tacos. Maybe if you hadn’t dumped me and run off to your next scam, which I guess failed spectacularly, you’d know.” She turned to poke Roland in the chest. “We can work together or against each other. Which is it?”

“If you had not interfered I might have him by now.”

Nessa bristled, her hair rising right up off her shoulders, “I interfered? Me? I was about to capture him when you pushed my enchanted rope out of the way.”

Pim growled a low series of meows in agreement.

“And done what?” Roland asked.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you intend to do with him?”

“The Queen of Fire wants him before those souls he’s collected can be used against her. I told you.”

“He will be punished,” Roland stated.

She gave him a hard stare. “Your pal has murdered a bunch of people and stolen their afterlife,” Nessa pointed out. “Not feeling a lot of sympathy. Besides, if he’s only been obeying orders for his boss, then the Princess is the one in trouble.”

“Absolving him would mean showing mercy. A rare trait among the Fae.”

Nessa made a sound of exasperation. “What do *you* want to do with him, once he’s inside the cursed photo?”

“Talk. I wish to talk with him. Understand his actions. Oliver was always the most level-headed of us. Advising moderation, not excess. To murder someone for their soul, how could he even access such magic?”

“People change,” her father said, reminding Nessa he was still here. “You guys have been around over twelve, thirteen hundred years?”

“Time does not pass in Fae as it does in this world.”

“Obviously not. Nevertheless, I don’t think someone can force you to become a Soul Eater.”

“Maybe he’s in love with the princess,” Nessa said having a sudden idea. “She didn’t have to force him.”

Roland looked like he wanted to say something. Instead, he closed his mouth, clenching his jaw tightly.

“What?” she asked. “Is he gay?”

Roland tilted his head. “Under normal circumstances? I would not say gay, more even-tempered.”

“Not gay as in happy, stupid. Gay as in he prefers men over women.”

Roland’s eyebrows shot up. “Ah. Oh. Honestly, I do not know. He was always very chaste.”

Her dad snorted, “I bet unicorns followed him around.”

“Why would unicorns follow Oliver?” Roland asked in all seriousness.

Her dad looked ready to launch into an explanation of unicorns and virgins. Nessa held her hand up. “Not relevant.” She looked at Roland. “Let’s go someplace less public so we can talk. Dad, do you have your car?”

“Yes,” he pointed at the parking lot on the other side of the police tape.

Roland drew a *glamour* over himself, turning into nothing more than a shadow.

Other people were leaving the hospital as well. The policeman lifted the tape without any objection.

Pim kept shooting Nessa looks as if to say, ‘What’s going on?’

“Keys,” she said holding out her hand as they reached the Volvo.

Her dad knew better than to ask why. He’d trained her.

She opened the trunk saying to Roland, “We are not cooperating, are we?”

“I do not wish to turn him over to the Queen of Fire.”

“Understood,” Nessa said evenly. “I guess it’s every supernatural for themselves. *Tsukamaete!*” she yelled tossing the Fudo Cord.

It had been wriggling and jumping since Roland had joined them. Now it flew to the Paladin gleefully wrapping around him like a boa constrictor, head to toe. His eyes bulged out from between folds of the rope. He struggled to speak but the cord knew its stuff. No words, no hand motions, nothing to access magic. Unless he was telekinetic, the Paladin was trapped.

“Help me find the camera. I bet he has it on him.”

Together they patted him down. Not the easiest task with the rope wrapped so tightly. The Fudo Cord seemed almost prescient, moving away from their hands as they looked for a bulge.

They couldn’t find it.

“He summoned the wind to fly here,” she said thinking out loud. “Maybe he stashed it at the cemetery.”

Roland wriggled harder.

“No time to go back now.” Nessa opened the trunk.

“Help me,” she said to her dad.

Together they heaved the struggling Paladin into the trunk.

“Now what?” Her dad was smiling. Dad loved a good caper.

“Cover him with a tarp. Pim and I will follow.”

The police cars and fire trucks still crowded the driveway around the hospital. “We need some place quieter than this.”

“You have a plan,” her dad said with a sly smile.

“I have a plan,” she nodded.

With Pim on her heels, Nessa ran to her scooter. She shifted her backpack around, moving the Fae crown to a front pocket within easy reach and put the cursed camera inside.

“Not sure if it’s a good plan,” she told Pim at his questioning meow.

Turning the key, she zoomed after her dad.

“But it’s all I’ve got.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In a secluded corner of the Redondo Beach parking garage, they dragged Roland out of the Volvo's trunk.

It was going on eight o'clock on a weekday. The top floor was deserted.

Thanks to an unfortunate incendiary run-in with a Firebug here in the garage, Nessa knew the only cameras were at the entrance and exit.

Roland wriggled for all he was worth. With the cord in his mouth, all he could do was mumble incoherently. The emotion behind the mumbles came through loud and clear. He was thoroughly pissed off.

Too bad. Nessa was not letting anyone stand in the way of saving her taco-loving fairies.

Nessa checked for the end of the Fudo Cord, rehearsing the words to make it return to her just to make sure. Speed was part of her plan. Under her hands the cord was soft and pliant, warm to the touch.

She pulled out her little silver knife. "Help me cut his clothes off."

"Because?" asked her dad, reaching into his ankle holster for his blade.

"I need to see if he has any magical objects on him. Like a bracelet or necklace. Ring. You know, something that could be disguised as a Portal Key."

Dad knew all about Portal Keys. The Inferni Coin he'd exploited was only the size of a silver dollar. Coin in hand, the user could walk through any mirror into the Inferni World.

It was sweaty and stupidly hard work trying to get Roland's clothes off while he was tied up. There was a little blood as well. Finally, he was nearly naked beneath the coils of rope.

He wasn't wearing any jewelry they could find. Nor was there anything suspicious inside his clothing.

"Could it be a tattoo or something under the skin?"

Her dad stood, looking over their prisoner.

"Boots," he said finally. "We haven't thoroughly checked his boots."

Roland had on soft walking boots, brown suede with leather soles.

"Pim, help me look," Nessa said grabbing one.

She reached her hand in as Pim sniffed and batted at the outside of the boot.

Nothing.

Pim joined her dad, sniffing the other boot. In seconds he meowed an alert.

Pim placed a paw on the outside seam near where the ankle would be.

Roland stopped struggling. He must have figured out part of Nessa's plan.

Her dad began working on the leather with his knife. Between the inside and outside seams was a slim silver glyph sewn into the lining.

Her dad ran his fingers over the symbol. It sparkled, buzzing with quiet energy.

"Probably activated by a word."

"Excellent," sighed Nessa. "Let's put this stuff in the car."

If looks could kill, Roland would have dropped her on the spot.

She almost apologized then stopped herself. What did she have to be sorry for? His pal had murdered four people so far and was looking to make it five. Screw explanations. He deserved to be caught.

They were gathering the shreds of clothing when Nessa heard a car engine. Headlights came up the ramp.

She swore under her breath.

"Come on, help me," her dad said grabbing Roland's feet. They had just dragged him to the side of the car when another auto rolled up. The lights were in their eyes. Too bright to see around. If it was security, they were so screwed.

Nessa felt Pim transform into his werecat form. He ran behind the vehicle, ready to spring at whoever emerged.

The car door opened but all Nessa could see was a pair of sturdy legs, the bright headlights reduced everything to an unfocused blur.

"Are you hiding a body?" said a man's voice?

The figure stepped forward just as Pim jumped.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“God damn it, Nessa,” Jun Hee moaned. “Your cat is a menace.”

“Your jacket...” Nessa started to say.

“Where, what?” shouted Jun Hee, craning his neck. “Ow, ow.”

“He sliced through the leather.”

Jun Hee was wearing a Sherpa-lined leather bomber jacket. Pim’s claws had ripped through the thick material like a sheet of paper.

“Help me,” said Jun Hee wincing as he shrugged out of it. His tone changed from angry to something else. Fear?

She grabbed a sleeve sliding it off as gently as she could.

He raised his arms, “Ow, ow, ow.”

Blood had soaked the thin cotton tee underneath.

“Jeez, Jun Hee. I’m so sorry. Dad!”

“On it,” he said jogging to the car. In a second, he was back, a first-aid kit in hand. Dad was a man prepared for emergencies. With a daughter under a curse from a Fallen Angel, he’d had to be.

“Hurry,” said Jun Hee, an almost panicked note in his voice. “I need you to look.”

And look she did. Jun Hee was six foot three of gorgeous Korean American GQ-worthy man. That wasn’t news. What was surprising were the black spirals, pentagrams, sigils, and what looked like stylized Chinese characters tattooed over his back and chest.

Her dad whistled. “You have a lot of ink.”

Some of the ink was smeared with blood from Pim’s claws.

Nessa dabbed at the injuries with an oversized gauze pad her dad handed her. He was standing next to her, almost too near. Her Dad was excellent at sensing danger. She got a vibe he was sensing it big time.

“Are any of the tattoos broken? Any of them!” Jun Hee’s voice almost broke on the last words.

“Yes.”

“Oh shit, shit, shit.” Jun Hee chanted. “Stupid cat. Stupid cat. Take your dead body and get out of here.”

“He’s not dead,” Nessa said. “And I’m sorry but I didn’t recognize this,” she pointed at the black SUV. “You always drive the dark green CRV with Colorado plates. The lights were in our eyes, then you got out holding a ball of battle magic.

He squirmed under her hand. “The Tahoe is a loaner. My car is in the shop. I was worried.”

“About me? You don’t even like me.”

Jun Hee snorted.

Pim jumped to attention, his back arched, hissing.

“What...” she started to say. Then she saw it.

A dense black shadow was crawling up the ramp from the floor below.

Jun Hee sucked in a breath. “You need to run.”

“It’s coming for us?”

“Me. Us. Moot point right now.”

She grabbed his arm, jerking him with a strength born of panic. “Dad, to me!”

They ran behind her father’s car, the silver crown already in her other hand. “Hold Roland with one hand and me with the other. Jun Hee, be ready. Pim!”

But Pim was already at her feet, morphing back to his feline form.

She slipped the Faerie Crown on, picturing the field of sunflowers she’d seen the first time she crossed the Portal.

The crown was her legacy from the Queen of Air. A Portal Key to anywhere in Faerie. The problem was it could only open to a place she’d seen. And she’d only been in the field of sunflowers and the Queen of Air’s palace. That was a limited geography.

The doorway opened and the scent of faerie washed over them.

Jun Hee tried to back away. “Oh, no, no, no. Not there!”

“Yes, here.” She kicked him through the gate unceremoniously with a foot to his butt.

He lurched through.

The shadow was almost upon them as her father hauled Roland and himself across.

What was inside the shadow? Demons? Monsters?

She fell more than jumped through, Pim waiting until the last possible moment to guard her back.

As the Portal phased into nothing, she saw a woman's face. The eyes almost as black as her own, the woman's mouth wide as she screamed like a banshee. A wild nest of white hair stuck out on all sides. Her hands were reaching, the nails long and knotted like a corpse.

And suddenly it was sunshine and sunflowers. The smell of Christmas: pine, cinnamon, ginger.

Her dad looked around. "Where are we?"

"Fairie."

He made a face. "I thought a Portal to Faerie would be much cooler."

"Jeezus, Dad," Nessa moaned. "I'm not Dr. Strange!"

Jun Hee banged the ground with one fist. "We're in Faerie aren't we." He didn't wait for an answer. The smell alone gave it away. "I hate this place."

Nessa pointed to where the Portal had been. "Wanna' go back?"

He didn't answer, settling for an venomous glare.

"What were you even doing at the garage? How could you find me?" Nessa had a sudden flashback to last week. "Oh my God, Jun Hee, did you put another tracker in my backpack?"

He looked defensive. "No...yes...maybe."

"Jun Hee!"

"Tracker?" Her dad closed the distance between them. "Tracker?" he said more stridently. "Is this jerk stalking you? Are you stalking my daughter?"

Jun Hee put up both hands. "No, no. No way.

"Pim!" her dad shouted. "Claws!"

Pim somersaulted into his werecat form. He slunk between Jun Hee and her dad, his long tail lashing. He didn't need much encouragement. Pim did not like Jun Hee.

Jun Hee eyed the werecat warily. "Not a stalker. No how. No way."

"But you did put a tracker in my backpack!" Nessa pointed out, wagging a finger at him.

Last week she and Jun Hee had been working the cursed sword case, trying to find Tommy Baptiste a. Nessa had been up to her eyeballs in zombies and warlocks and Jun Hee had suddenly shown up out of the blue. Nessa had gotten him to admit he'd planted a miniature location tracker on her.

“The sword was bad news. Bodies getting turning d up all over the South Bay. I was worried, I told you. And what was the thanks I got? You dumped me in Faerie, tied up like a side of beef.”

He looked at Roland who had given up struggling and was lying quietly, his eyes darting back and forth between them.

His eyes widened. “Oh my god, you’re doing it again, aren’t you? What did this poor guy do? And just who are you,” he demanded, pointing at her dad. “Why are you helping Nessa kidnap this man.”

Her dad looked down his nose at Jun Hee. The bounty hunter was still kneeling in the dirt. “Exactly what a stalker would ask.”

Jun Hee was getting red in the face. “I’m not a stalker.”

Her father wagged a finger at him. “That’s what they all say.”

Nessa turned her backpack upside down, emptying everything out. Jun Hee reached to snatch a little black ball as it fell, tucking it in his pocket.

“God damn it, Jun Hee you don’t even like me. What’s the real reason you’re following me and my cat?”

Pim growled and Jun Hee flinched. Werecat Pim had a scary growl.

When he didn’t answer Nessa rolled her eyes. “You know what? I don’t care. I need to dump this guy and get back to the real world. Who was the shadow woman and is she going to be there when I go back?”

Jun Hee sneered at her. “Nothing would have happened if your stupid cat hadn’t broken one of the amulets.”

“The amulets are embedded inside the tattoos? Wow. Who are the amulets hiding you from?” Nessa had a lot of experience with amulets as well as hiding.

“A shaman taken over by a demon. It’s a Korean thing. Not really your business.”

Nessa put her hands on her hips. “It is when you Korean thing attacks us.”

Her dad adopted the same pose. “Are you saying if we go back to the garage, the thing won’t be waiting for us?”

Jun Hee frowned. “Give it a few minutes. She’s not looking for you anyway.”

“Why is this particular shaman looking for *you*?”

“Not relevant,” he said in a tone signaling the conversation was at an end.

Roland gave a muffled choking sound.

Nessa had forgotten all about him. Dang. Her plan hadn't included all of them ending up in Faerie. Shrugging out of her backpack, she dropped to the ground scrounging inside.

"We just have to close your amulet again, right?"

Still looking grumpy, Jun Hee nodded.

She held up the black Sharpie. "Will this work?"

Her dad shot her a wide smile, "That's my girl, always thinking on her feet."

"It should," Jun Hee agreed. "I need to say the spell as you close the sigil."

Her dad had brought the first aid kit as well. She spread the anti-bacterial ointment over the deep tears in his skin, adding sticky bandages like butterfly stitches to the parts of the tattoo she didn't have to mend.

As she worked, her dad walked up the wide, dirt path to the ornate Portal gate stood in the middle of the road between the vast fields of sunflowers.

"Pim, stay with him," she asked the cat.

He growled. No doubt saying, "Your dad is on his own."

"Please, Pim? Dad," she called.

He turned.

"This is my fairies' land. With them gone, who knows what's prowling around. Be alert."

"Watch out for the giant kangaroo rats!" Jun Hee hollered shooting Nessa an evil glare.

Nessa flushed. She'd stashed Jun Hee in Faerie to keep him from interfering in her secret plan to hand over the Sword of Eternal Blood to Baron Samedi instead of returning it. The sword, she'd learned, might be able to break the curse tying her to Frank, the Fallen Angel. Before giving it to the Loa of the Dead, she'd had her fairies put a tracking spell on it. While stuck here, Jun Hee encountered the evil kangaroo rats. A whole gang of them.

Dad gave her a cheerful wave. If only she had a house or knew where the fairies lived her dad could hide out from Belencourt here. The demon would never think of searching Faerie.

Jun Hee craned his head around trying to see the damage to his back. "Am I going to need stitches?"

She looked at his back critically, "No. Good thing you were wearing this leather bomber jacket otherwise..."

"I like this jacket. Stupid cat."

They heard Pim s hiss all the way from where her dad was walking.

“Better watch what you say about my cat.”

The first aid kit had a tube of super glue. Fast-drying glue was a good emergency tool for closing wounds quickly. Nessa would be able to close the tears fully before re-drawing the tattoo. Positioning the glue carefully she squeezed it over his skin.

Jun Hee hissed.

“Stings?”

“I’m fine,” he said through clenched teeth.

Once the glue was set, she popped the top off the marking pen.

“Ready?”

He nodded.

“Starting.”

Nessa began carefully re-drawing the thick broken lines as Jun Hee chanted. Their power resonated in the air, creating wavy lines of red, yellow, and purple around the amulets on Jun Hee’s back.

When they’d finished, Jun Hee’s shoulders sagged. He hung his head, breathing in short gasps.

“Are you okay?”

He held up a hand, signaling he needed a minute.

“Dad!” she called. “We need to get back.”

He waved, jogging over.

“Jun Hee, are you good to go?”

