

Girl's Guide to Voodoo Bounty Hunting, Book 5: High Jinx

By Eden Crowne

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The Scene: Nessa, Pim, and her gang need to get the Alchemist who invented a formula that supercharges supernaturals from Hermosa Beach to the safety of the Infernal Court in neighboring Redondo Beach. Those who want the formula for their own have other plans.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

They were able to snag a table on the tiny outside patio at Starbucks. The tourists bound for the beach walking in and out of the coffee house front door had no idea they were squeezing by an Elemental witch and her invisible familiar, a Voodoo witch, a semi-divine Naga snake spirit, a black-magic blood witch, and a shapeshifting Kitsune.

Two Kitsune, Nessa amended as Reiko's mom exited the black Mercedes. She'd swapped the kimono for a more relaxed look of fawn trousers and sleeveless camel-colored cotton knit top. A kimono would draw too much attention. Besides being difficult to fight in. Nessa was hoping Reiko's mom would be ready to fight. A Kitsune on their side could give them a huge advantage.

Before Mrs. Sömmerhauler arrived, they'd had time to hold a quick war council.

Ravi said he'd scouted the streets around the Infernal Court. Nothing outwardly suspicious. No big black SUVs, engines idling. It was Saturday. The streets were busy with traffic heading for nearby Redondo Beach Pier and the marina. He'd walked through the two coffee shops near the Court entrance. Both were full but as it was Saturday, that wasn't unusual.

Lawyers from the Sömmerhauler and Villanova clans had been in the building, each waiting to speak to a Judge regarding the charges against the girls. They could hardly jump Reiko and Reese inside the court. Could they?

"If they had a Judge or source inside the Court they could," Nessa pointed out. Deadbeat Dad had taught her conspiracies lurked in the most unexpected places. "Get Reiko inside an office, drug her, and *poof*." She made a motion with both hands. "Gone."

Reiko's eyes widened.

“You’re working with Judge Jelani, right?” Ravi asked her.

“Yes. She seemed to legitimately want the drink off the streets. You don’t think…” she trailed off.

Ravi shook his head. “Judge Jelani is the real deal. Tough as nails. She wouldn’t compromise the supernatural community by letting this stuff loose.”

“Do you think they’ll try to stop us inside the court if they fail outside?” Fiona asked. She was dressed simply for her: black workout clothes, her hair tucked under a Dodgers baseball cap.

“It’s a possibility. My teammates can throw down a mean spell. They could lasso or stupefy us and snatch Reiko. Probably thinking they were obeying orders. If it’s one of my superiors, he or she only has to flash their badge. We take an oath when we join to obey. A magical oath,” he added when Nessa failed to look impressed.

“Ah,” she said. “I get it. Your boss shows their badge, and you can’t physically disobey them.”

“Right. Judges are free from those restrictions.”

“Will the Judge meet us at one of the entrances? Give us safe passage?”

Ravi tapped his phone, “Going to find out right now.”

Nessa had explained part of her plan to Fiona and Reiko before leaving the apartment. They had a duffel bag tucked under the table with the supplies she’d requested.

Mrs. Sömmerhauler approached the table hesitantly. Her body language was stiff and distant. Her face was another matter. Nessa was good at reading the subtleties of facial expressions. The tension around the eyes and mouth, the forward set of her chin all said she wanted to run up to the table and throw her arms around her daughter.

“Rei-chan,” she said quietly. “*Gomenasai.*”

Reiko sat back in her chair, putting as much distance between herself and her mom as she could without standing. “*Gomenasai?* You’re sorry? *Honto desu ka?* Really? *Sore dake?* That’s it?”

Pim hissed and Nessa put a finger to her lips. “Keep it down. You can fight about this later.”

“No,” protested Reiko. “We can’t. I want to know why.”

Ravi stood, motioning for the older woman to take his chair. He came by Nessa and sat behind her on the big concrete planter separating the patio from the alley.

Mrs. Sömmerhaulder sat. Her movements were precise. Elegant. She set her ivory-colored bag on her lap. A Hermes Birken, Nessa noted enviously. Crossing her hands over the bag, legs together, back straight she said, “I loved him. Your father. I love him still. He had no idea I was magic. Like any good clan Potion Maker, he couldn’t sense my power. I hid it from him. It was easy. I’d always had a double life. Living in Tokyo and running my club...”

“Hostess Club, just to be clear,” sneered Reiko. “As other people in our family love to remind me. Pretty women pouring overpriced drinks and taking money from rich men.”

The older woman’s face remained composed, except for a slight tightening of her lower lip. Reiko’s dismissive comment had hurt.

“There was little danger of him discovering the truth. At large family gatherings, it was easy to disguise my magic with suppression amulets. My grandmother, your Great-Grandmother Reiko, is a nine-tailed fox. The amulets were foolproof.”

“Not completely,” Nessa pointed out. “I saw the shadow of your other self at Reiko’s house.”

The woman stared unblinkingly at Nessa. She felt a little prickling resonance run over her skin, up and down and back. She saw the ghostly shadow of ears and a long white tail.

Mrs. Sömmerhaulder hissed out a long breath and the prickling sensation stopped. “You are perhaps one in one hundred million. Perhaps two hundred million.”

Desiree and Reiko looked at Nessa with interest.

Fiona only rolled her eyes. “For God’s sake. All parents lie to their kids. Honestly, Reiko. Part of growing up is finding out those secrets.”

“Everything changed when I was born, didn’t it?”

“Yes. We hadn’t planned it. Never expected it to happen. Kitsune and humans can rarely conceive. Philip declared it was a miracle.”

“He’s older than you?” Ravi asked.

“Much.”

Mrs. Sömmerhaulder looked at her daughter, the tight lines on her face relaxing a little. “I hoped she would be born like her father, without magic. My hopes were in vain. After thirty days, she transformed into a little white fox cub and back again. Right in her crib. It was the happiest and saddest day of my life. If Philip’s family learned of her magic, I would have to divorce him. Leave the clan. Reiko would never even be allowed to see her father. They fear,

unnecessarily, magic can rub off on them.” She lifted her brows, “Such superstition. Even in these times.”

“But you knew the rules. The clan rules.” Nessa said. “And you just kept going?”