The bounty hunter gave a curt nod, getting to his feet.

Nessa pictured the garage, her dad’s Volvo with the trunk open, the black sedan with its LED lights shining brightly. The Portal opened silently.

She motioned for the men to step through.

When they were gone, she shut the Portal. The less her dad knew about the situation the better. The disinterest of the past few months was out of character for him. Despite his endless scams, he’d always made Nessa’s safety a priority. Always. There was more to his sudden disappearance and Barracuda’s debt than he was letting on.

She went to stand by Roland. “I could have materialized inside your Queen’s palace.”

She waited while the impact of those words sank in.

Chasing Oliver was outside his jurisdiction. Madame Valencia had said the Queen of Air was interested in maintaining the status quo. Status quo probably did not include sending your most valiant knight to interfere. Nessa was the one being sent under the radar to help the Queen of Fire.

She fingered her silver crown. "I can still go to the palace. If I do, I doubt you'll be allowed to leave."

He glared, unable to answer one way or the other.

Overhead the sky darkened. Looking up, Nessa saw thunder clouds had appeared in the bright blue sky. As if on cue, the sunflowers turned their heads to the ground.

Pim growled, his fur standing straight up.

Stinging crackles of energy shot through the air.

"Is that you?"

Roland shook his head.

Kneeling by Roland, she tugged the cord away from his mouth. Instead of a wave of cursing or perhaps real curses, he said nothing, his eyes on the sky.

A flock of colorful birds sailed out of the storm clouds. Dozens and dozens of them. Big as in Jurassic Park big. Their feathers were the color of the rainbow, tails trailing behind them like enormous kite strings.

An airship of vast proportions roared out of the clouds. It consisted of a fancifully shaped airbag the size of a passenger jet with a gleaming gold and white structure suspended beneath. A flying palace.

A tingle of magic suffused Nessa's body from head to toe. She had no doubt the Queen of Air was aboard the ship.

"Well, this is my cue to get the heck out of here."

Praying the Portal would still open, she pictured the garage again. A whoosh of cold air slapped her in the face. She saw her father running across the cracked tarmac on the other side.

"You're on your own, buddy. *Modette!*" she shouted, holding out her hand.

The Fudo Cord spun Roland like a top as it unwound, flying to Nessa's hand at her command. She and Pim jumped through the Portal, instantly closing it behind her.

She counted to five before letting out the breath she'd been holding, wondering if the Queen's soldiers were right behind. She didn't think she'd broken any rules but who the heck knew what people in Fae thought?

The garage was blessedly free of screaming shadow shamans. Jun Hee's giant loaner SUV still had the engine running. Time was a funny thing between the Mortal World and Faerie. Sometimes it moved faster, other times it slowed down. She hoped they'd only been gone a few minutes.

"Gotta' go," she said running to her scooter. "Gotta' go now."

"Why are you in a hurry?"

"The Queen showed up in an airship with a flock of birds the size of your car. Best not to wait around. Just in case.

Jun Hee threw his bloody shirt and torn jacket in the car.

She popped open the scooter's basket for Pim, fastened her helmet, and revved the little engine.

"I have to get back to the hospital," she yelled as her dad started his car. "It's my best chance of finding the Soul Eater. Maybe Roland hid the camera there. Pim will help me look."

Jun Hee waved out the window. "I'll follow."

"Jun Hee, I don't need your help."

"Don't you?" he said ominously. He accelerated forward before spinning in a very cool drift move. "Which hospital am I following you to? Never mind, I'll figure it out."

She watched him speed down the ramp. "Dad, you need to get back to Aunt Emerald's. Belencourt is looking for the orb I found." She paused. "And...I'm guessing he's looking for you as well."

He said nothing.

"Are you going to explain?"

"Later."

Nessa sighed. One day she would get a straight answer from her dad. Not today maybe, but one day.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The call came in while she was still on the road to Inglewood.

“*Meowr?*” asked Pim over the noise of the engine.

Little scooters make a lot of noise at top speed.

Slowing for a traffic signal she told him, “Let’s wait until we park,” because she had a bad feeling. Given the way the day had gone, this wasn’t going to be good news.

And guess what? She was right. The video was attached to an email from [madamevalencia@madamevalencia.com](mailto:madamevalencia@madamevalencia.com).

Three high-pitched voices howled. Wings drooping, dresses in tatters, her fairies clung to each other in a pitiful little heap. A whip cracked off camera. They screamed louder.

The picture went dark followed by one line of text: ‘Get it done.’

Pim hissed batting at the screen with his paw. She’d unlatched his basket to share the phone screen with him.

Her stomach went all fluttery.

“Remind me again Pim why we got fairies?”

Pim jumped up to place his front paws on the handlebars. Leaning in, he rubbed his head on her chest

“We could walk away from Madame Bitchy Valencia. We could.” Even as she said it, she knew she wouldn’t. Pim did too judging by his expression.

Nessa had been the one to initiate this major change in her life. Saying sayonara to her dad’s scams. Leaving the vagabonding world of cheap motel rooms and short-term rentals. She liked living in Hermosa Beach. Going to school in Santa Monica. Having coffee with Ravi. Even with the constant threat of Frank hanging over her plus all the dangers of bounty hunting, it felt...right.

“I’m scared,” she admitted to Pim. “Are you scared?”

He nodded.

“We’ve been scared before. They’re counting on us.”

Pim growled his agreement, showing his teeth.

Revvng the scooter, they headed back to the hospital hoping to find Roland's cloak.

"Let's try to find his cloak. Roland's, I mean. He wasn't wearing it when he came up to dad and me."

He was linked to the Soul Eater. Nessa hoped to put together another tracking spell.

The fire trucks were gone. Three police cruisers remained parked near the emergency room entrance. As far as she could tell the ER was open again. They could hardly keep it closed. This was LA. ERs were busy all night, every night. Her dad hadn't shown up. Good. He must have taken her advice to go back to Aunt Emerald's.

"Let's stay together. We can start with the tree line and flower beds on the street side."

Her phone buzzed again. Hoping it was not more torture videos she tapped it on.

Ravi.

"I am at the hospital with a team. Where are you?"

"Pim and I are in the parking lot. We're hoping to find a cursed object the other Paladin was carrying. He didn't have it on him in the ER. Is Mrs. Banks still alive?"

"No, she passed about half an hour ago. But not from the Soul Eater. Her heart gave out. I was watching."

She looked at Pim. "Shoot. He won't come unless he doesn't know yet."

Pim trotted away nosing the bushes, signaling to keep looking.

'We're going to keep looking.'

"Got it. Come find me if you need something."

They searched the bushes, flower beds, and trees. First one side of the hospital grounds, then the other. Pim's sensitive nose finally sniffed it out buried around a spiky Ocotillo bush in a far corner almost to the service entrance. They were lucky enough of the stink spell remained. Folded inside the cloak was the cursed instant camera.

"Jackpot," she whooped, hugging Pim.

A rustling in the bushes made her stuff the camera down her shirt. She whirled only to see a little covey of quail burst out of the undergrowth cooing their distinctive song. They ran in circles around her and Pim, hopping and fluttering their wings.

"What the heck?"

The little fat ground birds, feathered crests bobbing, seemed delirious with happiness, nuzzling her ankles.

Her phone buzzed. Caller I.D. said Jun Hee.

“Now what?” she said shortly, staring at the quail.

Pim reached out to bat one on the head. Undeterred, it kept circling.

“Is that any way to answer your phone?”

“What is it Jun Hee.”

“I’m at the hospital. Did my quail find you?”

“They’re Jun Hee’s,” she told Pim. His tail shot up in a question mark. “Why do you have quail?”

“They’re spelled to track.”

“You have magic spells for...” she stared at the little flock, “for controlling birds?”

“Bird whisperer,” he said with a very un-Jun Hee laugh, as though he was having a good time. “As a bounty hunter the skill comes in handy, believe me. Eyes in the sky or on the ground.”

It would be invaluable, Nessa thought. Especially since he used to be based in Colorado with a lot of outdoors to cover.

One of the quail began jumping up and down, Nessa leaned over to pet it. The other quail scrambled to be near her hand like lead filings to a magnet.

“Where are you?” he asked.

She described their location. A minute later the tall form of Jun Hee jogged into view. He’d changed into a clean shirt and forest green hooded fleece jacket.

“You’re no good at tracking, right?” he said before Nessa had opened her mouth. “My birds can help. We need something from the old lady to start the spell.”

She held up both hands. “Wait, wait. Why are you here? This isn’t a Barracuda bounty.”

“Hey, I’m not only about money.”

Her doubt showed on her face. Pim sat back making the identical expression though Jun Hee couldn’t see.

“I’m not.”

Her expression didn’t change. Neither did Pim’s.

He rolled his eyes. “The Infernal Court has put a bounty on this guy. Dead or alive. My favorite kind.”

Money. Okay. Now she understood the good mood.

“I don’t know why *you’re* after him,” he said assessing her like he could divine the reason from her posture. “Isn’t a Soul Eater a little out of your league?”

Nessa bristled, giving him a hard stare. “How would you know what my league is? Seems I’ve done pretty good for Barracuda Bail Bonds so far. And who led the charge to rescue *you* from Baron Samedi?”

He put his hands out in a placating gesture. “Right, right. Sorry. I’m being a jerk.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “You are. As usual.”

“Ouch. Listen, let’s work together. You could use the money.” He tugged at the sleeve of her faded GAP sweatshirt. “If only to buy some new clothes.”

He wasn’t wrong about using some help. Time was running out. If the speed of the previous murders was any indication, the clock was ticking for the Soul Eater. The Fire Queen already knew about the plot. He could cut and run at any moment.

“My clothes are fine,” she sniffed. “Why are you using birds and not Chuck? He was your tracker on the cursed sword case.”

Chuck was a Lobo. A rare supernatural creature who turned from wolf to man instead of the other way around. Nessa had been an unwitting part of a murder ritual to free him from an evil Voodoo Priest.

Shortly thereafter, Baron Samedi, the Loa of the Dead, kidnapped Jun Hee and her boss, Roman Barracuda, for a fun evening of human sacrifice. Chuck had taken part in the rescue effort. He’d stuck around after the excitement, bonding with new friends. He’d struck up an unlikely friendship with Jun Hee. Unlikely in Nessa’s opinion because Jun Hee was generally a self-serving dick and Chuck was nice. Both as a wolf and human.

Jun Hee squatted down to pet the quail. “Chuck is helping Simone and Father Harry. They’re looking into those witch-brewed energy drinks making supernaturals go nuts.”

Simone was a young follower of Voodoo and the girl behind Chuck’s rescue. Father Harry was close to Simone and her family. He also helped save Nessa when Frank the Fallen Angel zeroed in on her one night.

Nessa wished the jovial Irish priest was helping *her*. Although he looked human, he was either half or a full angel. She could use his magical muscle against the Soul Eater.

“I thought the Infernal Court put a stop to those drinks.”

“Still around apparently.”

The magically spiked drinks had emerged during the chase for the cursed Sword of Eternal Blood. A Zombie master discovered the drinks took his undead slaves from shambling walk to a bat-out-of-hell run. Fueled up on the potion, his zombies had come after Nessa and the sword.

Tonight, neither zombies nor evil energy drinks were the problem.

“So, quail,” she said raising an eyebrow.

“Quail,” he said firmly. “Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it as they say.”

“I’m pretty sure I can get some of Mrs. Banks’ clothing for whatever tracking spell you have planned. Mrs. Banks is the lady I was tracking. Only... won’t an object from her lead you, *er*, the birds, right back here?”

“Not if we work the spell right. Also, you have something of the Soul Eater’s, don’t you? I mean you found him once.”

The leather cord they’d used in their original tracking spell was back at her aunt’s. Putting her hand in her pocket, she pulled out the small blue stone left after the demon’s body dissolved. She showed it to Jun Hee.

“His?”

She nodded.

“That will be enough,” Jun Hee said after she explained how she found it. “The problem is we have to get into the hospital to get something from the victim.”

One of the quail fluttered up onto Pim’s back. Several others crowded around cooing. They seemed able to see her invisible Familiar.

Pim blinked at her.

She gently set the quail back on the ground and picked Pim up.

“I’ll tell Ravi. He can help if I have trouble getting in.”

“The Witch Cop is at the hospital?”

“Why wouldn’t he be? You said yourself the Infernal Court has put a bounty on the Soul Eater.”

“Yeah, I guess.” He didn’t look happy.

Probably worrying about not collecting the full bounty, Nessa thought.

Smothering a yawn, she walked back into the Emergency room. At the nurses’ desk, she identified herself as the granddaughter of Ruth Anne Banks. The shift had changed making this a different set of nurses.

Her dad was on his way, she explained. He worked nights and had to arrange for time off.

Nessa was never at a loss for a story. She’d had ample training from her father in concocting cover stories on the go.

The nurse checked with Admitting and told her in sorrowful tones explained her grandmother had passed away.

Nessa didn’t have to fake the tears. Hearing it from them and hearing it from Ravi were two different things. Breathing in the sterile smell of the hospital, she felt death was all too close. Poor lonely woman. With her lower lip trembling, she asked what happened next. Should she go wait for her dad outside? Nessa was hoping they would suggest she go up.

The nurse patted her hand. “She’s upstairs. Third floor. ICU. I’ll buzz you through.”

Nessa thanked the nurse, texting Ravi as she walked into the main lobby.

Ravi met her at the elevator. Dark and handsome with thick black hair he wore combed back. He came from money and always looked it. Even here in the middle of the night he had on a beautifully cut dark blue suit, creamy blue shirt, and intricately patterned tie.

“Hey, Ravi.”

“Hey, Nessa. Where’s Pim?”

She pointed by her left leg.

He leaned down, “Hey, Pim.”

Pim meowed a hello. He liked Ravi. They both did.

She explained quickly about Jun Hee’s plan to track the Soul Eater.

“I just need a piece of her clothing. Morbid as it sounds. I want to get this guy.”

“So do we. I’ll talk to the nurse. Who are you again?”

“I’m her granddaughter. Dad is supposedly on the way to start the paperwork and bringing fresh clothes for...for Mrs. Banks. God, I feel like such a ghoul.”

He put his hands on her shoulders. “You are not a ghoul. He’s a bad man.”

“My dad?” she said automatically then put her hand over her mouth.

He gave her an odd look. “No. The Soul Eater.

“Right, right,” she agreed. “Really bad. I tried to save her, Ravi. I tried hard.”

“Of course you did. Wait here, I’ll talk to the nurses.”

Ravi returned after only a few minutes with one of the nurses. She handed Nessa a paper bag.

“These are her things,” the nurse said with a sad smile.

“Not her handbag though, right? My dad will get that when he comes. Paperwork...I shouldn’t...” she let the sentence trail and sniffed wetly.

“No, not her bag. Your dad can get it when he comes up.”

After the nurse had gone, Nessa asked Ravi the all-important question. “What about CCTV?”

“We’ll scrub the feeds, no worries. The shadow spell the demon threw into the emergency room meant nothing got on camera, we’ve already checked. You were never here. Neither were we,” he gave her an enigmatic smile.

The elevator doors opened. She stepped in.

“Let me know how the hunt goes or if you need back-up. The Court wants this guy big time.”

She nodded her thanks.

Outside, she hurried back to Jun Hee’s car.

The quail were clustered in a large steel cage in the back of the massive SUV. They left off pecking at seeds to coo and flutter their wings when Nessa appeared. They must still be tuned into her wavelength.

Jun Hee took the clothing, setting it aside. Whipping off a canvas cover next to the birds’ cage, he revealed a low wooden platform about two feet square, covered in gravel. He sat on the tailgate and immediately began setting out shiny white stones in patterns on the gravel.

After several patterns had taken shape, Nessa leaned close to Pim. “Chinese characters?” He nodded.

“Is your cat here?” Jun Hee asked without looking away from the stones.

“Yeah.”

“He’ll scare my birds.”

“He’s invisible.”

“They’ll smell him.”

“Birds don't smell stuff.”

“How do you know?”

“Summer zoo camp, sixth grade.”

A petting zoo in Grandma Hattie’s little hometown but it still counted as a zoo.

“Don’t let him eat my birds.”

Pim gave her a hurt look. The only thing Pim was interested in hunting were threats to his mistress.

“My cat wants you to know he has standards.”

Jun Hee gave a derisive snort before holding out his hand. “Give me her stuff.”

She pulled out the dress and a short cardigan. They smelled like cedar. Poor woman.

Jun Hee put them in an insulated metal box. Going to the back seat he hauled out a canvas duffel bag. Rummaging through it, he took out a small black candle and a lighter. Setting those aside, he far more carefully removed several individual bleached canvas bags no larger than his hand. Each bag was covered with symbols very much like the tattoos on Jun Hee’s back.

Pim and Nessa exchanged glances.

Inside every bag was a ceramic container. Only roughly glazed like it was hand thrown on a potter’s wheel. Jun Hee took pinches of powder from each container, sprinkling it over the clothing. After replacing the containers in their bag and the bags in the duffel and the duffel in the back seat, he held out his hand again. “Now the jewel.”

She handed the small blue jewel over.

He dropped it in the box.

Leaving the car, he moved the box closer to the retaining wall separating the parking area from the hospital landscaping. Pim and Nessa trailed behind. They were in a far corner of the lot, a blind spot for the CCTV, Jun Hee assured her.

Flicking a lighter from his pocket, he lit the black candle. Nessa took the lighter from him so he could pick up the metal lid of the box. Dropping the candle inside he flung the lid on top as fire whooshed up.

Nessa and Pim jumped back from the flare of heat.

The box rumbled and shook. Jun Hee held it down, chanting in what Nessa thought was Korean. She and Pim liked Asian dramas, she could recognize Mandarin, Korean, and Japanese.

Once the box quieted, he cautiously lifted the lid to peer inside.

Not a puff of smoke came out. Magic indeed.

With a nod of satisfaction, Jun Hee carried the box back to the car. Setting the lid aside.

Nessa looked inside the box to see the clothing had been reduced to a pile of white ash.

The jewel as well it appeared.

Gathering the ashes with a wooden scoop, he spread them carefully over the Chinese characters.

The white stones began to glow dully.

Nessa stayed quiet feeling the magic circling Jun Hee. The low-pitched buzz of energy was unlike anything she'd felt from her or her dad's spells. A *thump, thump, thump* resonated in her chest like she was sitting too close to a bass speaker.

Pim's fur slowly began to stand on end. His ears twitched forward and back, searching for a signal. Abruptly he jumped off his perch on the tailgate and padded away.

The stones burst into a bright white light and the ash rose in a tiny whirlwind, swirling in place.

Still chanting, Jun Hee held his hand over the whirlwind. It lifted until the ashes nearly touched his palm. He moved his hand, taking the ash with it. A hushed phrase made Nessa catch her breath. The ash fell onto the quail.

The little birds perked up their heads, topknots quivering. They gave a collective shake of their feathers and looked at Jun Hee.

He let out a breath.

"Done."

Pim yowled a warning. Not just any warning, a special warning.

Oh hell no. Nessa looked at the ground. A little spider web of shadows had begun to spread out.

"How strong was that spell?" Nessa squeaked, zipping open her backpack and pulling out the bag of salt and container of saltwater.

"Why?" said Jun Hee, breathless after expending so much energy on the spell.

Nessa squirted the web of shadows with saltwater from the sports bottle she always kept filled. Saltwater would only slow them down. She needed to get behind a protection circle.

She ran around the SUV, laying a circle of salt.

“Why? I ask again.” He started to stand.

She shouted, “Stay inside the circle.”

The Sniffers began to reform. Pim dashed over, jumping inside the ring of salt with her.

She closed the circle with a mound of salt. On top of the mound she wrote a rune of un-seeing. She activated it with her will and some spit. No time for blood. The shadows were swarming nearer the car, more than she’d seen in a long time.

Frank always had his Sniffers out, smelling for magic. Looking for witches. Or more specifically one witch. Nessa. All magic had an individual signature if one knew how to find it. Frank knew.

Nessa’s amulets protected her from the Sniffers, blurring her witchy scent. If she was in the vicinity of a large outpouring of magic, there was always the danger Frank’s minions would sense it. If she hesitated, he might take notice and choose to appear. Game over if that happened. Sniffers couldn’t see. Frank could. He’d know her actual location.

Pim jumped into her arms and together they scanned the area. The shadow of wings passed overhead. Nessa held her breath, heart pounding.

“Nessa...”

“*Shhh*, don’t say my name.”

The winged shadow crossed once more before blowing away in the wind along with the web of Sniffers.

For a moment the world blurred. A roaring in her ears drowned out everything else. She felt herself sway. Everything went a bit hazy. The first thing she felt as the world came back into focus was rumbling purrs vibrating in her chest. Pim’s furry head was under her chin as his paws kneaded her shirt. His bond reached into her laboring chest and loosened the knot of fear.

Her head, she realized was on someone’s lap. She was curled up, half in and half out of the SUV. Looking up she saw Jun Hee staring down at her.

“What the hell was that about?” he asked.

Oh, spit.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The covey of quail ran back and forth on the dashboard, pecking at the windshield left or right depending on which way the magical tether led. Crests bobbing, the little birds kept knocking each other off in their excitement to be part of the action. Nessa was weaving from side to side, catching them before they hit the floor.

Jun Hee had to push the birds over to see the street around their plump little bodies.

His tracking spell had worked. Or they hoped it had. They were heading back in the direction of Boyle Heights. Boyle Heights must mean Evergreen.

They stopped at a McDonald's drive-thru on the way. Parking to wolf down burgers, fries, and large soft drinks. Pim wanted chicken nuggets, but Nessa pointed at the Quail and cringed. Getting her point, he opted for a fish sandwich.

Nessa was ragged after all the magic she'd used today. Jun Hee wasn't feeling much better. Magic doesn't come for free. There's always a price.

She fed the quail tiny bites of French fries.

"How did you get these guys?" Nessa asked.

"Raised them from the egg, wanted them to imprint on me. They're all male. Otherwise, I'd be overflowing in quails."

He'd wanted to know what the salt circle was all about. She told him the same story she'd told Ravi when he'd seen Frank materialize at the Furrries Convention. Her mother had been under a curse by a demon and the demon wanted a matched set. Jun Hee accepted it. Ravi had too. Who's going to believe you're being chased by a Fallen Angel? Even in their world it sounded sort of preposterous.

"Family, right?" he said shaking his head. "Always dumping their curses on you."

She wondered if he was talking about the tattoo amulets protecting him against the shadow creature. He'd said it was a Shaman thing. In Korea, Shamans were usually women. Maybe his mom never earned the Mother-of-the-Year award either.

Sheet lightning across the sky. The storm clouds that had been following in their wake were now towering thunderheads. Thunder rumbled as flashes of lightning lit the night.

“Are you calling them?” Jun Hee pointed at the sky.

She shook her head.

Jun Hee watched the quail as he inched the car along the perimeter of the cemetery, block by block. Far from the main entrance and by what looked like an entirely separate structure they jumped, fluttering their wings while pecking wildly at the windshield.

Jun Hee and Nessa looked dubiously at the chain-link fence surrounding the front of the property.

“Here?” he asked them.

Their little warbling calls rose insistently.

“I’ll go look,” she told him, unbuckling the seat belt.

Jun Hee had a hard time keeping the birds inside and it took some quick maneuvering for Nessa to get out, Pim just ahead of her. The air had the odd metallic smell of an impending storm. She shivered, half from the nighttime chill and half from a feeling this could all go very wrong.

A rusty sign around one corner of the fence said *County Crematorium*.

Nessa shivered again.

Thumbing her phone, she brought up the website from yesterday. Reading through she understood the connection. Back at the car she motioned for Jun Hee to lower the window a little.

“The county bought this land from the cemetery.” She pointed at the building. “That’s the crematorium. Next door is the old Potter’s Field and some other gravesites were included in the property sale. They sort of all bleed into one another.”

Jun Hee grimaced.

“Here?” he asked the birds again. “For sure?”

They jumped and fluttered.

Pim gave a meow of displeasure, his fur already beginning to stand on end. There was so much unresolved spiritual energy floating around it didn’t take a medium to feel it.

Nessa peered into the darkness. Not many free-floating spirits, at least out here. They’d be further inside. Held in check by the fence. This facility had a full wall around it. Walls are important in graveyards to contain restless spirits. Generally, they could not cross thresholds beyond where they died or where their body was laid to rest. One reason so many spirits lost

souls were trapped in houses, buildings, and gardens. Their bodies had never been found. The key to containment was the wall should be complete, preferably with a gate.

Jun Hee moved a little farther up the street to park the car. Nessa hadn't seen any CCTV mounted on the building, which didn't mean there was no security. Break-ins at crematoriums were not unheard of. Spell Brokers routinely sold corpse powder obtained illegally from crematoriums through theft or unscrupulous morticians.

Human ashes had a terrifying ability to boost dark spells. Morbid as the thought was, the brokers' service meant fewer dark magic practitioners murdered innocent humans to obtain the ash.

Before climbing the fence, they unloaded her scooter. Fiona had driven off several times leaving Nessa stranded in the middle of an apprehension. She was taking no chances with Jun Hee. He was a 'me first' kind of guy.

Winding her hexed chain through the spokes of the tires, she set the locking spells in place. It should be fine, even in plain sight.

Jun Hee gave her an old towel and a boost to start her climb over the chain-link fence. She threw the towel across the pointy tops of the wire, heaved herself over, then half fell/half jumped down. She dusted herself off. Not the most graceful landing but no serious injuries so two thumbs up.

The quail were small enough to wriggle through the gaps. They swarmed around her feet, puffing their feathers back in place and pecking at the dirt. Jun Hee made the climb easily, hopping over in impressive style. Pim brought up the rear, clearing the fence in a running jump and some nimble paw-work.

Cooing in excitement, the covey scurried purposefully into the graveyard as soon as Jun Hee landed. Pim hightailed it after with Nessa close behind. A map of of the entire cemetery including the crematorium glowed on her phone screen.

According to the diagram, the birds were heading to the Potter's Field.

Traditionally, a Potter's Field was a dumping ground for bodies too poor to pay for a real burial. The website said bodies had been laid on top of bodies. Even now they had never been cleared away.

Holy Poltergeist.

The quail stopped at the boundary of the unmarked field. They made little darting runs, hesitating to cross it.

Pim wound in and out of her legs, a growl rumbling in his chest. Her toes were cold. So was the rest of her. Nessa remembered the skeletal hands reaching up out of the grave the first time she and the Soul Eater crossed paths.

“Guess you should know. The Soul Eater can manipulate corpses.”

Jun Hee rounded on her. “You are kidding me?”

“Nope.”

He looked out over the barren field. “Oh man,” he moaned. “I hate dead things. Hate them!”

“Do we have to cross here?” she pointed with her chin; her hands thrust in her pockets against the chill. “Can’t we go into the cemetery and then around somehow? Climb back in?”

The field was shaped like a giant rectangle, it seemed possible.

“Not if we want to catch him in the act. Look. Someone is standing over there. On the other side of the field. Near those gravestones. What does your map say?”

She squinted at the phone, sliding the map around with a finger. “Um, Japanese graveyard, I think. Old. Dating back over a hundred years.”

Jun Hee gave her a puzzled look. “Why would they have a Japanese graveyard here?”

“It says in the notes this is one of the few old graveyards that accepted other ethnicities besides white people. But they buried them together. Like the Japanese were buried all together and stuff.”

Looking up from her phone she searched for the figure Jun Hee had seen. She spied not one, but two people now. Too far away for her to make out any details. He had good eyes.

Jun Hee spoke in Korean to the quail. They chirped and cooed back at him.

“They say we have to go this way.” He pointed directly across the field.

“Crap.”

Pim growled, his back arched.

Nessa ran a hand along his spine. “Not good, I know.”

Jun Hee snapped his fingers. “I’ll have the quail follow me.”

They lined up behind him like little soldiers.

“Maybe nothing will happen?” Nessa said hopefully.

Jun Hee snorted. “Yeah right. With a whole field of skeletons in front of us? What world do you live in?”

As soon as Jun Hee set one foot off the path, a skeletal hand thrust up out of the dirt reaching for him. Jumping to one side, he took off sprinting like a thoroughbred, the birds on his heels.

Pim howled, transforming into his werecat form.

Nessa flicked out her police baton.

They ran.

Arms, heads, even whole torsos exploded from the dirt on all sides turning the Potter’s Field into a gauntlet of the dead.

Nessa jumped, dancing forward, back, left, and right like she was in some macabre version of the Hokey Pokey.

“Guess your guy knows we’re here,” Jun Hee shouted as he dove into a somersault after an entire skeleton, shreds of clothes still clinging to it, jumped at him from a shallow grave.

“No shit Sherlock,” Nessa wheezed.

He was back on his feet in a cool gymnastics move, never losing his forward momentum.

The quail maintained their tight, feathery line, weaving expertly in and out of the thrusting hands, cooing loudly.

Nessa was neither as coordinated as Jun Hee nor as fast as the quail. A second too slow dodging to the left and a hand grabbed her ankle.

Pim pounced, breaking it at the wrist with a snap of his jaws. The fingers kept their hold even when she left the arm behind. The delay was only seconds, but it was enough time for the dead to close in.

A ring of bony arms and grasping hands thrust up from the dirt surrounding her. A skull popped up in her path, jaw hanging open as if it was screaming. She tripped over it, falling into an entire torso. Her impact scattered the brittle bones. A forest of arms popped up reaching for her.

She smacked the bones left and right. Not fast enough. More hands shot up from the ground, showering her with a rain of dirt and stones. Bony fingers wrapped around first one, then her other arm jerking her hands to her sides.

Pim leaped to help, grabbing one of the bony arms in his teeth. He executed a somersault in midair. The bone snapped freeing her hand with the baton. She smacked at the other skeletons holding her wrist swearing as she managed to whack herself in the process. The wrist cracked and she was free. Or sort of.

As she got back on her feet, two bony hands burst from the dirt grabbing at her as she tried to jump away. Their finger bones tangled in her shoelaces. She lost her balance falling heavily to her knees.

Pim jumped, cracking bones with every snap of his powerful jaws. The skeletons clutched at his paws and tail. He howled, biting and clawing through them until he'd freed Nessa.

Bruised and battered, she pulled herself up. The bony hands still clutched her shoes. Enough.

Laying a finger on her summoning belt, she called the lightning. She'd held it ready since they scaled the wall, waiting in case they were observed.

No point in trying to keep a low profile now.

"Pim to me!"

He fought his way to her, pulling bony hands with him through the dirt.

"Lightning," she warned.

The true name of the lightning singed her lips as she shouted it to the wind. The stormy weather was an unexpected bonus tonight. The chaotic nature of the atmosphere made it eager to transform. A blinding flash illuminated the sky. She saw the bolt zigzag inside a thunder cloud. She pulled it to her, aiming the bolt nearly at her feet.

Instead of the strike of pure white light she was used to, the bolt burst into flame leaving a blazing trail of red in its wake.

Fire? What was fire doing riding her lightning strike? She had no power over fire. None at all.

The bolt struck the ground incinerating the skeletons and leaving a smoking crater in a circle dangerously close to her and Pim.

Pim gave her an accusing stare.

"Sorry."

Only one skeletal hand remained stubbornly clutching her ankle. Together she and Pim jumped over the smoking crater and ran.

After only a few steps, four complete skeletons burst out of the dirt, blocking their way. Swerving she wove from side to side, trying to get out of their path. She swore as they matched her movements exactly. How could they know where she was when they had no eyes?

She brought her baton up and Pim crouched, ready to spring as they lunged forward, arms outstretched.

A ball of blue energy shot across the field. It exploded the skeletons before smacking into Nessa with the force of a baseball bat. Head over heels, she rolled in the dirt only stopping when she smacked into the wall of the crematorium.

She looked up just in time to blearily see Jun Hee, hands together, sending another ball of energy flying her way.

She covered her head with her hands and buried her face in the dirt. Searing energy exploded across her back. She felt the burn of its passing right through her clothes. A heartbeat later clods of dirt, stones, and shards of bones rained down.

“Ow,” she moaned. “I think I broke my butt.”

Pim tugged her jacket, urging her to get up.

Breathing heavily, she staggered to her feet, sidestepping a long bony arm pulling itself across the ground in her direction.

Jun Hee waved both hands in a ‘come here’ gesture.

With Pim running interference, she reached Jun Hee in a wobbling run. Her tailbone throbbing in pain.

The quail crowded around her cheeping a welcome and pecking furiously at the bony hand clutching her leg.

Pim yowled at Jun Hee, baring his fangs.

“What?” Jun Hee said just as fiercely. “I was helping!”

“You,” she gasped, trying to catch her breath, “broke...” gasp, “my butt.”

“Sorry,” Jun Hee said not sounding sorry at all.

“Are...” gasp, “you laughing?”

The bony hand began inching its way up her calf.

She pointed. “Help.”

Jun Hee grabbed the bones and yanked, nearly pulling Nessa off her feet. Holding the arm in one hand Jun Hee stamped on the wriggling fingers with his boots saying, "That was like a freaking minefield of the undead. Jesus, what is wrong with L.A.?"

"I thought you... left Colorado because," she panted, "because it was boring," she panted.

"At the moment, boring is looking pretty attractive."

Nessa could not disagree.

"What was with the flaming lightning bolt?" he asked, still stomping on the wriggling finger bones. "It was awesome."

"Not me."

She held up a hand, signaling him to wait. Nessa leaned over, her hands on her knees. Her head was still throbbing from the impact of Jun Hee's energy bolt. Her lungs burned, her arms and legs ached from being grabbed by skeletal hands and her tail bone felt like it really was cracked.

They were on a narrow path of paving stones. Just Jun Hee, Pim, her, and the quail. Where were the hands? And all the other bony bits? She looked around. The bones were on the side facing them in the Potter's Field. There they remained, waving back and forth like a grotesque garden of flowers in the wind.

Nessa looked from the skeletons to where she and Jun Hee stood.

"Why did they stop?"

Jun Hee swung his arms to encompass the area behind them. "This strip of land must mark the end of the Potter's Field and the beginning of the Japanese cemetery. No bones in this area. Or at least no bones willing to obey the Soul Eater's commands. I don't think he can compel the skeletons far from their burial place. Watch."