This confrontation reminded her a little too much of her own mother’s selfishness. Bargaining with a Fallen Angel and dooming her daughter.

Izumi looked at Nessa defiantly. “You are a child. You do not understand what love can make you do.”

“And I don’t want to,” said Nessa with feeling.

Ravi put a hand on her shoulder. She twisted around to look at him. He gave her a funny little smile.

“You hid my magic,” Reiko said. “Not only from them. From me. I’ve been living a lie. Were you ever going to tell me?”

Reiko’s mother’s hands tightened on top of the handbag. “I tried... I wanted to tell you many times.” The mask slipped and her face looked utterly miserable. Shoulders sagging, she said, “I didn’t know how.”

Desiree, speaking for the first time, asked, “Are you going to help us get Reiko to the Infernal Courthouse?”

Her shoulders snapped back into position. “What is your plan?”

A very short time later Ravi came out of the coffee shop’s bathroom, his transformation complete.

Striking a pose, he flicked the long brown curls away from his face. “Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful.”

Nessa and Desiree burst out laughing.

Fiona put a hand over her face, “Robert...”

“Ravi,” he corrected her.

“That’s what I said. Come here, Roger. Let me fix the wig.”

“Still Ravi,” he sighed squatting down in front of the witch.

Fiona expertly tugged the wig into a more centered position. Looking to Reiko she pulled part of it into a ponytail leaving two long tendrils on either side.

Fiona had helped them raid her closet before leaving the house. Nessa's plan already taking shape in her head. A Bait and Switch was exactly what they needed. Deadbeat Dad had partnered with others on a few big jobs, teaching Nessa about this technique to confuse pursuers.

Ravi was a slim man. Leanly muscled. Lucky for them. Five more pounds and he'd never have managed to shimmy into a pink stretch cotton tube dress paired with a long white cardigan, courtesy of Fiona. Underneath he wore a pair of navy-blue men's running tights from the emergency bag he kept in the company SUV. His feet were too big for any of the girls' shoes. He had to pair the winsome outfit with his running shoes.

Ravi was a good sport. He hadn't even hesitated when Nessa explained he would pretend to be Reiko, riding behind her on the scooter.

She handed over her extra helmet. "Here, put this on."

The helmet was bright pink. Nessa found it at a garage sale for five dollars and bought it for the day she might make a friend who needed a ride.

She exchanged smiles with Ravi.

Seems today was that day.

Once the helmet had been carefully strapped on over the wig, Ravi whipped out his phone posing coquettishly for selfies.

"I am going to dine out on this story forever," he declared laughing.

Jumping to Nessa's side he snapped a photo with her, making a peace sign with his other hand.

The few other people on the patio smiled but made no comment. This was LA. A man in a wig and a dress was barely worth a second glance.

"You look pretty good with long hair," Desiree said.

He flicked one of the locks again.

"Not sure pink is your color," she added.

"Don't be a hater," Ravi said with mock seriousness.

"What do you think?" Nessa asked Pim.

He held up a paw for a high five.

Poppy was going to ride with them for good measure. Enough people and one demon had seen the bird with Nessa to give their disguise an added boost.

The bird had been unusually quiet though when she got a look at Ravi she squawked, “Help, police.”

“Shush, Poppy,” Reiko admonished. “It’s part of the plan.”

“Secret?” asked Poppy in a disconcertingly clear voice.

“Yes. A secret.”

Poppy bobbed her head excitedly.

Far too short a time later, Nessa, Pim, Poppy, and Ravi were speeding along the Pacific Coast Highway heading for Redondo Beach and the Infernal Court.

Ravi was crouched low, his head at her side, trying to appear smaller.

Fiona was driving Ravi’s company SUV with Mrs. Sömmerhauler in the seat next to her wearing Fiona’s Dodgers baseball cap and sunglasses.

Desiree would take her own car since no one was looking for her. Reiko would hunker down in the back seat. They left Fiona’s car at the beachside garage.

Ravi had secured permission for all the vehicles to enter the Infernal Court parking lot at the back of the building.

They’d barely made it onto the PCH when it became apparent Nessa’s plan had worked.

She wasn’t sure if she should be happy or terrified. Probably both.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A grey jeep with an open top roared out of the CVS parking lot nearly ramming her as she turned from Second Street onto the Pacific Coast Highway. He was close enough she could feel the heat from the Jeep's engine.

Adrenaline shot through her arms and legs and her heart constricted. 'Here we go,' she thought.

"Turn right, turn right on Herondo!" Ravi shouted. "Head toward the Post Office and the Marina."

Nessa knew exactly where he meant. The main post office for this area was only a couple of blocks away.

Quiet back streets crisscrossed the area between Hermosa Beach and Redondo Beach. Visitors thought the PCH was right on the ocean but there were blocks and blocks between it and the actual sea. The area was almost entirely residential, not commercial until you got to King Harbor and the hotels on North Harbor.

Accelerator handle turned to the max, Nessa bumped up onto the sidewalk putting a row of parked cars between her and the Jeep. The Jeep slammed on the brakes, slowing to keep pace with Nessa.

"Hold on," she shouted.

Braking hard, she turned into the parking garage of one of the big condo buildings along Herondo, spun in a circle, zipped back out and onto the long diagonal street leading to the Post Office.

The Jeep tried to hang a U-turn, then slammed to a stop as it was boxed in by cars coming in both directions. Horns honked like mad.

Nessa accelerated swerving into the Post Office Parking lot and through the 'Post Office Vehicles' only driveway. She swung a wide turn, stopping just behind the gate. She and Ravi peeked around the gate posts.

The Jeep sped by.

Gunning the motor, she went back the way she'd come to Herondo, speeding past the giant power plant on the left and onto Harbor Drive. Harbor would take them to the wharf. From the wharf, there were a bunch of streets leading to downtown Redondo Beach and the entrance to the Infernal Court parking lot.

They were just passing the life-size whale mural on the power plant retaining wall when a powerful motorcycle coming the other way cut across traffic to accelerate after them.

“Crap, crap, crap,” she chanted.

One end of the large commercial wharf was just ahead. There were parking garages at either end.

“Poppy! Siren!” she shouted veering onto the pedestrian promenade.

The parrot wriggled out of the blanket, whooping for all she was worth.