He moved to the edge of the path and lifted one boot, holding it above the nearest hand. The fingers inched up out of the dirt to the elbow trying to reach him. Shifting his foot back; the bones stayed where they were. The fingers grasping at empty space.

Pim arched his back and hissed.

"See? This far and no farther."

She straightened up. "About the lightning. I did call it." She held up two fingers entwined. "The atmosphere and I are like this. I understand lightning. I've called it many times. Electric"al current fuels lightning, not fire. There was real fire piggybacking on my strike."

"Ideas?" asked Jun Hee.

"None," she answered truthfully.

Crouching low with the quail running between their feet, they jogged to the cover of a large marble memorial a few yards away

In front of the memorial was a mound of clothing. Nessa flicked on her cell phone flashlight. Piles of gray ash surrounded the clothes.

"Oh shit!" Jun Hee hissed, scrambling away. "Is this corpse powder? Oh man, I touched it." He made a face hastily wiping his hands on his trousers. He spoke to the quail in Korean. They hurriedly backed away at his command.

Nessa poked at the pile of clothing. "Look," she pointed. "That's a man's kimono, right?"

Jun Hee nodded, "Yeah, yeah, you're right. Another victim I guess."

A scream rent the air.

Nessa jumped, pulling the Fudo Cord off her waist.

Jun Hee spoke a word of power to summon another ball of blue energy.

The sound of a second scream was abruptly cut off.

Nessa had been around enough violence to understand what the sound meant.

Jun Hee peered into the darkness on one side of the memorial. Nessa crept around the other side until she could see, too.

One figure lay prone on the ground. Another stood over it, surrounded by a sickly green light.

The Fudo Cord began to vibrate.

"Now you wake up?" she whispered. "Reanimated corpses aren't enough of a trigger?"

The glowing green figure must be Oliver, the Soul Eater. The cord was already eager to be set free. This time she was going to get him. All she needed was to aim the Fudo Cord in his direction. She stood upright, pulling her arm back.

Taking Nessa's movement as a signal to attack, Jun Hee jumped out from behind the memorial at the same time.

"No, wait," she yelled.

He didn't wait. He heaved an energy ball before Nessa could stop him.

The blue light bounced harmlessly off the standing figure. It did, however, get his attention.

The sorcerer looked at them, his eyes blazing like headlights.

Great.

A volley of fireballs materialized in a roar of white-hot flames. With both hands, he hurled them across the graveyard.

Nessa and Jun Hee flung themselves on the ground behind the memorial.

Pim yowled at Jun Hee as Nessa cursed the other bounty hunter with every expletive she could think of.

"Idiot! I have the only weapon that can catch this guy. Stay out of the way of my god damn Fudo Cord."

"Oops," he said, squeezing closer to Nessa as fireballs smashed the roof off the memorial. "At least now we know who's a Fire Elemental," Jun Hee shouted above the noise.

Maybe. Oliver didn't conjure the fire on her lightning bolt. What would be the point? The fiery lightning had helped her, not the opposite.

Chunks of marble splintered off. Smacking them on the head.

"Awk," she squeaked covering her head with her arms. A few more hits and their hiding place would disappear.

Time for action. Nessa dropped one arm, laying a finger on the sigil for the whirlwind. As she began the summoning spell, she felt what could only be called a seismic shift in the atmosphere. A temblor of energy on the scale of an earthquake and the roar of a freight train.

Jun Hee looked at her.

"Not me."

And it wasn't. She hadn't even summoned the wind yet.

Above them, the thunder clouds trembled. Thunder rocked the ground. Something big was getting close. She felt the *otherness* of it with every fiber of her Air Elemental self. The clouds began to burn.

"Grab the quail," she shouted.

The little covey was packed together in a feathery ball behind the remains of the memorial

Jun Hee looked like he was going to protest. Nessa pointed up with her chin. Giant bursts of red, orange, and yellow illuminated the sky. Flares burst out of the atmosphere, reaching toward the ground like the skeletal hands from the Potter's Field.

Jun Hee's eyes widened. With a word, he called the quail. They ran to him without hesitation. He gathered them beneath his chest like a mother hen, digging his hands and feet into the dirt, tucking his chin into his chest.

Friend or foe, Nessa needed to grab Oliver before whatever was coming arrived.

She called the tempest by its name. And it answered. Dang, did it answer. The force of the summoning exploded above her feeding off the elemental energy flooding the night sky.

Instead of one funnel cloud, two, and then a *third* dropped so close Jun Hee yelped.

The tips danced wildly, hovering a few feet off the ground. Their force sucked up first the marble pieces of the memorial, then headstones, and finally stripped the grass and soil off the graves.

Nessa struggled to keep her feet as the pull of the wind did its best to yank her out of the cover of the shattered memorial. Her summoning would never directly attack her, but physics was physics. The funnel clouds were generating a terrifying amount of suction. Pim leaned his considerable werecat weight against her shins, helping to brace her.

Throwing all she had into the effort, she forced all three funnel clouds to touch the ground. They crashed together with a booming roar.

With both hands, she flung the whirlwinds at the Soul Eater.

He was ready. With arms crossed on his chest, the Soul Eater shouted a counterspell.

Nessa heard the hex clearly, even over the roar of the storms.

Fire erupted between them. A wall of flames. The heat blistered her cheeks. With every word of his spell, it rose higher until it crested like a tsunami. In a terrifying moment of realization, she knew he hoped the flames would consume her.

Air does not like to be stationery and tornadoes longed only to move. Nessa released the whirlwinds. They needed no urging. The funnel clouds surged into the flames, sweeping the wave up and into their vortex.

The tornadoes became suffused in fire. The oxygen feeding the flames.

A second protective barrier as tall as the first appeared in front of the Soul Eater.

Nessa sent the funnel clouds crashing into this new fiery wall only to watch them bounce off. Hauling them back, she flung them at the wall once again.

The same thing happened.

It was debatable how sentient the magic Nessa used was. She didn't think you could call it intelligent. Yet the forces she used sometimes behaved in strange and wonderful ways.

Without changing her spell, two of the whirlwinds veered off, one to either side. They kept tightly to the edge of the Soul Eater's wall of flame.

As she watched in fascination, the funnel clouds expanded until their edges joined, creating one massive storm with Soul Eater trapped in the middle. He pushed the scorching spell to burn hotter, higher. Not a good idea.

If you wanted chaos, then thermal energy was a storm's happy place. The storm fed the fire and the fire fed the storm.

Nessa saw the body of the dead man sucked up into the oxygen-fed inferno.

These were not spiritual flames. They were burning bright and unbearably hot. Dry grass caught and flared. Luckily for Inglewood, there was little vegetation in this part of the graveyard. If it jumped the cemetery fence the situation could escalate dramatically.

Unbidden, her mind flashed to a forest in flames. The day cruel men held her father hostage. Hurting him. Hurting her. They'd forced her to call the lightning again and again until the forest fires raged out of control destroying towns, homes, animals, and people. She'd taken her revenge against those men before the end of the day. Not one had survived.

She did not want to be the cause of another devastating fire. Running from the ruined memorial, she took up a stance as close to the flaming maelstrom as she could bear. Tightening her muscles and clenching her jaw, she banished those images.

"Focus," she told herself. "*This* spell. *This* place."

Within the chaos of the winds, a bubble of green light shone impossibly bright. The Soul Eater. The green light wavered, turning darker until it was black. Fire was not his only weapon. He had souls at his command.

The black bubble expanded. Like his fire spell, she could feel his magic from where she stood. Slimy and viscous. He let it leak through the barrier into the wild winds, infecting them like a virus. The storm winds darkened; veins of black magic begun to surge through the clouds. He was taking over her spell, using the energy of the souls he'd stolen.

A volley of dark sigils struggled through the chaos of the storm to hit Nessa like a punch in the stomach. They struck the ground around her in a shower of black ochre. As they hit, they transformed, pushing out multiple arms and legs and last of all a head.

A head with a human face.

Nessa gagged as bile clogged her throat.

She recognized the face of the paunchy man from Evergreen, his face twisted in terror. The others looked just as human, just as frightened.

Pim ran between Nessa and the creatures. He pounced onto the back of the closest one. Snatching it in his jaws, he shook it until it dissolved into black goo. He jumped to the next. As he shook it, the black blobs from the first oozed together reforming the original creature right down to the face. In seconds, the other reformed as well.

The black insect-like creatures surrounded Pim. Now it was their turn to pounce. They swarmed the werecat, merging their bodies into one goeey mass. They flowed over him like black tar, burying the werecat in a wave of muck.

Nessa had all she could do trying to hold the mega-storm in place. If she lost control, it could devastate the entire neighborhood. But this was Pim. She dropped her hold with one hand, keeping the other on the summoning belt.

Swinging her backpack around she ran to Pim, pulling out the liter bottle of heavily salted water. Saltwater negated spells. She poured the saltwater on the summonings reasoning if it worked on Sniffers it would work on these.

She was not wrong.

They pulled apart, reforming into a dozen creatures. They lifted their faces and screamed.

She sprinkled them with more saltwater. The goo bled away, the awful things screaming as they went. The human faces were the last to dissolve.

The image was going to haunt Nessa's nightmares for a long time.

Pim swayed unsteadily. His fur was standing on end like he'd stuck a paw in an electric socket. She couldn't pick him up or drag him away with only one hand. He weighed over seventy pounds as a werecat.

The funnel cloud had begun wriggling back and forth like a Rhumba dancer. She had to get her focus back on the matter at hand.

"Shake it off," she shouted. "Please Pim."

Shaking his head, he moved away from the storm, putting one paw ahead of the other with exaggerated care as though he wasn't quite sure where the ground was.

The flames in the funnel clouds flared brighter. Nessa jumped back from the heat. As she did, she saw the darkness within the storm double in size. The gooey creatures had just been a distraction.

The fire department and police must already be on their way. She had only minutes to get the situation under control.

She looked at Jun Hee straining to protect his little covey of quail. Frightened chirping echoed through the roar of the flames.

“Pim, stay here,” she ordered.

He gave her a dazed look, not quite able to shake off the aftereffects of the black blobs. They must have been infused with some sort of toxins to hit him so hard. He'd be okay. Pim was strong.

Not letting herself hesitate or think her decision through, she ran directly into the chaos of the flaming tornadoes.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Nessa threw herself into the insanity of the storm. For a paralyzing moment, the winds grabbed her with brutal force. There was a terrible sensation of flying into the air, spinning out of control. She couldn't speak. She couldn't breathe. The unbearable weight of the whirlwinds slammed into her.

In her head she heard her Grandmother Hattie's calm voice, "These are your storms, Vanessa. Your magic. They must obey. You own the wind, little girl."

'They must obey you.' Yes, they must. She held onto the words like a lifeline. Swallowing down the panic choking her, she said the true name of the storms three times in her mind.

The tumbling stopped so abruptly Nessa's neck snapped. 'That was going to hurt later,' she thought. 'So much.'

Panting, dry-mouthed and heart pounding, she saw she was suspended high above the ground. Chaos raged only a few feet from her. The winds roared in fury.

This was the eye of the storm. She'd caught the attention of the three tempests. Now she had to hold it.

"I am Vanessa Chevalier Scott," she shouted.

She placed her hand on her summoning belt, running her fingertip over the sigils for the whirlwinds.

She called out the true names of the storms. "I am Vanessa Chevalier Scott. You will obey me."

"Mistress..."

"Mistress..."

"Mistress..."

Three times the word was whispered in her ear.

"Obey," she said again.

And they did.

The chaotic whirlwind drew further away allowing entry of a gentle breeze. The breeze wrapped around her like a caress. She descended gently to the ground. Now she stood in her own safety bubble, clear and bright.

“Mistress,” the storms said this time speaking in one voice.

She motioned for the winds to part enough so she could see the Soul Eater inside his black bubble. He was only barely visible. His foul magic made him even darker than the black flames in the barrier.

The winds kept the flames away. The heat was another matter. Nessa had to shield her face with one hand. In the other, the Fudo Cord was bucking wildly, eager to attack.

“Let’s do it,” she told the cord. “*Tsukamaite!*”

The demon-binding cord flew from her grip so fast it scorched her palm. Straight and true as a javelin it flew only to bounce off the Soul Eater’s energy shield.

“No,” Nessa cried before calling it back.

Grabbing hold she spun it in a circle over her head flinging it again at the Soul Eater. “*Tsukamaite.*”

Once more the cord bounced off his shield returning on her command.

The dark bubble of black energy began to glow from within. It illuminated the Soul Eater. He’d tossed off his cloak, revealing a handsome young man. Fair-haired with a finely sculpted face. He looked like a young prince in a Renaissance painting. Except for the eyes. His eyes were as black as Nessa’s own.

He said something in a language Nessa didn’t understand and pointed. A blast of energy burst from his hand straight at her.

Nessa pushed the force of the storm in front of her.

His hex bounced off *her* shield now.

His features twisted and he bared his teeth at her.

The throbbing in Nessa’s head was escalating to a roar. This spell was sucking her dry. She’d never attempted to control three tornadoes while fighting a soul-sucking sorcerer. Their magical standoff couldn’t last. Even now she felt her power trembling with fatigue.

He looked beyond her, smiling. Pulling the darkness to him, he created a black glowing ball. The ball squirmed in his hands, arms and legs pushing against its skin. More of the gooey black fetches.

Why was he looking behind her?

Oh crap. Pim. Jun Hee. The quail.

He was going to hurt them.

Enough.

She'd been more panicked than angry at the start of the battle. Now she was mad. Nessa angry was a very different witch from Nessa frightened. Anger meant power thanks to long-dead mommy dearest.

If she unlocked the spiritual cage holding the Fallen Angel's dark magic, she could destroy the Soul Eater. Nessa felt it instinctively. Sorcery was no match for divinity. Even the Fallen Angel kind.

This was why the Queen of Fire had singled her out. Her soldiers had reported Nessa's display of power after the attack at the Queen of Air's palace. She'd flashed her wings in full display. Not too many earthly beings had wings. The Queen figured out Nessa wielded enough power to defeat the Soul Eater.

And she did, too. Except... using her angelic power held risks. Not only could she alert Frank to her location but she could lose control. It had happened before.

She would have to take the chance. The Soul Eater was not killing anyone else tonight.

In her mind's eye she pictured the iron cage where she kept the legacy of her mother's curse. Sensing her focus, the curse threw itself against the spiritual bars of its prison, demanding to be set free. She turned the key and opened the door a crack.

Anger blossomed rich in menace. Power quenched her thirst, filling all the empty exhausted spaces drained by the massive spell. She let it come. A pair of enormous inky black wings burst from her back. The feathers shimmered, iridescent. She swept them forward fanning the flames in the Soul Eater's barrier. She no longer felt the heat. She felt nothing except a glorious euphoria.

With a spell she did not even consciously realize she knew; Nessa willed her own barrage of flames into being. These were not hot. They were cold. Frighteningly, freezing cold as befitted a Fallen Angel's legacy. She hurled the icy black fire at the Soul Eater's barrier.

As she thought, sorcery was no match for divine magic. Her cold fire smothered his flames. The barrier turned to sparkling black ice before splintering into a million tiny shards. The wind took them, exposing the sorcerer within his protective bubble.

Moving his hands in an intricate gesture he conjured a spiky hex.

Spitting and sizzling the hex hurtled toward her. Instead of closing her wings to shield herself, she thrust both hands out.

The Soul Eater gave a cry of triumph.

Too soon.

Only inches from her, the hex abruptly slowed. It hovered for a heartbeat before coming into her outstretched hands as gently as a friendly puppy.

Nessa grasped it tightly. She whispered words that turned to frost as they left her tongue. The hex transformed from black to wintry white.

Every spell contains a tiny fragment of its maker. Part of the price magic demands. Skilled supernaturals can track a spell to its sender. Extraordinary supernaturals can capture the spell and send it rocketing back to the source. Cursed Nessa was extremely skillful.

A nudge from Nessa sent the hex speeding to its maker. At its core, this hex remained tied to Soul Eater. His barrier was created to keep others out, not contain his own magic. Otherwise, how could he fight? It barely slowed as it penetrated his barrier to shatter against the Soul Eater's chest.

Crystal ice spiders swarmed from the hex. For a moment they covered him entirely. The ice turned red as they ripped into the sorcerer's skin.

His arms flailed, wildly swatting at them. Flames sputtered from his fingertips like a lighter trying to catch the flint.

Spark, spark, spark.

At last the magic caught. Fire burst from his fingertips. Screaming in pain and rage he burned them. The fire dissolved the spiders into sticky silver puddles. The liquid clung to his body.

He screamed again, ripping at his shirt. The Soul Eater had created the spiders to secrete acid when they were destroyed. Unfortunately, he was not immune to his own spell. The acid ate into his flesh, leaving bloody red furrows up and down his chest and arms.

He was shrieking incoherently now. Soul Eaters probably had very few unnatural enemies. Failure was obviously a new emotion. He put his hand over his heart and pulled. Straining with effort, he wrenched forth a bright light. So bright Nessa had to squint to keep her eyes open.

The light expanded to fill the space between them. It pulsed, dividing into two halves. Those halves pulsed and split. Then again, and again. Within each of the lights, a shadow took form.

People?

No, not people, Nessa realized. Not in the living sense. Their despair struck Nessa like physical blows. These were the shades of men and women whose souls he had stolen. They wailed and cried. Beating at the air as if trying to escape their prison.