Weaving a perilous path around groups of people she headed for the garage.

People shouted and shook their fists. One guy threw a drink at her. It smacked Nessa on the chest, leaving a cold wet stain.

“Is he behind us?” she shouted to Ravi.

After a moment he said, “Going a different way. Oh hell!”

She looked over her shoulder long enough to see the rider gun the engine and smash through the entry gate into the parking garage. The heavy bike easily shattered the flimsy bar.

Shouts and screams echoed off the walls of the garage.

The walkway branched off. One side for the garage. The other to the wharf. She couldn't go to the wharf. There were stairs and multiple levels impossible to navigate on a scooter. She'd been to the garage before and knew the layout. It was a claustrophobic place with low ceilings and narrow aisles.

She sped past the elevator, Poppy in full “whoop, whoop” mode.

Once past the elevators, she went the wrong way down one aisle turning to squeeze between several parked cars. The motorcycle had slowed as it searched for them. As she emerged two rows over, she practically ran into him.

Poppy screeched and Nessa swore.

She snaked around him, actually kicking the motorcycle with one foot to keep her balance. Her little scooter, even with Ravi on the back, was more maneuverable than the big

machine. She wobbled from side to side for a heart-stopping few seconds before she got their balance back.

Coaxing the scooter between two cars in handicapped parking – these were always wider than normal parking spaces – she hoped she could get back out the way she'd come in.

The motorcycle rider anticipated the move. He roared into the aisle blocking her way, revving the engine until the noise was deafening. She squeezed back out, heading for the ramp to the roof. There were only two floors in this garage.

“We'll be trapped up there,” Ravi shouted.

“I have an idea. Grab my baton. It's clipped to the back of my jeans.”

She felt Ravi feeling for the clip with one hand. Finding it he snapped the weapon open to its full length.

“Jam it in the wheel,” she shouted.

The motorcycle sped up the ramp practically on top of her. As it pulled even with them, Ravi thrust the baton into the spokes of the front wheel to spectacular effect. The back wheel flipped up, propelling the rider and bike up into a forward somersault.

Nessa didn't wait to see what happened next. She gunned the little scooter forward, down the ramp and out the broken entrance gate.

Harbor ended at the garage and the wharf. She swung up onto a street full of hotels and luxury condos. She didn't know its name. She did know it ended on North Catalina Avenue and North Catalina would get her closer to the Infernal Court.

“Make a left on Emerald,” Ravi told her.

She nodded.

Poppy began whooping again. Nessa didn't ask her to stop.

Catalina was a beautiful broad boulevard lined with tall palms and houses. It ended at the Palos Verde headland. Palos Verde wasn't very '*verde*' or green these days thanks to the drought.

She could see they were coming up on Emerald when the Jeep roared up on her tail.

Poppy screeched.

Ravi swore.

Nessa turned the scooter into a driveway and up onto the sidewalk. She slowed down, abruptly hoping the Jeep would roar past and she could get behind it. Luck wasn't with her. The

Jeep slowed too, staying abreast of them. A woman with a stroller, two dogs, and a toddler on a tricycle veered into their path.

Yelping in surprise, Nessa swerved in a butt-busting bump off the curb nearly losing Ravi. They came within inches of the Jeep, so close the guy in the passenger seat reached out trying to grab Nessa's hoodie.

Swearing, she braked and careened from side to side behind the Jeep using her feet to keep the back from falling over. Hoping for the best, she veered across the street, ignoring a stop sign and about ten traffic laws.

The Jeep followed. A pick-up coming through the intersection swerved, spinning almost in a circle. Two more cars slammed on their brakes but the Jeep kept coming.

"I can't outrun it," she said to Ravi.

"Turn right and then left. If we can make it to the Infernal Court parking lot, we'll find backup."

She did as he said but the Jeep followed, screeching around the turn on two wheels. It was almost on top of them. Nessa had no tricks left. Without her Elemental magic, she was crippled. No lightning strikes. No thunderstorms.

The Jeep bumped the back of the scooter, nearly knocking them over. Pim pushed the top of the basket off. Nessa hadn't locked it. With both paws on the handlebars, he peered past Nessa at the Jeep. He crouched down on his haunches and before Nessa realized what he had in mind, he jumped.

In perfect form, he leaped from her helmet to Ravi's to the Jeep's hood. Nessa pulled to the side, squeezing the brakes. As the Jeep sped by, she saw Pim jump up and over the windshield right through the open top.

The driver swerved wildly crossing back and forth across the center line. In a panic, oncoming cars desperately slammed on the brakes, twisting to the side.

Nessa followed as closely as she dared. She could see through the window Pim was jumping between the driver and his passenger. Werecat or not, Pim was a formidable fighter. He clawed and ripped at them the two men struggled to get hold of the cat. They might as well have tried to grab a slippery eel. Pim anticipated every move.

Abruptly the Jeep accelerated across an intersection, smashing into a stop sign on the opposite side of the street. Steam erupted from under the hood.

Nessa sped over to the wreck.

“Pim?” she shouted, her heart in her mouth.

Yowling triumphantly, Pim sprang out of the driver’s side window. She caught him with her left hand the scooter wriggling wildly.

The driver pushed open the door, falling to the street. His face was a mass of torn and bloody skin.

“Good kitty,” said Nessa, putting him back in the basket.

“Whoop, whoop, whoop!” shrilled Poppy.

“Whoop, whoop!” shouted Ravi and Nessa.

They were now only a couple of blocks from the Infernal Court parking lot. The gate and the expansive lot were behind the court, shielded by a high concrete wall and rows of poplar trees. Cars entered through a heavy steel security gate. The gate could be activated manually from inside or externally with beepers by the staff.

The wall kept them from seeing anything as they approached.

The gate was partially open with just enough space for them to squeeze through.

All hell had broken loose in the parking lot.

“Are those Zombies?” she asked Ravi pointing to a dozen burly, yet disheveled and slightly uncoordinated men armed with baseball bats blocking their way forward.

“Don’t ask me,” said Ravi. “You’re the one working for the Voodoo Bail Bonds King.”

Pim put his paws over his eyes, shaking his head.

“Night of the Living Dead!” squawked Poppy.

“I was not expecting Zombies today,” Nessa said exhaling a long breath.

“It’s like the Spanish Inquisition,” Ravi said over her shoulder. “No one expects them.”

She laughed, “Are you a Monty Python fan?”

“I am.”

A woman in judge’s robes had a wand. She was waving it in an intricate movement protecting a group of people pressed up against the wall behind her from the Zombies.

“Pim look another wand!”

He nodded enthusiastically.

Wow, two wands in a couple of days. She always thought they were a myth.

The Zombies pounded on the Judge’s invisible barrier, whacking it with their bats.

Nessa was wondering how to get by since between the spell-fed barrier and the Zombies the entire driveway was blocked. As she pondered plowing through them battering ram style, the Zombies abruptly stopped. Bats upraised, they shambled away.

Cavalier, the South Bay's very own Zombie Wrangler and Desiree's cousin, had to be nearby giving them orders. From what she'd learned, Zombies needed a lot of steering. Thankfully these were not the superfast Zombies charged up on Bee Buzzed.

She gave a thumbs up to Ravi.

Speaking of voodoo ...

"Do you see Desiree?"

More importantly, where was Reiko? She couldn't have made it into the building if everyone was still fighting. She felt Ravi twisting from side to side looking as she eased the scooter through the melee, a little unsure of where to go or what to do now.

Aside from the Zombies, it was hard to tell who the good guys were and who were the bad. Everyone seemed to be brawling or throwing spells at one another. With Ravi still on the back, she negotiated the bike around several groups of men and women punching and kicking each other for all they were worth. They were wearing suits like Ravi did when he was working.

Were they Infernal Court agents?

"Wait look there!"

Desiree pushed her way past the Zombies at a run. Feet pounding, she didn't even look their way as she ran out the gates.

"Is she leaving?" Ravi asked, sounding surprised.

"No idea," Nessa said. "Why is everybody fighting everybody else instead of the bad guys? Or is everyone a bad guy?"

"Some sort of spell." Ravi made a sweeping gesture at the mayhem. "A big one."

"Who could conjure this?"

"Belencourt, for one," Ravi gave her a significant look.

"Crap. Crap. Crap," Nessa chanted.

"Yep. I need to get into this. Can you stop?"

She did. He hopped off the back. Still wearing the brown wig, pink helmet, and dress, he ran over to the judge by the gate entrance. The people behind her barrier didn't seem to be

affected by the confusion spell. He would need to talk to her. Maybe she was strong enough to break it.

Nessa pushed the bike behind a couple of SUVs, hoping they would protect her precious transportation.

“Poppy, stay here,” she told the bird as Pim hopped out of the basket.

Sidling between the SUVs she looked out at the confusion.

Much to Nessa’s surprise, she saw Jun Hee. He was near his hunter-green Honda tossing defensive hexes like throwing stars at two big men and a bigger woman dressed in suits. The men had nasty scabs covering their faces. One had a bandage hanging off his head. It looked like he might be missing an ear. The other had ragged patches of his scalp torn away. The woman had half her face bandaged and what looked like bite marks on her partially shaved scalp.

“I think those are the same goons from Brian’s house,” she said to Pim.

Her fairies had swooped in to run interference for Nessa and Desiree’s escape. The missing ear and bite marks pretty much sealed the deal. Fairies liked to bite.

Jun Hee He was bleeding from a long cut on his forehead and his shirt was torn in half revealing the intricate tattoos covering his body. He executed a roundhouse kick sending the one-eared guy flying backward.

She decided he could take care of himself.

Fiona came running up to her, her blond hair out of place and dirt smeared over the front of her high-low sports tee.

“It’s an Obfuscation Curse!” she shouted, thrusting a pair of small hand-stitched dolls into Nessa’s face.

“It’s a what?” said Nessa batting Fiona’s hand away.

Fiona waved her hand back and wagged the dolls. “Obfuscation.”

Now there was an SAT word if there ever was one.

“Obfuscation, like in confusion?”

Fiona nodded. “Exactly. Confusing people and making them attack each other. The curse is anchored in the poppets.”

Poppets were used in both Voodoo and Black Magic to inflict pain and suffering on individuals. They were hand-sewn, generally no more than four to six inches tall, stuffed with

personal items from those the curse was intended to affect. Often, they were sewn with pieces of the individual's own clothing.

Nessa's Great Grandmother had written about them in the family grimoire. Really dangerous poppets were pierced with needles dipped in blood sacrifices to anchor the spell.

"Look at the back," Nessa pointed.

On the back was part of an embroidered badge with an intricate crest.

She looked up at Fiona, clueless as to its meaning.

"This is torn from the spelled badges the Chief investigators have sewn in their clothing. Agents take an oath of obedience."

"Right, right, Ravi told me. They have to obey if they're ordered to carry out a task."

"Exactly. Whoever made the poppets stole..."

"Or was given," Nessa said ominously.

"Or was given these badges to make the spell more effective."

Fiona and Nessa let this information sink in.

"For such a big spell they'd need at least thirteen poppets. The ones I found were nailed to a tree." Fiona pointed. "Over there by the wall."

The high wall ringed three sides of the parking area had tall leafy evergreens planted close together to block any prying eyes from seeing inside the lot.

Fiona looked Nessa up and down. "Have you got your weird cat?"

"Pim is not weird," she protested.

"Invisible is weird. Is he here?" Fiona said looking around.

Pim meowed announcing his presence and probably protesting he was not weird.

"I could barely reach these. I had to stand on top of one of the cars and jump for them. Your cat can help you get the ones that are too high up. You take this side; I'll check out the other and see what I can find."

Not waiting for an answer, Fiona took off, leaving the poppets for Nessa.

Reluctantly she tucked in her tee and slipped the nasty things inside her shirt. They made her skin crawl and reminded her of the prickly, spiders-crawling-up-your-legs feeling she got near demons.

They ran to the trees and immediately spotted one of the dolls about ten feet off the ground. Nessa boosted Pim. Extending his long claws, he easily climbed the rough bark.

He was reaching out a paw when a hideous little face shot out of the leafy branches, all wrinkly skin and pointy teeth. The thing looked like a decaying hairless monkey.

It screeched and swiped at Pim with handlike paws. It grabbed the poppet and jumped at her.