If the Soul Eater thought the shades could trap her in a web of desolation, he was mistaken. Frank the Fallen Angel was all about souls. Which meant so was Nessa when she was in this state.

She calmly sketched a glowing sigil in the air. When it was complete, she whispered a *word*. Soft and silky on her tongue. The sigil moved. It flexed and stretched as if it had been confined too long. Golden filaments spun out from its center to wrap around the shadow beings.

Screaming, struggling, flailing, they tried to escape.

“*Pax*,” Nessa said, almost hearing Frank’s voice in her head. “*Pax. In Pace. In Pace.*” Peace, she told them, be at rest.

All movement ceased.

“*Pax*,” she said softly again. “*Pace.*” Rest.

They went limp, collapsing into formless smudges wrapped in gold.

Nessa knew the instant they stopped fighting; she could absorb their energy. Take it back from the Soul Eater. Increase her own power tenfold. After all, Fallen lusted after souls. And here they were for the taking. Almost like a gift.

But she was not a Fallen. She was Vanessa Chevalier Scott. She had called the darkness to save souls, not steal them. Especially not these poor doomed men and women.

The Soul Eater howled. He was burned and bloody but not down yet.

He shouted a battle spell. The words turned into scythes as they left his mouth. The weapons flew across the space between them to cut away the golden threads. The bright lights faded to darkness taking the shadows with them.

Nessa twitched a finger. Now the scythes sped to her. She gathered them as if they were as harmless as dandelions in the wind. She flung them back at the Soul Eater.

They sliced into his protective bubble leaving jagged holes. Nessa had the satisfaction of seeing more blood run down his chest and face. His protective bubble flickered, energy dripping from it like the rivulets of blood seeping from his body.

Taking the Fudo Cord, she held it out.

The Soul Eater was frantically trying to craft a counterspell, pull more souls out of his bag of tricks. His power was waning. Nessa saw the souls were now struggling against him.

She no longer needed to touch the summoning belt to maintain control of the raging whirlwinds, not with so much power at her command. Holding out her palm, she called the lightning. It shot through the maelstrom to land in her outstretched hand. With only her will, she compressed it into a spitting ball of light.

She smiled as she threw it at the Soul Eater.

The lightning hit his wall like a shell from an artillery gun, shattering the final shreds of magic.

She hurled the Fudo Cord at the same time, "*Tsukamaitte!*"

His now pitiful defense was no match for the demon-hunting power of the cord. It shot straight and true wrapping the sorcerer in its embrace.

Abruptly the flames inside the whirlwinds sputtered. Like someone had turned off the fire faucet. In seconds they went out altogether.

The winds took the Soul Eater. He was powerless before them now. He tumbled wildly before soaring out of sight somewhere above Nessa's head.

Taking a calming breath, she focused on breaking the summoning. Sending the funnel clouds back to the sky.

But did she really want to?

"Look at the power you command," the dark curse breathed seductively in her ear. "Release the storms, let them run their course."

"What a sight to see," one part of her brain agreed, critically eyeing the raging mega-funnel cloud. It was a most excellent storm. She imagined the tornado sweeping over the city, sucking up cars, houses, whole buildings. The Soul Eater would be smashed to bloody pieces. So satisfying.

"Nessa, time to close the cage," said a cultured British voice in her head.

"Is it?" she asked.

“It certainly is,” said the voice calmly. “You are not your mother.”

His words were like a kick in the stomach. Her mother had doomed her to this curse out of jealousy. Greedy for the elemental power of the Chevaliers.

No, she was not her mother. She was a good witch. Her Grandmother’s granddaughter. She did not destroy innocent lives for fun.

Pim, because his was the voice of reason in her head at times like this, joined his strength to hers from outside the maelstrom. Together they grabbed hold of the Fallen’s power and forced it inch by screaming inch back into the cage. The power fought but her will was stronger. One day she might not have the strength to contain it. But today was not that day.

With a mental click, she locked the darkness away.

She still stood in the center of the storm. Without the boost of power from her curse, she felt her energy draining away. The pounding in her head, the trembling in her legs threatened to overwhelm her. She was so tired. Something sharp was poking her in both eyes. Gently fingering her eyelids, she swore as she swiped away two tiny, crumpled balls.

God dang it. She’d burned out her blue contacts again. Now anyone could see her inky black eyes.

The fires were gone but the whirlwinds must be divided and sent back into the atmosphere. Taking a firmer stance, she pictured gripping the three tornadoes in her mind and separating them.

They resisted.

She repeated the process. Pulling them apart in her mind.

Nope. If storms could enjoy themselves, these were having a high old time. They began to inch toward the other side of the graveyard.

“Stop right now,” she said to them very much like Pim in his sternest mental voice.

They didn’t stop.

Narrowing her eyes and clenching her stomach muscles she pictured yanking them apart. Once again, they resisted.

No. Not the storms. The storms were listening to her. Something else was in there with them. Teasing her. Not her magic. Another’s. Its sizzling touch was unlike anything Nessa had felt before. It didn’t feel inimical. Not demonic or dark. She didn’t know what it felt like.

The Soul Eater flew by spinning wildly, still caught in the grip of the whirlwinds.

Oops, she had forgotten him for a moment.

Her Grandmother Hattie had taught her a trick in case a spell was hijacked by someone else. One only to be used in emergencies. A hijacked mega-storm seemed like an emergency if there ever was one. She put a finger on the sigil for the tempest, running it oh-so-slowly counterclockwise. At the same time, she intoned the true name of the wind *backward*.

This spell would force the magic to reverse. Only the spell was affected, not time itself. Even Fallen Angels didn't have that sort of power.

Reluctantly it seemed, the massive funnel cloud returned to its position around the Soul Eater's formerly flaming barrier. There was no flame there anymore, the storm was only repeating its movements.

In a booming, ground-shaking rumble the storm split. Now, the three original funnel clouds danced around Nessa.

Repeating the reversing spell over and over, she walked between the raging storms, pushing them forward. Pim ran over to join her. The tips of the funnel clouds danced over the ground ripping deep trenches in the dirt.

They zigged and zagged coming nearer and nearer their point of origin, the broken memorial. She vaguely heard Jun Hee's voice. Why was he shouting? Forcing her concentration away from the spell, she saw he was being dragged across the dirt as the whirlwinds swirled at his feet. He was curled in a ball trying to protect the flock of birds.

Nessa ran to straddle him, knowing her presence would deflect the funnel clouds.

"Move back to the memorial," she shouted at him.

He dragged himself on his elbows to curl up next to the remains of the memorial.

Elemental lore says the winds may not attack the summoner. They came damn close this time, though. When the spinning vortexes were almost on top of her, the funnel clouds lifted. With a final blast of energy, they shot back into the sky.

Nessa looked up in time to see the Soul Eater fall to earth still wound in the Fudo Cord. She held her breath until he landed with a frighteningly loud *thump*.

Fingers crossed Soul Eaters were as difficult to kill as she'd been told. Had Madame Valencia said she wanted him dead or alive?

Dang.

With the storms gone, she could hear the sirens. Every first responder in the city must be on their way. Nessa knew she should go to the Paladin. Get him. Get Jun Hee. Get moving. Fast.

Knowing and doing were two very different things currently. She swayed as the world tilted one way and then another. Pim was by her side, back in feline form. He reared up, putting his front paws on her thighs. A wave of strength passed from him to her. Supporting her in any way possible was his duty. Poor guy, he couldn't have much more energy left than she did.

The world phased out of synch for a heartbeat. When she was able to focus again, the pounding in her head had lessened. It wasn't gone, but thanks to Pim, it was more bearable.

She needed a big drink of something cold and sweet. All she had in her backpack was water. Water would have to do for now. She poured some in the little collapsible bowl for Pim first, then gulped down most of the rest. From the backpack's inner pocket, she took out her cheap emergency sunglasses. She looked stupid wearing them at night. Better to look stupid than demonic.

She cupped Pim's face in her hands, "Okay?"

He nodded, turned, and trotted to Jun Hee. Jun Hee was sitting up by the remains of the memorial, his arms full of quail. They were cheeping quietly. They must be okay.

The same couldn't be said of their master. He had blood mixed with dirt on his face and hands and in his thick black hair.

Remembering the monstrous shaman shadow from the garage, she asked, "Tattoos all in place?"

He nodded. "For now." His voice sounded strained.

She handed over the remaining water.

"Thanks." He drained the bottle. "Why are you wearing sunglasses?"

She waved a hand in the air. "The fires, they hurt my eyes. You know, smoke and stuff. We need to go; the fire department is almost here."

Jun Hee awkwardly got to his feet. The quail stayed tucked in his fleece jacket.

Nessa walked to where the Soul Eater lay. He wasn't moving.

The Fudo Cord was wrapped tightly around him, just like Roland. Only the man's eyes showed. They glared at her. Not dead. Nessa didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

His eyes were still as black as her own. Soul Eater magic must bleed their humanity from them. Only demons and Fallen Angels had eyes that black.

He didn't bother to struggle. What was the point? He was enough of an adept to understand the extent of the Fudo Cord's magic.

They stared silently at one another. Nessa wasn't worried about any sort of magical soul gaze or compulsion. He couldn't control her. No one could. Her angelic connection rendered her immune to such spells.

Pim padded over to stand by her side.

Jun Hee followed, setting the quail back on the ground. They chirped happily, bobbing their top knots and clustering around Jun Hee's feet.

She pulled out her cell phone. Time to call Madame Valencia.

"Uh, Nessa."

She held up a hand, "Just a second, Jun Hee. Need to make a call."

"No, Nessa," Jun Hee tugged her sleeve.

She found the number

"Nessa," he said urgently. "Look."

Rounding on him she bit back the words on the tip of her tongue as she saw what he was talking about.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A spirit had materialized a few feet away. A man. Asian. Middle-aged, his round face smooth and unlined. His head was shaved. The manifestation was so clear Nessa could see every detail. He was wearing a simple black kimono, one shoulder covered by a sort of cape or half sleeve. He held his hands clasped in front of him, grasping a circle of brown wooden beads with a tassel hanging from the end. Ghostly white flames surrounded his body.

A childhood spent watching Japanese anime meant she knew exactly what he was.

“The Soul Eater trapped a Buddhist priest?” she said to Jun Hee.

Jun Hee blew out a hiss from between his teeth. “Guess those were his ashes by the kimono. Damn. Maybe the priest didn’t understand what he was getting into. You know, thinking the Soul Eater was really an avatar for one of the Buddhist deities or something.”

Nessa couldn’t stop staring at the solemn apparition. Clearly, he was praying. “I don’t know a lot about Buddhism. Aside from the obvious Social Studies stuff in Junior High and things I learned from anime. Why would he care about talking to the dead?”

“Buddhism is all about the afterlife,” Jun Hee said nodding. “Funerals and funeral rites. Graveyards. Ghosts, demons, spirits. People think it’s all mediation, sweetness, and light. Nope and nope! There are tons of horrible Buddhist hells full of grotesque demons waiting for the sinful.”

“I saw a priest dressed like him the first time I came to the cemetery. When I got Peg.”

The quail apparently could see the priest as well. Wriggling out of Jun Hee’s arms, they ran *through* the apparition, stretching their necks to look up, chirping away.

Jun Hee furrowed his brows. “Am I supposed to know who Peg is?”

“Barracuda stuff. Skipped bail because she got caught in a cursed photograph.”

He made a face. “Better you than me.”

“There was a TV news crew here because of the ashes they’d found. A crew of ghost hunters, too. And this guy or someone dressed exactly like him.”

They both looked at the priest. His mouth was moving quickly, though no sound came out they could hear.

“Do you think he’s behind this,” she pointed at the turmoil in the sky, “because it sure isn’t me.”

As another peal of thunder shook the ground, a strange resonance made the air tingle with energy. It was like getting multiple shocks from static electricity.

“Ow, ow,” Nessa said shaking her hands to get rid of the lingering sensation. “Did you feel that?”

“Feel what?”

She pointed at the sky. “I felt a weird resonance vibe when I was fighting the Soul Eater. Like there was something else in the storm with me. It makes me go all tingly.”

Jun Hee had to raise his voice to be heard over another boom of thunder. This one so loud it sounded like a canon going off. “Got to be the priest. He must have called something as he waited to meet the Soul Eater.”

Nessa stared at the ghostly priest. “You think? Why? I mean if he knew what the Soul Eater was doing.”

“Could be the priest was hunting him, like you. Figured the only way to stop the Soul Eater was to sacrifice himself.”

“How would sacrificing himself help anything?” Nessa’s supernatural education had been sketchy. A combination of life on the run and her being an Air Elemental. Elemental witches were rare. They also were not entirely human, making Mortal world witches wary. Nessa never had a coven to teach her all the old lore.

“Death curse,” said Jun Hee firmly. “It’s got to be. With his dying breath, he sent his death curse to ask for vengeance. Whatever he called has been following us in the storm clouds tonight. Observing. Judging. Deciding whether to interfere.”

A ball of fire burst out of the clouds in a thunderclap so loud it shook the ground.

Nessa groaned, “And there’s the answer to his prayers.”

The fireball stopped, hovering about twenty feet in the air. A terrifying figure appeared in the flames, part human, part giant cat. It was pulling a wooden cart. The cart was also in flames.

“Why is everything burning?” moaned Nessa.

Jun Hee scooped the quail back up in a twittering, cooing bunch. Their little heads peaked out turning every which way.

Holding the jacket in one hand Jun Hee aimed his cell phone at the burning figure, thumbing the screen.

“Are you *filming* this?”

“Hell yes! If I can prove to the Infernal Court the Soul Eater is really gone, they might still give the bounty to me.”

“To you?” she shot him a knife-edged look. “*To you?* I captured him.”

He gave her an ingratiating smile, “I figured we could split the bounty. You know. I helped.”

She gave him an even fiercer look.

“A little...I helped a little.”

Leaving the burning cart to hover in the air, the creature leaped to the ground. The monster had to be ten feet tall. He was covered in black and white fur and wearing only a short kimono tied around his hips. His long tail lashed back and forth.

Nessa felt her insides quiver as her stomach made its familiar slide into her socks. She suddenly wanted to go to the bathroom. Badly.

Pim had already changed into his werecat form. Back arched, he clawed the ground, yowling a challenge.

Bouncing lightly on its feet or were they paws? The monster’s back legs were distinctly cat-like. The beast stared at Nessa and Jun Hee, then at their captive.

Pim stalked over to place himself between Nessa and the monster. His tail and fur were sticking straight up.

The creature smiled, showing rows of dagger-like teeth. Crouching down the cat-monster made a ‘come here’ motion to Pim crooning “*Nyan, nyan, chibi-kun.*”

Its low, gravelly voice made Nessa’s hair stand on end.

“*Nyan, nyan, nyan,*” it said.

Pim growled.

Jun Hee adjusted his cell phone, still filming. “He said, meow, meow, little one, meow, meow.”

Nessa turned on Jun Hee. “You speak Japanese?”

“Yeah. I did a high school year in Yokohama. Followed it with classes in college.”

“*You* went to college?”

He frowned. "You don't have to say it like that."

With sirens and horns blasting almost as loud as the thunder, a convoy of fire trucks, police, and an ambulance rolled into the crematorium driveway.

Crap, crap, crap.

"We're running out of time. Do you know what it is?"

"Kasha. A Hell Cat. Japanese Buddhist Yokai. Supernatural. He drags evil people to hell in his cart. Though usually Kasha only come for corpses. You know once the bad person has died. Our Soul Eater isn't dead yet."

Nessa considered this. "But he has lots of dead people inside him in a manner of speaking. Does Korean magic a Kasha?"

"Nine-tailed foxes, unicorn lion dogs, dragons, magical birds, yes. Flaming humanoid cats dragging a chariot to hell? No effing way."

Nessa squared up to the cat monster, her hands on her hips. She pointed at the Soul Eater, "He's mine. I caught him. I get to take him."

Jun Hee tugged at her hoodie. "Uh... Nessa? Got the power of hell behind him. Sort of gives him an advantage.

She pushed his hand off. "I have to try."

The Kasha looked at her briefly before shifting his gaze to a spot to her left. Nessa looked. She was not surprised to see the ghost of the Buddhist priest standing near her, still chanting silently over his beads.

"Excuse me, sir. Mr. Priest, sir?"

He didn't look up.

"Sir, I need the Soul Eater. I need him. My friends are being held hostage."

His lips didn't stop moving.

Damn it. She had never wished for Aunt Emerald's ability to speak to ghosts until right now.

"Can you hear me?"

No response.

The Kasha howled so loudly Nessa nearly wet herself. He took a step closer and just as quickly Nessa took a step back not knowing what to expect.

Filling his expansive chest with a deep breath, the beast pursed his lips before spewing out a stream of black smoke. The smoke expanded, flowing thick and fast around them. In seconds their desperate little group was screened from the firefighters.

The flames around the Kasha doubled in size forcing Nessa and Pim to back even further away. These were not spiritual flames either. Like the Soul Eater's magic, this was real fire. The heat was so intense it hurt to breathe.

Pim howled right back, looking to Nessa for the signal to attack.