“Zombie monkey!” she shouted as she fell backward, her arms crossed to protect her face. The monkey landed on her chest. Before it could bite, Pim tackled the creature, pulling it away. They fought in a tangle of claws.

‘Whoop, whoop!’ sounded overhead.

Poppy dive-bombed the monkey, grabbing hold of the flesh on the back of its neck with her clawed feet and tearing at the loose skin with her sharp beak.

The monkey screeched, reaching back with its free hand – the other still clutching the poppet – to tear at the parrot. The opening was enough for Pim to snap his jaws around the Zombie monkey’s throat. He bit down and shook. There was a nasty *crack* and the Zombie monkey went limp.

Fingers crossed, knock on wood, please God, Nessa prayed, let it be dead. She had no idea what the supernatural rules for undead animals were.

Pim used his teeth to pry the poppet from the monkey’s stiff fingers, dropping it in Nessa’s hand.

Poppy fluttered to her side.

“Watcha’ doin?” she asked, head cocked.

Nessa showed her the poppet. “We have to find these. They’re bad.”

Poppy bobbed up and down excitedly and took to the air.

Pim ran along the ground, Nessa close behind, looking for more of the dolls.

Pim yowled an alert a couple of trees ahead.

Nessa had to run around one pair of fighters rolling on the ground punching each other and jump over another pair. The second pair were almost spent, their punches dying down to a slap fight.

She spotted a police baton on the ground. An extendible version like the one lost in the chase earlier. Scooping it up, she ran to the base of the tree. Pim had already climbed beyond her reach.

This time two of the hideous Zombie monkeys launched themselves out of the branches. Nessa had a weapon now. She jumped, whacking one on the side of the head. It flew off the tree onto the ground.

Poppy dive-bombed the second beast as it attacked Pim. Grabbing the loose skin on its back with her little clawed feet she tugged, cutting at its head with her beak. The monkey ignored the bird biting Pim and holding on. They tumbled from the tree.

“Poppy move!” Nessa shouted.

The bird released its hold and Nessa let go with a blow to the creature’s back. It screamed letting go of Pim.

Nessa kicked it and it bounced into the tree with a *thwack*.

The other monkey had recovered and ran at her.

Poppy flew across its path making the monkey fall back. Using the opening Nessa struck down with all her strength on its head. There was a nasty crack and it stayed still. The other paused, screamed at them and ran between the parked cars.

Boosting Pim, he climbed to the poppet, tossing it to her.

That made four dolls.

A couple of Zombies with baseball bats almost cornered them until the Zombies were distracted by three women in cleaning staff uniforms. The women were armed with a housekeeping cart loaded with bricks. They had MLB-worthy aim, braining a Zombie each. They followed those up with two more direct hits. The Zombies staggered and fell to the ground.

“Have you seen any of these?” Nessa shouted to them, pulling one of the poppets out of her shirt.

One of the women tossed her two just like it.

“Bruja Negro!” she shouted making the sign of the cross.

Bruja Negro, a black magic witch.

The women picked up their bricks and scanned the parking lot for more targets.

Six dolls now.

They’d covered all the trees on this side of the parking lot. Steeling herself, Nessa held the baton ready. She ran the gauntlet through the groups of fighting men and women. About a dozen of the hairless monkey Zombies had joined the battle. There was a lot of screaming.

Poppy flew ahead. Her wings gave them an advantage in the search

“Whoop, whoop!” squawked the bird landing on the high branch of a tree next to the courthouse. Her head darted, looking for monkey Zombies.

Nessa tossed Pim as high as she could. He hit the trunk of the tree running, claws ready, scrambling up to where Poppy whooped her call. In seconds he had the poppet in his teeth.

Nessa was not as lucky. This time the monkey guard was on the ground. It bared its fangs at her.

Nessa was not a fan of monkeys even when they were alive. These freaked her out. It jumped. She smacked it with the police baton but the thing took the blow, somersaulted over, and came right back at her. She hit it again. It shook off the blow, screaming and screeching. Two more joined it.

Pim jumped beside her, the poppet in his mouth. She braced herself, the baton ready to swing.

The monkeys leaped simultaneously. Their clawed hands stretched out, their sharp teeth bared.

And went sailing through the air.

Jun Hee stood beside her, swinging the baseball bat.

“Poppets, right? Fiona told me.”

“Yes,” she panted. “Thirteen.”

“Here,” he tossed her one. “One of the monkeys had it around its neck. Ex-monkey,” he said with an evil smile.

Two of the monkeys scampered back posturing for an attack.

“Oh, bring it monkey boys!” Jun Hee shouted running at them.

The monkeys took a good look at the big man, turned and ran screaming.

Jun Hee followed yelling in Korean and swinging his bat.

Nine poppets.

Pim ran to the next tree. Poppy above him. Nessa followed on shaky legs, her breath burning in her throat.

Pim clawed up the tree, biting through the string. Thankfully no monkey guarded this one or the next.

Ten, eleven poppets.

They looked at the rest of the trees on this side of the fence with Poppy’s help.

No poppets.

Where were the other two?

Leaning over, her hands on her thighs trying to catch her breath Nessa remembered Jun Hee said he'd taken one from a Zombie monkey.

Crap. Maybe the other two weren't on the trees.

She explained to Poppy and Pim. Her Familiar raced into the melee, running between the parked cars, fighters, Zombies, and monkeys.

Nessa followed as best she could. A trio of Zombies was pounding on one of the big black SUVs. Several people were cowering inside. One of the Zombies, a heavy-set man with a thick brown beard, had smashed the windshield and was trying to climb up the hood to get inside. Since these were not the enhanced Bee Buzzed version of Cavalier's Zombies, the bearded Zombie was not having much success. It kept raising one leg and slipping off the bumper. Raising one leg and slipping off the bumper, again and again.

Meanwhile, the other two kept pounding the sides of the car, not able to understand they should be targeting the windows.

The poppet was tangled around the Zombie's broken baseball bat, the one trying to climb up the hood. Whether it had gotten on the bat by accident or design, Nessa couldn't guess.

Running around to the back of the SUV she climbed up the bumper. SUVs are big vehicles. Much taller than Nessa. Why, why, why had automobile designers removed the handy spare tire placement from the back of most SUVs?