She signaled to wait. Pim could not take him. The Kasha's was magic on a scale she had only encountered with Baron Samedi, the Loa of the Dead, and Frank the Fallen Angel. Your survival depended more on luck and cunning. Also, the ability to run away, very fast. Even with her angelic power at full strength – which it definitely was not – she did not think she could defeat the Kasha.

With one flaming hand, the beast plucked the Soul Eater off the ground as if he weighed no more than an apple. He threw him over his shoulder.

Jun Hee started walking away, still filming, the covey of quail wriggling in his jacket.

“Are you leaving?” she yelled.

“Duh!” he answered. “It's from hell. Hell! Summoned by a priest. This is the Soul Eater's Karma catching up with him. I am not standing in the way. And smokescreen or not, there will be questions from the police. I absolutely do not want to stick around to answer them.”

Before Nessa could reply, she was knocked aside by a stinking black mass. A storm of swirling energy slammed into the Kasha, throwing it and Oliver to the ground.

The Kasha crouched on all fours yowling as the black whirlwind circled him in an eye-blurring series of attacks. Nessa caught the flash of a sword blade in the fire.

“Oh my God,” yelled Jun Hee, scrunching his face. “The smell. What? Why?”

“Roland is here. The other Paladin. He's come for Oliver.

“Who the hell is Oliver?”

“The Soul Eater's name is Oliver. He's a Paladin who served King Charlemagne in the 800s.”

“You are shitting me!”

“Nope. And inside the stinky storm is his best friend, Roland. From the Song of Roland. They serve different kingdoms in Fae. I don’t know why he’s using his stink bomb spell. Maybe he thinks it will bother the cat.”

“Well t sure as hell bothers me,” yelled Jun Hee.

The cat didn’t like the smell either. His face was a wrinkled mask of disgust.

Pim ran to her for orders.

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

She looked from her cat to the battle. Even if Nessa could get close enough to snatch Oliver, she couldn’t carry him away. Jun Hee sure wasn’t going to be any help. He had his arms full of quail and his eyes full of dollar signs.

The Kasha decided he’d had enough. The flames around his body turned as white hot as phosphorous burning. Nessa and Pim backed even farther away, the heat too intense to bear.

Standing to his full and terrifying height, the Kasha spat out a spell. The hex sparked as the words left his lips. A fireball materialized bigger and hotter than any she’d seen tonight. Which was saying a lot.

The Kasha hurled it at Roland, engulfing the swirling black entity entirely.

Nessa put a hand on her summoning belt. She spoke the name of a cold wind from the north. The wind flew to her with a shriek of pleasure. She had not called it in a long time. With her other hand, she flung it at Roland.

Cold wind met hot fire. The two spells clashed with a blast of air strong enough to knock Nessa to her knees. She had to fight to keep her finger on the summoning rune, bracing herself against the ground with her free hand. Pim leaped in front of Nessa trying to shelter her from the backlash.

The fire and the cold wind roared like giant animals in combat.

“Colder,” Nessa ordered the wind. “Colder still!”

Cold fought heat until the cold won. The fire flared before dissipating in flickering sparks.

The Kasha growled.

Nessa swallowed, her throat going dry. She thought she was used to scary feline snarls thanks to Pim. Guess not.

Roland lay fully exposed on the ground.

Getting to her feet, Nessa stared back at the Kasha. Her life had been a series of many strange events growing up. She'd encountered murderous Jinn. A Fallen Angel, naturally. Witches. Warlocks. Voodoo Loa. Voodoo wizards. None of those encounters had included monstrous anthropomorphic creatures. Okay, exactly true. She knew Chuck, the Lobo. Chuck was big, sure. The Kasha was in a whole other weight class. Still, best to meet it in true Nessa style.

She put her hands on her hips. "Yeah, that was me," she shouted. "You are out of line, Mister Cat."

Pim backed her up with an ear-splitting challenge, stalking back and forth in front of his mistress.

Not waiting for the monstrous cat's reply, she walked to where Roland lay sprawled. His clothes were singed and smoking. Several inches of hair had been burned away along with, she looked closer, his eyebrows. His face was a painful-looking shade of red. He was breathing, though. Breathing is a major plus.

"Leave him alone," she called loudly to the Kasha. "He's trying to save his friend." She pointed at the bound Oliver, helpless in his Fudo Cord cocoon.

"This one," she laid a hand on Roland's chest, "is not a bad man."

Or she didn't think so.

The Kasha was a divine being. Even if he was from Hell, he was connected to whatever heaven the Buddhist Priest believed in.

He glared down at her, still fingering a pair of fireballs summoned while Nessa had been checking Roland.

To her surprise, the spirit of the priest appeared next to her. He put a phantom hand on her shoulder.

"Take me instead," said Roland, his voice a choked whisper. "Mighty spirit, spare Oliver and take me. This witch will see he is imprisoned for his crimes."

"Roland," Nessa protested. "No."

"Yes. He is my friend. Misguided, yet I know in my heart we are comrades still. He needs my help."

The Kasha hesitated as if considering Roland's offer.

"Think what you're saying," Nessa hissed at him.

He raised a hand, beckoning. "Please, I offer myself."

The Kasha looked to the priest, then Oliver, then Roland, and back at the priest.

The priest was speaking. Whatever it was seemed to help the Kasha decide. He shook his big furry head. With a flick of his wrist, the beast surrounded himself and Oliver in a wall of flame.

Nessa screeched throwing herself over Roland trying to shield him.

The Buddhist priest shimmered in front of them. Raising his hand with the prayer beads he circled it quickly in the air. A white shield appeared, deflecting the flames away from them

How could a spirit be so powerful in the real world? And if he was so strong, why did he give in to the Soul Eater?

She wasn't going to get an answer today.

The Kasha picked up Oliver. With a casual one-handed toss, he threw the Paladin into the back of the flaming cart.

"No," croaked Roland, trying to stand. "Please."

He was going to leave with Oliver. A tremor ran through her settling in her throat like a noose. The fairies. How could she save them without the Soul Eater to trade?

What if Oliver could escape the Kasha? Then she'd have a chance to capture him again.

The only justice she was after today was for her fairies. Nessa called the Fudo Cord to her.

*"Modotte!"* she screamed.

The magical cord unspooled from around Oliver.

He was on his feet in a heartbeat, his own hands grasping fireballs. He hurled them at the Kasha and for a moment, it looked like he might scramble out of the cart.

But only for a moment.

A dozen skeletal figures appeared beside him. They wrapped their bony arms around the Soul Eater howling. He struggled, screaming back at them. Nessa didn't know if they were undead servants of the Kasha or the Soul Eater's victims. Either way, they were stronger. This time there was no escape.

The Kasha laughed. Jumping into the sky, he took his place between the handles of the cart. Flames of orange and black surrounded him. Howling gleefully, the Kasha began to run.

Nessa felt Roland summoning air magic. She grabbed Pim, rolling away as the tempest

burst into a full-blown funnel cloud. Roland jumped on the storm as if he was mounting a horse. He rode it into the air pursuing the Kasha.

Nessa knew it was too late. The Kasha was divine. Far beyond them in power. A Portal opened in the sky. Black and menacing. With a mocking wave, the Kasha ran into the tunnel closing it with the flick of a paw. In an instant it was gone. Roland threw himself at what were now only fluffy mountains of water vapor.

Roland descended to earth, the whirlwind falling to bits around him. He knelt on the ground; his head bowed.

Nessa could feel the chaos in the air from all the conflicting magic.

“Oh Pim, we are about to get very wet.”

When in doubt, the atmosphere balanced itself with a cleansing rain. And rain it did. First in buckets, then a blinding torrent.

Pim hissed.

Nessa did too.

The apparition of the Buddhist priest turned to her. He held out a hand as if blessing her. He bowed low once before floating away.

“Come on,” Jun Hee said, making her jump.

“Jeezus, you scared me. I thought you left.”

He wiggled the cell phone. “Realized I needed full proof the Soul Eater was gone for the bounty.”

“Oh, of course,” she said with a knowing look. Money is what to the bounty hunter. Period. Exclamation point.

Tucking his phone away, he helped her to her feet. “It’s over. Let’s cut through the other side of the graveyard. We can’t let the firemen see us.”

Tears of frustration stung her cheeks. She’d lost the Soul Eater and her only chance to get her fairies back.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The rain fell relentlessly. Roland leaned heavily on Nessa's shoulder as they slogged through the mud to the other side of the cemetery.

They were heading for the main entrance by the Administration office. As far as Nessa could tell, there were no fire trucks on this side of the graveyard.

Poor Pim was hissing and spitting as he tiptoed through the mud. He did not like rain in either of his forms.

At the parking lot, Nessa jerked to a halt. A black Town Car was parked by the sidewalk. Two people stood under an oversized umbrella.

One of them was tall, thin, in a gorgeous mid-calf dress of silver and blue, her hair sparkling with jewels. Madame Valencia. No mistaking her.

"What the hell is she doing here?" demanded Nessa.

"I called her," Jun Hee said sounding surprised at her tone.

"Why?"

"She's the one putting up the bounty with the Infernal Court.

She shot him a look.

Again, he looked surprised. "I thought you knew."

"No, I did not. She's holding my fairies hostage. Didn't you hear me ask the priest?"

"Wasn't listening. She has them in prison?"

"Yes."

He made a fist pump in the air. "Boo yeah! I hate those creepy girls. They tortured me. Probably would have killed me. As far as I am concerned, she can keep the little monsters."

"Jun Hee!" she protested.

But he'd already turned away.

She led go of Roland. He sank onto the sidewalk.

"My fairies," she said to Madame Valencia trying unsuccessfully to keep the note of desperation out of her voice. "The Soul Eater has been..." she searched for a good word.

"Neutralized. Give me back my fairies."

“Has he?” she asked in a deceptively casual voice.

“He was taken by a Kasha. To hell,” she added.

Madame Valencia’s face twisted into a sneer or as much of a sneer as she could manage with all the Botox. “Which means you did not fulfill your part of the bargain. The exact wording was ‘bring him to me.’ I do not see him.”

Anger flared in Nessa. Her hair began to float up, pulling itself loose from her ponytail holder. It had been a long, hard couple of days. And she was thoroughly sick of other people getting in her way.

“I *did* capture him. Twice. This time I had him tied up like a Christmas present ready to hand over to you. Then a Buddhist Priest sent his death curse into the heavens. He called a cat from hell. And I don’t mean figuratively. He was literally from the Buddhist Hell. The monster exists only to grab evil people and drag them to eternal torment. Jun Hee has it on film.”

Jun Hee opened the Town Car’s back door. He nodded as he maneuvered himself and the quail inside. “I do.”

Madame Valencia did not look impressed. She continued to stare at Nessa wrinkling her nose like she was an unpleasant pile of garbage. “The Queen needed him alive to prove the Princess’s complicity.”

Nessa threw her hands up in the air in frustration. “Screw proof and screw complicity. What did you think I could do against a divine cat deity? *Divine*. Not partly divine. Fully. Watch Jun Hee’s video.”

Anger swelled in her chest. She stamped it down. What good would bringing out the dark side do her now? Blowing Madame Valencia into the Pacific Ocean would be super satisfying, sure. It would *not* help save her fairies.

“The threat of the Princess using the souls he’d collected against the Queen of Fire is gone. I did that.” She pointed at herself. “Me. Not Jun Hee.”

Madame Valencia ignored her. Nessa might as well have been talking to a wall. The older woman motioned to Jun Hee, only seeing now he was already in the car. “Ah. Good. You can show me the video.”

“Not until I see the money,” he said readjusting the squirming bundle of quail on his lap. “And no Fae bargain. Infernal Court rules.”

“We shall discuss terms.”

“He didn’t do anything,” Nessa’s voice broke on the last word.

The man in the suit adjusted the umbrella for Madame Valencia to enter the car.

“The Queen of Fire thanks you for your assistance,” the older woman said not looking at Nessa. “You are dismissed, Miss Scott. Say hello to your aunt for me.” She gave a brittle laugh as the driver shut the door.

The man closed the umbrella, got behind the wheel, and started the engine.

Nessa watched them, anger boiling inside her.

She called the lightning with barely a flick of her magic. The first bolt smashed into the car’s windshield shattering it.

The driver gunned the engine.

Nessa sent another bolt taking out the back windshield. There was a screech and a torrent of swearing from inside the vehicle.

The driver burned rubber out of the parking lot.

She tossed one more after the car as it sped away. Not really intending to hurt them.

Maybe.

Madame Valencia was a true and total bitch. What could Nessa really do?

She said as much to Pim.

Only silence met her question.

Pim was sprawled next to Roland on the wet concrete. Both of them looked as ragged as ragged could be.

She gathered Pim in her arms. No easy task. The grey British Shorthair was a handful. Nudging Roland with her foot, she said, “Hey, Roland. Hey!”

He coughed and stirred a little.

“Get up. Let’s go get something to eat. I am running on fumes.” She thought about what she’d said. Roland was from the Seventh Century. “Um, I am out of energy.” And she was. Her last burst of Elemental magic had been a mistake. Her arms and legs had gone from feeling like they were made of jelly to being filled with lead. “If I don’t get something to eat, I am going to fall apart.”

Roland painfully dragged himself to his feet.

They were limping out of the parking lot when a van roared up the driveway. It executed a perfect Tokyo Drift move, coming to a stop in front of them.

It was the ghost hunter's van.

Of course it was.

The motley crew of ghosthunters she'd seen on the news came tumbling out of the doors, pushing to be the first to reach her.

"We saw everything," said the sturdy lady with wavy hair.

Nessa turned away and kept walking.

"Wait," she said running closer. "We want to talk with you. About what happened here."

"Nothing happened here," Nessa said over her shoulder.

"Everything happened here," one of the men said. "Storms. Fireballs. Witchcraft. And... and.." he broke off to lean over, panting.

"Easy Ron. Take a deep breath," said another man.

"The giant flaming cart," added the woman.

"And the cat," panted the man. He pantomimed flames shooting around his body. "Fire."

"Go away," Nessa said in a tired voice, still walking.

"We have it on camera," said one of the men.

Pim wriggled off her shoulder, jumping lightly to the ground.

Nessa turned to face them. "Are you threatening me?"

The group exchanged looks. The man with the beard nudged the sturdy woman.

"No, no. We've been hunting for this stuff all our lives. You... you're real. It's real."

Nessa took a step closer and took off her sunglasses.

The woman in the back of the group squeaked and the two guys grabbed each other by the arm.

Pim turned a backward somersault. He came down in his werecat form.

The entire group gasped.

Even an exhausted werecat is still intimidating as F.

"I ask again," said Nessa. "Are you threatening me?"

"We... we've... um... jeezus..." the sturdy woman stammered.

"Uploaded it to the cloud," said the bearded guy in a rush.

Sighing deeply, Roland came to stand by Nessa. He drew his dagger. "Shall I kill them?" he asked quietly. His tone was more frightening for the matter-of-fact way he said it.

"Wait," Nessa said.

“Wait!” the sturdy woman said. “*Please*, wait. You don’t understand. We’ve been chasing the supernatural all our lives. You just proved it exists.”

“And my Paladin Roland here will dis-prove it just as quickly. Permanently.”

“Ghosts are real, aren’t they,” said the lady in the back. The one who squeaked.

“Far more than you could ever realize,” said Roland.

“Shush,” admonished Nessa. “You’re not supposed to tell them.”

“Why not? They will soon enter the spirit world themselves.”

The group drew closer together.

Pim growled.

“The film doesn’t show you,” said the sturdy woman. “Not your face or his,” she pointed at Roland. “And when the cat blew the smokescreen, everything got blotted out. We’re not trying to expose you. Please. Please can we talk sometime? Off the record? This...” she almost sobbed. “This is everything to us. Everything. Even if no one ever knows. Now *we* know we aren’t crazy.” She turned to the others, wiping her eyes, and giving the air a fist pump. “We’re not crazy.”

“We’re not. We’re really not,” they said, nodding their heads, sniffing wetly and wiping their eyes in turn.

Pim stopped growling to sit back on his haunches. With a glance at Nessa, he flipped back to his invisible feline form. He knew she was not going to hurt these people.

The group gasped in unison as he disappeared.

“What do you think?” she asked her Familiar.

“Please,” said the bearded man.

“Please,” said the other woman. “It means so much.”

“We won’t record it or anything,” said the sturdy woman in a pleading tone. She put her hands together in front of her, “Please.”

Nessa hissed a breath.

Idiots.

She held out her hand. “Give me your card.”

The woman quickly handed over about a dozen. Nessa tucked them in her back pocket.

She stepped very close to them, knowing exactly how frightening she looked when her eyes were black. “If I find out you’ve broadcast any of what happened here tonight. Any of it! My werecat and I will show you just how real magic is. Understood?”

They nodded again.

“Good. What you saw tonight should terrify you. In fact, I hope it keeps you awake night after night. There is so much you do not and should not know. Part of what I do is protect innocents from this knowledge.”

Which was bullshit, but it sounded great. In her mind she struck a noble pose, ‘Nessa Scott, Protector of the Innocent.’

To the ghost hunters, she said, “We’re going now. Do not follow us or I might not be able to restrain the Paladin from using his dagger.”

Roland gave them such a bored stare it was terrifying. He looked like he wouldn’t give their deaths a second thought. Which he probably would not.

She motioned for Pim to jump back in her arms. Nudging Roland with her shoulder, they limped out the gates and around the block to her scooter.

Jun Hee’s loaner was still parked at the curb. He must be riding with Madame Valencia talking terms. Nessa deserved a share of the bounty. Tomorrow she’d fight with him. And by fight, she meant she would cripple him if he didn’t hand over some cash.

Jun Hee was neither innocent nor in need of protection. Now she knew his weakness. If necessary, she could always get Pim to claw through his tattoos.

Getting Roland to squeeze behind her on the scooter and hold on took longer than it should have. He had never been on a scooter before. He fell off the back spectacularly on her first two attempts to zip away from the cemetery.

His falls gave her time to observe the firefighters and police scouring the grounds. Two tornadoes in two days plus mysterious fires and more murders. The priest’s ashes were there. And the other person as well. Or maybe the winds had blown them to heck. How could the police even begin to figure out what happened? If those ghost hunters kept their promise, the authorities would put it down to freak weather.

She knew from her wide-ranging experience of being poor Jack in the Box often had the cheapest fast food around. Googling it on her phone, she didn’t find any nearby. Dang. There was a Taco Bell. Good enough.

Pim had collapsed in a boneless lump in the scooter's basket.

“How about burritos?” she asked him.

He waved one paw limply in the air.

Roland finally figured out the physics of sitting on a moving scooter: Lean forward, hold onto her waist.

Mentally she crossed her fingers. ‘Please let the police be busy looking elsewhere,’ Nessa silently prayed as they sped away. She was not supposed to have a passenger on the bike. No spare helmet either. California had strict helmet laws.

Luck was on her side for once. The police were far too busy handling this newest calamity to slam Los Angeles to bother her.

She pulled into the Taco Bell parking lot, picked up the exhausted Pim, and tugged Roland with her. It was blessedly, wonderfully warm inside. The familiar smell of taco meat and hot sauce tickled her nose. She felt Pim's tummy rumble under her hand. Her own answered louder.

She found a booth in the back. Here Pim could hunker down on the seat out of sight.

Tonight was a night full of firsts for Roland. First scooter ride. First burrito. First basket of nachos. First cola.

He wasn't sure how to eat the burritos. After Nessa cut Pim's beefy soft tacos – no lettuce, no tomatoes – into tiny bites, she eagerly showed Roland how. Holding her burrito in both hands, she unfolded the paper and took a big bite, licking the sour cream as it oozed out the top. She always got extra sour cream.

Nobody said anything, concentrating on filling their stomachs. It took three burritos and a large order of spicy fries for Nessa to fill her up. Burritos, tacos, nachos, fries, drinks... She moaned inwardly about spending this much money on only one meal. What else could she do? Her morals wouldn't let her abandon Roland cold, wet, and hungry.

They sat staring into space, temporarily unable to do anything thanks to their food coma. It was a good feeling.

After several trips to the drink machine and one to the bathroom, she took out the Speak and Spell, placing it on the seat. It felt like days since she and Pim had had a proper conversation.

‘Well?’ she started, letting him take the lead.

His paws danced over the keyboard.

“We need to go into Faerie. Ask the Queen of Air to intercede.”

Roland sat up straighter. “The ghost speaks.”

“Not a ghost. Cat. Magic cat,” she added. “You saw him as a werecat.”

“I did not understand they were connected,” he said staring hard at the banquet seat.

‘Do you think the Queen will even see us?’ she asked Pim.

“After your demonstration of power in the ballroom, I believe she will,” Pim typed.

“Everyone was quite impressed.”

“The Queen will demand a favor in return,” Roland said. “You should be aware.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.”

What little Nessa knew of the Fae meant it would be something hard and dangerous. She lifted the sunglasses to run a hand over her tired eyes. They were sore from the heat and smoke.

“Do you still have the camera?” Roland asked.

Nessa tugged the backpack closer. “Yes, and I’m keeping it. Asshole tax.”

He looked cross. “I would have had him if not for you.”

Nessa sat bolt upright.

“Oh, you’ve done it now,” the Speak and Spell droned.

“Me?” she hissed at Roland. “*Me?* If you hadn’t interfered when I threw the Fudo Cord the first time, the Buddhist priest would still be alive. Mrs. Baker might still be alive. The other guy who died tonight, whoever he was, would still be alive. And I would have my fairies back from Madame Valencia. There is potentially a lot of death at your door, Mr. Paladin.”

“She is not wrong,” Pim typed in agreement.

Roland looked down at his hands. “He is my friend.”

“Well then why didn’t you ask him to stop?”

“We are bound to our Master or Mistress in Fae. We must obey or be punished.”

“How did you end up in service to the Queen?” Pim asked.

“I died. Or I was dying. I’d fallen mortally wounded on the battlefield. Have you ever suffered a mortal injury?”

Nessa had been staring into space, not really paying attention. “What?” she said, shifting her eyes back to Roland.

“Mortal injury,” he repeated.

“Me? No. Duh. I’m still alive. Mortal means sayonara. Forever.”

His face took on a dreamy expression. “Bleeding to death is a pleasant feeling. Close your eyes and sleep. I wanted to sleep. To rest. I was so tired. I vaguely felt two enemy soldiers pull me to my knees, one on either side since I had no strength left to stand. The point of a sword or perhaps a dagger pressed into the back of my neck. I thought ‘Here it is,’ and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, I was in Faerie.”

“You’re an Air Elemental. Faerie likes Elementals,” Nessa pointed out.

“As I learned.”

Pim’s paws tapped the keyboard. “Were you sad?”

“About what?”

“Not dying.”

“After I recovered, I chafed at my new bonds for a time.” He shrugged. “I had no family, no friends, assuming they all died during the battle. I am a warrior. I fight. It’s all I know. I am certainly as deserving of hell’s fire as Oliver.”

“And you didn’t know about Oliver being in Faerie too?” Pim asked.

“Not until recently. He does not serve the Queen directly, only her sister. It saw him at the last Summer Solstice Ball. A chance encounter.”

Pim tapped rapidly at the keys. “Must have been a shock.”

“I was so happy.”

The way he said it was full of nuance. Nessa was good at nuance. “Let me guess. You were super excited and he was like, ‘who are you again?’”

Roland hung his head. “An excellent summary of our encounter.”

“He didn’t want to be pals anymore?” she asked.

“Again, you are correct. He was cold. Hardened. We’d shared so much in the past. Do you want to know how we met?”

“Not really,” said Nessa.

“Yes,” typed Pim.

“We fought. Each seeking to prove they were better than the other. For hours we battled. In the end, we were too evenly matched. Neither of us could best the other. Instead, we became comrades. He joined our band of Paladin in service to the king.”

“People change,” Nessa said, thinking of her father and how he’d seemed to forget all about her.

“How did you get back here from Faerie?” Pim asked. “Wasn’t the Queen angry?”

He shifted his eyes over the table and the Speak and Spell. “I do not know where to look. Speaking to an invisible ghost is disconcerting.”

“Invisible cat. Not an invisible ghost. I already told you. Geez, dude. You live in Faerie. A world made of magic. I think you can figure it out.”

Roland gave Nessa a sour look. “Abandoning me to the Queen was a most unchivalrous act.”

Nessa returned the look two-fold. “Sorry not sorry. You made me lose the murdering Soul Eater.”

“Getting back to my question…” typed Pim.

“Yes. Your question. My Queen and the Queen of Fire are not precisely allies. They do, however, try to stay out of each other’s way. After explaining the Princess’s plans to take over the court, she directed me to keep the assassination from happening.”

“Status quo.” Nessa quoted Madam Valencia.

“Precisely,” agreed Roland.

Piling the trash on the tray, Nessa started getting ready to go. She wanted to get on with her probably extraordinarily stupid plan to get her fairies back. From what she’d observed, the High Fae didn’t think much of fairies. She’d heard them referred to as ‘vermin’ several times. The Fire Queen could have them executed at any time.

“I’m leaving,” she told Roland, packing away the Speak and Spell. “You are on your own from now on. Good luck and goodbye.”

She slung the backpack over her shoulder, picked up the tray of trash, and headed for the door without a backward look.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Together she and Pim walked around to the back of the Taco Bell by the dumpster. There were no CCTV cameras here and she was out of sight of the street.

“We’re going to the Queen of Air’s Court. I don’t feel like we have any other choice. Agreed?”

Pim nodded.

She placed the delicate silver crown on her head, picturing the massive ornate white ballroom. The dazzling floor-to-ceiling windows and ceiling open to Faerie’s azure blue sky.

She took a step forward. Asking the Queen for help would come with consequences. Consequences or not, the fairies had become her responsibility from the day she fed them tacos. They wouldn’t be in trouble if not for their connection to Nessa. Period.

A circle of warm air whooshed over her. Squaring her shoulders, she stepped inside. Or started to. Something grabbed her ankle as she stood balanced half-in, half-out of the Portal. Before she understood what was happening, she was jerked back. She had a split second to see Roland before he yanked the crown off her head. A different Portal appeared. Cold air enveloped her as the world spun in dizzying circles. She had the presence of mind to grab Pim by the scruff of the neck before everything went dark.

Nausea is the worst feeling in the world, Nessa thought as she was thoroughly sick. She’d take anything: fever, sore throat, broken bones, anything but nausea and vertigo.

She kept throwing up until she’d lost every bought and paid for calorie from the entire day and perhaps several before. ‘Please let it stop,’ she silently begged.

Pim was near, she could always feel his presence. He was trying to send healing energy into her. She was so exhausted from throwing magic every which way for the past few days it took a while for his help to penetrate. He placed his paws on her back, kneading her gently until her stomach calmed down.

She opened her eyes a slit to see if the world was behaving again. Thankfully it stopped spinning.

With the nausea gone, a whole new list of pains made themselves felt. Something sharp was digging into her back, elbows, and hips. Her tailbone throbbed like she'd broken her butt all over again. She ran her hands over a rough stone floor. Hard, hard, stones. Ah, stones explained it.

"Ow," she moaned.

Pim came around to rub his head against her chest.

Wiping her mouth on her sleeve, she scooted as far away from the mess as she could get before her back bumped into another hard surface. A...barrel.

Big wooden barrels stood stacked floor to ceiling in a semicircle around her. They were in a small stone chamber dimly lit by light reflected through an open door. It was cold. So cold Nessa could see her breath.

Swiveling carefully around, she saw Roland crouched near the door, his back to them.

"God damn it, Roland..." she started to say.

He whipped around whispering, "*Shh*, guards."

Guards? Where were there guards?

Pim bristled, shimmering halfway to transformation.

Nessa put a hand on Pim's head telling him to stand down. For now.

"What the hell?" she said in the barest whisper.

He moved to close the space between them. A little too close for Pim's liking. Her Familiar whipped out a paw. His claws were not sheathed.

A trio of scratches appeared on the Paladin's cheek.

Roland hissed out a breath, his hand going to his face and coming away red with blood.

"Pim would like to know why you kidnapped us," she said softly.

He glared at her as he put a little distance between them.

She knew why he drew back. Her eyes were black from side to side since she'd burned her contacts out in the fight with the Soul Eater. The sunglasses had disappeared somewhere in the chaos of the Portal journey. From looking in the mirror she knew how scary those eyes could be.

His face was still bright red from the firefight. His skin flushed a deeper scarlet when he realized she'd noticed his hesitation.

Sher batted her eyelashes dramatically because screw him. She had nothing to be ashamed of. “You were saying?”

He shifted slightly, looking her in the eyes again. “I recognized the chamber. The one holding your Faeries.”

Nessa gave him a side-eye stare. “*Really?* You recognized the Queen of Fire’s dungeon?” She loaded every quiet word with sarcasm. “From a video on my phone?”

His expression hardened. “I have been in the same cell. In fact, it was I who scratched the inscription into the wall behind your bondmaidens. *Omnia pereun.* All is lost.”

“You were a prisoner of the Queen of Fire?”

He gave a rueful smile. “No. Not the Queen of Fire.”

“I don’t understand.” Nessa adjusted her position wincing as the stones dug into her sore tailbone. “Do you mean Madame Valencia?”

Nessa did not think there were many stone dungeons in L.A. but what did she know? The woman was rich. Rich people did weird things.

“The Queen of Air. Your Queen. *Our* Queen has your fairies.”

Pim hissed.

Nessa’s stomach clenched and she felt like she was going to throw up again. There was no reason to doubt him. What could he gain from lying?

“Why?”

“The connection between the Queen of Fire and our Queen is less tenuous than the woman...”

“Madam Valencia.”

“Yes, this Madame Valencia would have you believe. Your angelic assets are known to both the Court of Air and Fire. Our Queen was complicit in this venture. She was the one who offered to restrain your fairies.”

She and Pim exchanged understanding looks. Nessa had paid attention in history class and Pim had lived through several centuries of intrigue. The Chevaliers had been forced to flee the guillotine during the French Revolution, Pim included.

“For a political favor in return?”

“Precisely,” Roland agreed. “The Fae thrive on conflict. Plotting and counterplotting endlessly. Fire could not guarantee your help without a personal bargaining chip. Air supplied it.”

He was right. If the fairies hadn’t been in trouble, she would have let Jun Hee or the Infernal Court handle the Soul Eater.

“We lost him in the end to the Kasha,” Nessa couldn’t help pointing out.

He held up a hand, gesturing to the door.

They stopped talking.

Nessa heard the shuffle of heavy footsteps pass. Pim arched his back, waiting for the word to transform.

The footsteps paused and Nessa held her breath. After what felt like forever, they walked on leaving only silence once again.

She gave the knight an assessing look. “We are not friends. You don’t owe me anything. Which means you’re not helping me out of the goodness of your heart. What do you want in return?”

“A favor.”

“A favor,” she repeated.

“Of equal measure.”

Boom, there it was. Another trap. Fae loved their bargains.

Pim put a paw on her leg.

She met his eyes. They both knew people much older and wiser had been taken in by Fae bargains.

The trio was her Bondmaidens according to Fae law. Ridiculous as it sounded in the real world. She’d taken on the role unknowingly at the time. Too late for regrets over their dinner at Del Taco. They were bound together. Now they were frightened. They were alone with no way out. Nessa understood such terror so well.

“Do we have a choice?” she asked her Familiar. “If the Queen has them, we’ve got zero bargaining power.”

Pim sat back on his haunches, shaking his head. Not in disagreement. Rather the inevitability of her answer.

She narrowed her eyes at the Paladin. “Okay. Help me free my bondmaidens. Return all of us safely to my world and I will owe you a favor. On the condition this favor does not endanger any of my family or friends.”

He stared at her silently. After a time, he shook his head. “I cannot guarantee those conditions.”

Nessa started to protest.

He raised a hand to stop her. “On my part, I will give my word not to knowingly endanger your family or friends with this favor. In addition, I will do my utmost, at the risk of my own life, to protect them should they or any innocents be in danger as a result.”

She looked at Pim.

He gave the feline equivalent of a shrug. The decision was hers.

“Rock and a hard place, kitty,” she muttered to him. “All right. I will owe you a favor in return for your help in freeing my three fairies. In return, you must allow all of us to return safely with all our limbs and memories to the place we were going to enter my Portal. It must also be at the time or near the time you took us.”

Those restrictions should protect them from being dumped in the middle of the African Savannah or at a time months later. He’d have to adhere to her conditions. Unfortunately, she’d have to follow his commands when he asked for a favor in return.

“I agree,” said Roland.

He held out his hand.

As they shook, Nessa felt the tingling frisson of magic pass between them. The bargain was sealed.

Nessa shifted her position, wincing at the pain in pretty much every part of her body.

“What’s the plan?”

The plan was surprisingly simple if not totally bloodless.

Roland did indeed know exactly where her fairies were being held. He’d lived in this castle for more than a thousand mortal years. He’d opened a Portal down the hallway from their cell.

Motioning for Nessa to stay put, he crept silently out the door.

“I feel like we’re in the Hobbit, about to send the dwarves out of Rivendale in the barrels,” she whispered to Pim.

He smiled at her.

A voice cried out, followed by the dull thud of body meeting body. The sounds of a physical fight were unmistakable once you've heard them. Nessa pulled out her police baton as she ran into the passage, werecat Pim snarling ahead of her.

Three uniformed men were piled on top of Roland. Guards. A fourth lay sprawled on the flagstones.

Pim leaped on one clawing and spitting. He cried out in surprise flailing at the attacking beast with both arms.

Nessa laid into another with her baton hitting him hard on the side of the head. He let go of Roland, turning to confront her. She hit him in the temple before he could grab her. He fell onto his side, stunned from the blow. Real fights are not like movie fights. People go down quickly when bashed in the head.

"Don't kill them," Roland said, twisting out from the last man.

Pim turned his eyes to Nessa. He had the guard pinned on his stomach; jaws unhinged in the uncanny way of werecats. All it would take was a moment to snap the bone.

"Wait," she said to Pim, scooting out of Roland's way as he struggled with the last man.

The two men rolled back and forth, punching each other furiously. Roland twisted all the way around in a wrestling move slipping his forearm around the other's throat. He locked his legs across the man's chest. With his other hand, he pulled out a dagger.

The guard went still.

"The keys are tucked into his belt," Roland said breathlessly. "Take them."

She grabbed the iron ring. Jangling the keys as big as her hand, she pointed at a heavy wooden and iron door with no window. "Here?"

"Yes."