With one foot on the back windshield wiper – praying it wouldn't snap off – she boosted her upper body most of the way onto the roof. Wriggling her hips and pulling with her palms on the hot metal, she managed to get all the way up. The dang roof was as hot as a frying pan. Her palms throbbed from the burning metal. She could feel the heat right through her jeans and hopped up on her feet.

The Zombies on either side of the car stopped swinging their bats. Slowly the information traveled through their decaying synapses that maybe they should stop this person on top of the vehicle. Raising the bats, they began smashing at the roof.

Now she was glad the stupid SUV was so tall. They couldn't reach her.

Pim was on the ground watching, Poppy bouncing beside him.

“Get ready!” she shouted.

The bearded Zombie was still doing his one-leg up climbing routine. Backing up to the edge of the roof, Nessa ran barreling into him with her whole body. She knocked him all the way over onto the ground, Nessa landing awkwardly on his chest. Her ears were ringing from the impact. She tasted blood in her mouth.

Pim jumped beside her. In a second, he'd bitten through the tangled cord holding the poppet on the bat and leaped away. Nessa rolled to the ground. Not quickly enough. The Zombie grabbed her arm.

He gripped her so tightly she cried out. He was a big man, far stronger than her. Twisting frantically, she tried to break his grip.

Pim dropped the poppet, biting the man's hand. If Pim was in his werecat form, he could bite the Zombie's fingers off and free her. He'd done it before. Now though, he didn't have the strength.

The two other Zombies noticed their struggles. They left off smacking the car with their bats, shambling toward Nessa.

Nessa contorted herself like a pretzel to kick the Zombie with both feet. Still no effect.

Poppy came diving in, screeching like a fire engine. She landed on the Zombie's face, ripping at his eyes with her beak.

He let go of Nessa, needing both hands to remove the new threat. Nessa rolled over, reaching for Poppy as she did. One of the baseball bats landed with a thud on the bearded Zombie's face as the others attacked. Another bat missed Nessa by no more than a breath. She felt the breeze as it flew by her head.

Still holding Poppy, she scabbled with her free hand to try and get to her feet. She got up, tripped over her own feet, stumbled, and fell to one knee before making up on both feet.

The pair of Zombies moved to follow. The bearded one had gone still. The crack on the head with the baseball bat had put him out of the fight.

With Pim holding the poppet, they zig-zagged through the parked cars hoping to confuse the Zombies. Lucky for them, Zombies are easy to confuse.

"Thanks, Poppy," she said raggedly. "You're... you're a trooper."

Poppy bobbed her head up and down rapidly.

"Kiss?" she asked

Nessa gave a hoarse laugh. She raised the bird up and kissed her on the head.

Poppy turned her head and pressed her beak to Nessa's lips.

"Small kiss," said the bird.

"Small kiss. I guess we're friends now," said Nessa trying to take a deep breath. She felt like she couldn't fill her lungs with enough air.

"Whoop!" said Poppy.

Pim dropped the poppet in her lap.

She tallied them up.

"Twelve. Fiona said there were thirteen. Should we destroy these and then try to find the last one?"

Pim cocked his head considering the poppets.

Nessa had never encountered this type of spell.

A heavy *thud* nearby made her heart jump into her throat. She felt the ground around her. Where was the police baton? She didn't even remember dropping it.

Another thud and another.

'Zombies?' Nessa thought.

The next thud was right next to them.

Nessa looked around wildly for anything to use as a weapon.

Pim hissed, backing up, snarling.

"Fee Fee!" screeched Poppy, fluttering her wings.

Fiona jumped down from the roof of the SUV shouting, "Ha!"

Her face was smeared on both sides with red stripes like tribal war paint. She thrust her hand out, holding the head of one of the monkey Zombies. In its mouth, the last poppet.

"I am Fiona Garde, slayer of Zombie monkeys," she declared holding the head high and crowing.

Nessa scrambled away. "Gross Fiona. Wonderful and yay, but gross!"

"How many do you have?"

Nessa untucked her shirt emptying the poppets onto the ground. "Twelve."

Fiona's eyes were alight with excitement. "Now we burn them!"

She gave a maniacal laugh.

They piled the poppets and the monkey head together. Neither of them felt like sticking their fingers in the dead monkey's mouth to pry the poppet out.

Digging through her backpack Nessa pulled out a lighter. Lighters were an important part of her magical survival kit.

“You’ve got salt in there, right?” Fiona asked.

“Always.”

“Okay, we burn them then sprinkle the ashes with salt. Salt water would be best.” She looked at Nessa.

“I’m out of water.”

She shrugged, “Salt will do.”

Nessa laid a hand on Pim’s back. “Keep watch for bad guys!”

Pim gave a snappy one-paw salute. He leaped onto the top of the SUV’s hood. Poppy fluttered up, strutting back and forth with the cat.

“You light them,” said Fiona, scooting away.

“Why me?” asked Nessa, suspicious.

“Your lighter, your bounty hunting madness.”

“Reiko is like your best friend,” Nessa protested.

“Light the damn poppets.”

Nessa lit them.

You would think they’d been doused in kerosene. Flames burst from the pile shooting up three feet in the air. The dolls began to scream.

Nessa crawled over to Fiona and they held onto each other as the cries rose in volume. They finally had to cover their ears. The SUVs around them began to quiver and quake. A wind rose from nowhere tossing the tree branches back and forth. The ground vibrated in a burst of energy strong enough to blow out the windows of several cars as the spell lifted.

They got to their feet. Nessa’s knees were only a little shaky.

“Where’s Reiko?” Nessa asked.

Pim meowed from the hood of the SUV, pointing in the direction of the courthouse.

Reiko and her mother were there. Her mother was in her Kitsune form, an enormous white fox.

Reiko was behind her, backed against the wall.

Ranged in front of them were a dozen grotesque figures. Horned and fanged.

The Kitsune grabbed one in its jaws and bit the monster in half, spitting out the bloody remains.

“Why aren’t they stopping?” Nessa asked Fiona. “The spell’s done.”

“They’re not part of the Obfuscation Curse. Those are demons.”

“Holy crap,” breathed Nessa. Digging the salt out of her bag she handed it to Fiona.

“Here, finish off the poppets. I need to help Reiko.”

“How?” called Fiona after her.

Good question. Her Elemental magic was useless.