Pim kept his hold on the other man's neck. The one she'd smacked in the head was sitting looking dazed, his back against the wall.

Nessa had to try two keys before finding the right one to turn the lock. Even unlocked, opening the door was like trying to move a boulder. It took all her strength to pull it wide enough for her to slip through. There was just enough light from a pair of tiny windows to see inside.

The fairies screamed in delight at the sight of Nessa. They ran at her only to be jerked back by the chains around their ankles.

They jabbered and trilled and talked non-stop in their own language as Nessa hugged the ragged little things. Their dresses were in tatters, their faces bruised. They were dirty, their beautiful long hair a tangled mess.

“How can I free them?” she shouted.

“The same key as the door will fit their chains,” Roland shouted back. She also heard Pim’s yowl of anger and figured they were tying up the guards.

Kneeling first by the Red Fairy, she jammed the key into the iron lock. It clicked open. The fairy fell to the ground, bowing to Nessa, whimpering, “*Haiii. Haiii. Taco, taco, taco.*” Some of the only words her fairies knew in English.

Nessa hugged her, moving next to the Blue Fairy, and then the Green.

All of them bowed over and over, sobbing, chattering nonstop in their language. Fairies were a very vocal sort of being. Too bad Nessa couldn’t understand them.

The door opened wider making the trio shriek in fear.

Roland and Pim entered. Werecat Pim ran to the fairies. They fell on him with kisses and squeals of joy. They liked werecat Pim as much as feline Pim. Maybe more given their similar chaotic natures.

Roland stood, watching the scene. Nessa couldn’t read his expression. With a glance over his shoulder, he suddenly straightened, arms rigidly at his sides.

The Queen of Air strolled in on a blast of freezing cold wind.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*Ailm Gan Eagla*, Ailm the Fearless, ruler of the Kingdom of Air, was dressed in a white gown held together by a wish and a prayer and a thousand pearls. Maybe two thousand. The dress sensuously accented her bountiful breasts, tiny waist, and curvaceous hips. Her hair hung loose, unlike the first time Nessa had seen her. Silver waves fell to her waist with more pearls laced through the curls. She was barefoot and hovering a few inches above the cold stone floor. Who needs shoes when you can fly?

“Well, well, what do we have here?” she said in her velvety voice.

Her dramatic entrance was spoiled when a pair of creatures came tumbling into the room to throw themselves ecstatically at Nessa and Pim. They had twisty horns, whiskers, a skinny ridge of spines, and iridescent scales of yellow, silver, and green covered partially with downy white fur. These were the Queen’s twin baby luck dragons, *Long Bao Bao*, in Chinese. A gift from Zhong Kui, the King of Ghosts. The scaly little things had met Pim at the Queen’s Ball. It was love at first sight for the dragons.

They jumped and gamboled around Nessa’s feet, rubbing their scaly faces against Pim’s fur. Apparently, they recognized him even in his werecat form.

The Queen made a sound of impatience.

Two uniformed guards who had been waiting outside the door leaped in to snatch a dragon each. The creatures squealed, alternately wriggling to be free and trying to lick the guard’s faces.

They took the baby dragons, still squealing, away. The room returned to its icy chill.

Roland faced her, dropping to one knee. He lowered his head, murmuring, “Your Majesty.”

Nessa and Pim placed themselves in front of the fairies. To her surprise, the girls sidestepped Nessa to stand in front of *her*. They spread their wings protectively. Filthy, bloody, hurt, and hungry, they each took up a fighting stance, fists sparkling weakly with magic.

“Taco, taco, taco,” they trilled showing their sharp teeth. So many teeth.

Pim moved to stand with them.

Nessa kept her hands at her sides. They were in a castle in the air, with the Fae Queen of Air, surrounded by other Air Elementals. Unless she was prepared to call on her dark magic, there wasn't much point in starting a fight. And even then, it was a fight she could not ultimately win.

"Did you ask her?" the Queen said in English to Roland.

Still on one knee, the Paladin replied, "Yes, Your Majesty."

"And..." she raised an imperious eyebrow.

"She agreed to my terms, Your Majesty."

The Queen allowed a tiny smile to crease her beautiful features.

Nessa's heart jumped into her throat so fast she thought she would choke.

"Wait, what?" Nessa barked. "You asked the favor for *her*?"

Roland did not move.

The Queen inclined her head. Answer enough.

Spitting in indignation, Pim somersaulted back to his feline form. There would be no battle, he understood. They'd been royally bamboozled.

"Was this the plan from the start?" she asked, her eyes darting from Roland to the Queen. "Kidnap my fairies and force a favor from me?"

The Queen hit her with a blast of icy air. Nessa flew backward from the force of the wind. She hit the stone wall so hard she saw stars.

The Queen's tone was as cold as her spell. "Remember to whom you speak."

Nessa was too busy trying to breathe to make a smart-ass reply. Probably for the better.

Holding hands, the fairies ran to Nessa. A sparkling wall of gold appeared in front of her and the Queen. A barrier.

"Taco!" they said menacingly, glaring at the ruler of Air.

Head high, the Queen ignored them.

Roland hadn't moved.

Pim was pacing, alternating between his feline and werecat forms. Dazed or not, Nessa could feel the waves of anger coming off him. He would very much like to carve up the haughty monarch.

The world tilted precariously as Nessa sat upright. Both her magical and physical energy meters were flashing their red warning lights: empty. She felt as wrung out as a dry sponge and

about as smart. Holding onto one of the chains bolted into the wall, Nessa managed to pull herself to her feet. She was not having this conversation lying on the floor.

The fairies lifted the barrier slightly to allow Pim to pass through. He radiated magic, sending the last of his own energy into his mistress.

It was barely a trickle. They were both physically spent. Finished. Kaput.

“Was this the plan from the start, *Your Majesty*?” she gave the title as much malice as she could manage.

The Queen lifted a fingertip at Roland.

He stood immediately, facing Nessa. “Yes. Part of it. Not all.”

“Your talents, Nessa Chevalier Scott, are rare and deep,” said the Queen in a languid tone. “Princess Nepenta’s treachery and the use of the Soul Eater in your world was an opportunity to avail myself of those talents. Far too delicious a chance to pass up, I am sure you will agree.”

No, Nessa did not agree. Wisely she kept those thoughts to herself.

Pim hissed *his* opinion, however.

“Your fairies have been returned to you by Roland. You owe my Paladin a favor. My Paladin owes me.” She met Nessa’s eyes. The Queen’s eyes were the color of arctic ice and every degree as cold. “You will be hearing from us, Nessa Chevalier Scott.”

In a swirl of silk and pearls, the Queen floated out the door. Saying over her shoulder, “Return the crown. Send the child and her vermin on their way, Paladin.”

“Bitch,” said Nessa, not caring if the Queen heard.

The fairies snapped their fingers, lowering the golden shield. They crowded close to Nessa, supporting her as she swayed unsteadily.

“She didn’t need to show up,” Nessa said to Pim. “We would have gone home thinking we owed Roland for saving the fairies. Nope. She wanted to twist the knife herself. Show me who was really in charge.”

“Taco, taco, taco,” chorused the fairies.

Roland opened his mouth to speak.

“Don’t,” Nessa growled, every bit as menacing as werecat Pim. “Don’t say a word.”

He kept silent; his face impassive as he handed her the Portal Crown.

She snatched it back, thrusting the silver crown into the backpack. She wouldn't need it. Roland was sending them home.

Lifting his hand, he waved open a Portal on a burst of cold air.

Peering through, Nessa saw her scooter and the dumpster behind the Taco Bell. Where she had wasted her hard-earned money buying the traitorous Roland his damn dinner.

Jerk.

Nessa pulled the fairies close. "Maybe you *should* have been the one the Kasha took to Hell, Roland," Nessa said.

Hand in hand and with Pim in the lead, they stepped through.

"Maybe I should have," she heard him say as the Portal closed behind her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A short time later the fairies were stuffing themselves with tacos, burritos, and a new taste treat –spicy french fries. She'd bought them colas as well. They needed the sugar and caffeine.

*Glamour* didn't work on Nessa, a side effect of her ability to see ghosts. She could only hope the fairies had disguised themselves in their usual costume of rainbow-haired teenage nineties wannabes. Just in case, they were outside on the patio despite the evening chill. Their time in Fae had been a mere blink in the Mortal world.

She wasn't sure what to do next. Aunt Emerald's wards wouldn't let the girls into the house. Once their stomachs were full, they would need a bath with a lot of soap, clean clothes, and sleep.

Waiting until they were full – another dent in Nessa's food budget – she took out a little notepad and pen. Not knowing each other's language was a real drawback. Drawing pictures helped fill in those gaps.

Quickly drawing a bunch of sunflowers and a gate, Nessa made stick figures of herself, a circle for the Portal, and the three fairies going through. She was hoping they would want to return home rather than guard Nessa.

'Please let them want to go home,' she prayed silently.

They squealed enthusiastically causing a family walking into the restaurant to turn and stare.

"Happy," Nessa explained with a wave of her hand. "Very happy."

"Taco, taco, taco," the fairies sang loudly, jumping up to do an impromptu jig. They were so high from the sugar.

The parents shoved the kids between them and quickly went inside.

Nessa went back to the dumpsters, the fairies still dancing. She opened the Portal.

They dropped to their knees, bowing. She was their queen, after all. Nessa had to pull them up gesturing to the Portal.

“Yes, you are welcome. I am sorry you were tortured because of me. Please go home. Please.”

After more bowing, hand-kissing, and three choruses of their favorite taco song, they danced drunkenly through the Portal.

Note to self, Nessa thought. Cola makes faeries drunk/high.

She closed the Portal with a sigh of relief. Pim had collapsed onto the ground. Rolling on his back he put all four paws in the air and let his tongue hang out the side of his mouth.

“Dead tired, kitty. I get it. Me too.”

She gathered him up in her arms. Slings him up on one shoulder, she opened the scooter basket to remove her helmet. She laid Pim inside on his little cushion.

In a moment she had snapped on her helmet, released the hexed locks, and fastened the chain on the back. Before turning the ignition, she checked her phone. A dozen texts from both Barracuda and Ravi.

She called Mr. Barracuda first.

“Are you safe,” he demanded, picking up on the first ring.

“For now,” Nessa said honestly.

“Was it you and your dang cat raising tornados all over Boyle Heights?”

She hesitated, “Uh, no... yes... maybe... which answer gets me in less trouble?”

Muffled laughter echoed over the receiver. Rose Marie and Pansie, she thought.

“Hmph,” Barracuda snorted. “Not sure yet.”

“I have your Fudo Cord. It was amazing.”

“Did you catch the Soul Eater?”

“I did. Or your cord did. Until he got snatched by a Japanese Buddhist cat from Hell.”

She proceeded to tell him the story of the night’s adventures. He put it on speaker so the twins could hear. Her description of losing the Soul Eater to a cat had them all laughing in sympathy.

Somehow their laughter eased the tight knot of tension in her own heart. They were laughing with her, not at her. Undoubtedly, they had lost many bail jumpers under similarly bizarre circumstances.

“What about those fairies of yours?” he asked.

“Saved them,” Nessa said. She didn’t need to explain more tonight.

“Well see you come in tomorrow,” his voice turned gruff. “I have a backload of cases for you and your lazy cat. I am losing money as we speak.”

She heard the twins giggling, so she didn't take his tone too seriously. Maybe her dad had known what he was doing when he borrowed money and magic from Roman Barracuda. She could have done far worse than land at his door.

He was grumbling about no-good criminal scum running off with his hard-earned money as he rang off.

Next, she phoned Ravi.

“Jeezus Nessa,” he said almost shouting. “Are you alive?”

Laughing she said she was.

“What happened to the Soul Eater?”

She told him about the cat from hell.

“Oh man,” he moaned. “Why do you get all the good stuff? I was stuck at the hospital scrubbing CCTV. Now I'm in the office filing stupid reports.”

“Believe me, I would trade places with you in a heartbeat. Oh, oh. Jun Hee was with me for a lot of the action. He's trying to claim the Soul Eater bounty from the Infernal Court. He has a video. But it was me who caught him. One hundred percent.”

“What an asshole,” snarled Ravi.

“He drove off with Madame Valencia. She's the one who put up the bounty he said.”

“Yeah, but before she can give it to him, the Court must sign off. Anyway, nothing is going to happen until business hours tomorrow.”

“You have business hours? For magic?”

He laughed, “Banking hours. Hey, let's meet for coffee in the morning at Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf. The one on Hawthorne. We can see what's what with the bounty. I am on your side; right?”

“Thanks Ravi. How about nine a.m.?”

“Cool. Get some rest. You and Pim must be exhausted.”

She could not disagree.

Her sight was blurring from fatigue by the time they motored back to Hermosa Beach.

“Aunt Emerald? I'm home,” she called quietly, entering through the kitchen. Her stomach was growling. She'd thrown up everything after being hijacked to Faerie. Then at Taco

Bell, she'd only bought food for the Faeries to save money. Aunt Emerald liked to cook and always made extra.

"Nessa, you alright?" came her aunt's voice from the living room.

"I'm alive," she sighed, "guess that's about as good as it gets tonight."

A half-full baking dish of meatloaf sat on top of the oven with a dish of what looked like Au Gratin potatoes by it. Yum.

Pim jumped on the counter, licking his lips.

She prepared plates for them as her aunt walked in.

"Well, go on," her aunt said. "You can talk and eat. What happened?"

For the third time, Nessa described the evening's events since she left home after the scrying. Nessa went into far more detail than she had with Mr. Barracuda or Ravi. Aunt Emerald was family.

It took double helpings of meatloaf and potatoes for Nessa and two glasses of red wine for her aunt before she got to the part about Roland tricking her.

"Damn Fae," her aunt shook her head. "I hate them."

Right now, so did Nessa.

"Where's dad?" she asked casually as if she didn't really care.

She'd kept her distance since he'd shown up at the house a few days before. After all the action tonight, and his part in some of it, she'd expected him to want to hear the story. Wouldn't he?

"Gone," said Aunt Emerald. "Came back, packed his bag, and took off."

Pim stopped licking his whiskers.

Nessa stared at her aunt. "Again?"

She drained her glass and poured a little more wine. "Yep."

Her aunt was not a demonstrative woman. Only rarely did she touch Nessa far less show any affection. Tonight, she laid a hand on Nessa's knee.

"Sorry, honey." She patted it several times. "Real sorry."

"He didn't say anything? Like where he was going or about throwing me to the mercy of Barracuda Bail Bonds?"

"Nothing. He gave me some cash and drove off. Oh, I think he went up to your room. Maybe he left you a note?"

Nessa rinsed their plates, thanked her aunt for the food, and went upstairs to her room. Fiona's door was closed, no light underneath. She hadn't thought to look for the other witch's car. It didn't matter. Fiona probably wouldn't care where Nessa had been the past couple of days. A mini-holiday for the other witch from slumming it with Barracuda Bail Bonds.

No note was waiting for her in the living room. The same for the bedroom.

Pim meowed and butted his head against her in sympathy.

"What did I expect?" she asked him. "He's had enough of us. He's made it pretty clear."

After swallowing a couple of Ibuprofen, she stripped out of her clothes in the bathroom. Standing under the shower, lathered in soap she wondered why he'd come to her apartment if not to leave a message.

Washing the cream rinse out of her hair the idea hit her like a punch in the gut. Fear zinged up and down her spine. She grabbed a towel, wrapping it around her as she ran into the bedroom.

Surprised, Pim jumped off the bed.

She pulled open her bureau drawer throwing socks, underwear, and bras into the air.

Instead of the orb, she found two boxes of her special blue contacts. The ones she needed to hide her inky black eyes.

No orb.

Deadbeat Dad had taken it.

Sinking down on the floor she put her head in her hands.

"Dang it, Pim."

Her cell phone rang. Nessa was tempted to let it go to voice mail. God damn deadbeat dad. It kept ringing. She pulled it out of her hoodie pocket.

'Ravi' flashed on the screen.

Oh. Thinking it could be about the bounty from the Soul Eater, she tapped answer.

"Hey, Ravi."

"Hey, Nessa. Um..." he cleared his throat. "You know how I said I was still at the office?"

"Yeah," she said picking underpants off the floor.

He cleared his throat again. Why did he sound nervous?

"And I would look into the Madame Valencia bounty?"

She tucked them in the drawer. “Yes.”

“Well, um, uh...I found something in the queue for the Infernal Court tomorrow...” the pause lengthened.

She put a pair of socks back in, next to the underwear. “And?”

“You’re being summoned.”

“What do you mean summoned. Like, magically?”

“No. Sorry, this sort of took me by surprise. Um, you’re going to be served a summons to appear in court.”

“*I’m what?*” Her voice came out in a screech.

“You’re being charged with wrongful endangerment from weather magic because of the tornados. Four tornadoes. Jeezus. You summoned four tornadoes in twenty-four hours?”

“Maybe five,” she squeaked.

“Not good, Nessa. Also, malicious disregard for public safety and cloaking protocols in...” he paused, “in Beverly Hills. You attacked a coffee lounge in Beverly Hills?”

Nessa’s stomach cartwheeled into her socks.

“You better get a lawyer. Fast.”

Ohhhhhh crap.

*To be continued in Girl’s Guide to Voodoo Bounty Hunting 5: High Jinx*