The fighting had all but stopped around the parking lot. Most people were laying sprawled on the ground or sitting, their heads in their hands, beaten and bloody.

As Nessa ran, she looked for weapons. That’s when she remembered the Taser in her backpack.

“You are such an idiot,” she told herself.

She’d forgotten all about it in the confusion of the parking lot fight. The Taser would have been handy in fighting the bearded Zombie or the hairless monkey things.

Stupid, stupid.

She pulled it out. The weapon sparkled in the sunlight. Fiona had glammed it up declaring it was ugly. Now it was covered in rhinestones. Fiona had two designer Tasers custom-made by high-end luxury brands.

Nessa’s Taser held only two charges at a time. This type fired actual electrified darts into an attacker. Once used, the packet had to be replaced. Mr. Barracuda had given her an extra pack a week ago. She tucked the weapon into her waistband with the spare cartridge in her hoodie pocket.

A bloody baseball bat lay on the ground near the courthouse steps. She picked the bat up as well. Might as well go in swinging.

Movement along the wall signaled more demons joining the attack on Reiko and her mom.

Crap.

She ran to them, shooting off the taser at the closest one. The dart stuck into the green skin of its chest. The demon vibrated in an almost comical way, jumping and twitching before it

fell stiffly to the ground. Demon or not, they had organs and hearts and blood pumping through their hideous bodies. Tasers had enough volts to incapacitate all but a High Demon.

One spun, turning on her with a snarl. Pim jumped onto its face, clawing wildly at its eyes. The demon had four. It jumped spoiling her aim with the taser. The bolt landed in its crotch instead of its chest.

The effect was even more spectacular. It screamed so loudly its companions paused in their attack to stare.

Nessa saw the Kitsune had bit her own paw. Blood welled in the pads. Forcing Reiko against the courthouse wall, she tore off the suppression amulets with her teeth before drawing a symbol on her daughter's forehead with the blood.

The symbol immediately began to glow.

Nessa loaded the spare cartridge and fired them one after the other into two of the demons. They jumped and twitched, falling to the ground in great wriggling lumps of claws, tails, and teeth.

Three more demons closed on her. She was out of ammo. With Pim by her side, she raised the baseball bat.

Reiko screamed. The demons paused, turning to stare.

The girl fell to her knees. She clutched her head with both hands.

Swinging the bat, Nessa smacked the head of the nearest demon sending him stumbling forward. Pim hissed and Poppy swooped into the face of another as Pim leaped.

The air around Reiko shimmered. Nessa felt a wave of resonance that nearly knocked her off her feet. The demon in front of her hissed, holding his hands over his ears.

Izumi Sömmerhauler's blood sigil had freed her daughter's fox magic.

One minute Reiko was a human girl crouched by the wall. The next, a huge white fox stood on four legs.

The larger Kitsune barked an order. Reiko's fox eyes glowed blood red. Drawing back her lips in a snarl, mother and daughter tore into the demons.

Calling Pim and Poppy back, Nessa turned away. She didn't want to see what happened to the demons. Their screams alone were going to give her nightmares for days.

Behind the protective barrier at the top of the stairs, a tall, well-dressed man with gray hair cut short stood behind the three witches. Another man was by his side. ‘Surprised’ did not do justice to the look on the gray-haired man’s face.

He was watching Reiko and her mom finish off the demons. ‘Finish’ being the operative word. The Kitsune were tearing them apart. Green blood spurted in high arcs. Being slightly demonic themselves, the fox spirits seemed immune to the acidic effects of demon blood. Their fur was streaked with the stuff.

Nessa watched the surprise on the tall man’s face shift to something else. Disgust? Revulsion?

When the foxes were satisfied the demons would not trouble anyone ever again, they jumped high in the air, did an eye-popping back flip, and came down gracefully on one knee fully human again.

Izumi Sömmerhauler saw her husband almost immediately.

“Phillip...” Izumi said holding out a hand.

“Dad...” said Reiko running to the steps and resting her palms against the barrier.

He turned on his heel.

“Daddy?”

The emotion she put in the word made Nessa’s heart ache for the girl.

Daddy didn’t even pause. Philip Sömmerhauler turned his back on his daughter and wife and walked into the building, the other man trailing in his wake.

Nessa ran up the steps, addressing the three witches.

“This is Reiko Sömmerhauler. Judge Jelani is expecting her and what this,” she waved a hand at the chaos in the parking lot, “is all about. Lower the barrier.”

After a brief whispered conference, the witches did as she asked. The barrier melted away leaving the entrance clear. They swung open both doors, flicking a latch to keep them that way.

Inside, Nessa saw the long corridor leading to the common area, conference room, and Judges Chambers.

Sniffing, Reiko wiped the blood from her nose on the sleeve of Fiona’s sweatshirt. She must have received the injury before she transformed. As Nessa had read, they were not one creature but two. They’d have to transform back into foxes later and clean themselves up.

Izumi ran up the steps to take her daughter’s arm.

Reiko looked at her mother.

Mrs. Sömmerhauler put her chin up, lips a tight thin line. “We are who we are,” she said firmly. “I was wrong, Reiko. We have nothing to be ashamed of. We are Kitsune. We are magic.”

“We are magic,” said Reiko in a quiet voice. She stole a glance at Nessa.

“Kick-ass magic, Reiko. Super Japanese mythical kick-ass magic.”

Reiko’s eyes momentarily took on a distant look. Nessa felt a shift in the resonance emanating from the now amulet-free girl.

“Magic,” repeated Reiko.

Head up, Reiko shrugged her mother off and walked into the Courthouse on her own. Izumi followed.

Nessa was going to go too when Ravi ran up.

“Pim, will you follow Reiko? I’ll come in a minute.”

Tail high, he obediently scampered after the Sömmerhaulers.

Poor Ravi. He was definitely looking the worse for wear. The pink helmet and wig had both come off. His left eye was badly swollen and his lower lip was split. He held one arm against his chest, bending into it slightly.

“Are you okay?”

With his other arm on his hip, he struck a pose, giving a dramatic flip to his hair as though he was still wearing the wig.

“Don’t mess with the dress,” he drawled, snapping his fingers in the air.

Nessa burst out laughing.

“Ravi you rock.”

“Don’t I though?”

She pointed at the parking lot. “Uh oh, the Zombies haven’t gotten the cease-and-desist order.”

Ravi looked. “Crap.”

Despite horrific wounds, the Zombies were shambling with their single-minded focus in the direction of the courthouse.

“Regis, Lenora, Zachary!” Ravi shouted, waving an arm in the air.

Three bloodied and bruised Infernal Court agents, leaning against a black SUV, looked to him.

He pointed.

“Damn!” he heard one of them say.

All three limped away from the SUV, putting themselves between the Zombies and the doors. Ravi ran down the steps, joining them.

Their worries changed to a collective sigh of relief when as one, the Zombies collapsed like their batteries had been removed. They sprawled on the cracked tarmac in a tangle of arms, legs, and broken baseball bats, unmoving.

Climbing to the top step and staring over the parking lot, Nessa understood why.

Desiree was kicking the crap out of her cousin Cavalier. He was rolled into a fetal position just inside the parking lot entrance. She was laying into him like there was no tomorrow.

Zombies needed their wrangler to keep them on task. Or moving at all apparently.

“You go, girl!” Nessa shouted fist pumping the air.

Desiree raised a fist in return.

“Desiree has the Zombie problem under control,” she shouted to Ravi.

Ravi left the Infernal Court agents hugging each other with relief, rejoining her on the top step.

“Awesome,” he said smiling then winced, touching his eye gingerly.

“Ouch. Your eye is going to be black and blue.”

“Nothing sunglasses can’t hide,” he said with a firm nod.

“And your lip.”

He tapped it with the tip of one finger. “Yeah, won’t lie. This hurts.”

“Will your mom be mad at me?”

His face twisted in a surprised expression. “Why would you ask me about my mom?”

Nessa turned to the open doors behind her to make a sweeping gesture at the corridor.

“Ravi Singh!” sang out a voice.

Dr. Singh was striding down the hall. Her high heels click-clicking on the linoleum.

“Jeepers it’s your mom!” Nessa said in a fake old-timey voice. “Your goose is cooked.”

Ravi did not laugh.

She was there in three strides of her long legs, holding out her cell phone. Nessa caught a glimpse of Ravi posing in his wig and dress.

“Cooked!” she said with emphasis.

“Cooked goose!” Poppy squawked.

“Oh crap,” Ravi moaned.

Dr. Singh glared. Nessa thought she saw the shadow of a Cobra hood blossom behind the woman’s dark head of hair.

Yikes.

Pim gave a little yowl and jumped into Nessa’s arms.

“What is this I hear about you wearing a wig and women’s clothing?” She shook an accusatory finger at Nessa. “I’m assuming you are responsible.”

She wasn’t wrong.

“Gotta’ go,” Nessa said and ran up the corridor, Pim in her arms and Poppy on her shoulder.

“Whoop, whoop,” squawked Poppy. “Out of the way. Whoop, whoop.”

Ravi had hinted someone inside the Court was trying to prevent Reiko’s memory wipe spell. Judging by the thirteen poppets he was right. The poppets could be anchored with a variety of personal items: hair, nail clippings, bits of clothing, used tissues even. Whoever had created them did it from inside the Court. Nessa wanted to personally make sure Reiko was safely inside Judge Jelani’s chambers.

She headed for the reception desk. No one sat behind it. Probably to be expected given the level of mayhem only now winding down. A directory on the wall showed the Judge’s chambers were No. 313. A sign on her left pointed to Numbers 300-320.

Good.

A screech made her jump a foot. One of the hairless Zombie monkeys ran overhead, clinging to the ceiling like a gecko.

He was followed a few seconds later by a rapid click-click-clicking. A woman in high heels, a white sweater, a tight gray skirt carrying a long-handled net and running like a track star skidded to a stop by Nessa.

“Where?” she shouted.

Nessa pointed in the direction the monkey went.

The women ran on.

“It’s a crazy world,” Nessa sighed heading for 313.

“Scary monkey. Kisses?” said Poppy moving closer.

Nessa gave her another kiss on the head.

Down the corridor and around the corner she saw Reiko standing outside No. 313. Mom had transformed back into fox form, standing guard. The girl waved

“Hey,” Nessa said breathlessly. “Hi, Mrs. Sömmerhauler.”

Even sitting, the fox spirit was nearly eye-to-eye with Nessa. Her tail moved restlessly. She pulled her upper lip back showing red-stained fangs to nod at Nessa.

Pim wriggled to be let down and she set him on the floor.

Pim went to the fox, unafraid, nose high, sniffing. The Kitsune lowered her own nose and touched it to the feline. Either she could see Pim in his invisible form or smell him.

“Rei Rei,” squeaked Poppy flapping her wings and bobbing back and forth.

Reiko smoothed the feathers on Poppy’s head. “Hi, Poppy.”

A chorus of high-pitched squeals made Nessa and Reiko both jump.

More of the hideous hairless monkey ran along the corridor. One of them stopped in front of Nessa, raising its arm in a menacing pose.

Reiko’s mom casually leaned over and with a snap of her jaws, the monkey disappeared.

Reiko made a horrified face. “Ewww, mom. Don’t eat demon monkeys.”

Mrs. Sömmerhauler gave a furry shrug.

Screaming, the others ran off.

“Demons? I thought they were Zombie monkeys.”

Reiko shook her head. “Imps. Servants to a demon lord. Mom told me.”

The word ‘Belencourt’ flashed on and off in Nessa’s mind like a giant neon sign on the Las Vegas Strip.

She’d never been sorrier something was not a Zombie.

Two men in suits much like the ones Ravi wore ran by them carrying the same sort of long-handled nets the woman in the tight gray skirt had.

Nessa pointed down the corridor and off they went.

Taking a deep breath Nessa tried to catch Reiko’s eye. “Moment of truth. You’re okay with the memory wipe Reiko, right?”

The girl certainly looked calm. Pretty amazing after her first-time transformation into a fox spirit while simultaneously fighting a horde of demons. She was made of sterner stuff than Nessa had given her credit for.

“I am. This craziness showed me how dangerous it is to keep the formula around. Reese, though. I’m worried.”

“It’s almost noon. I’m meeting her soon. If she wants to come in, I’ll bring her.”

Secretly she hoped her suspicions about the Villanova girl were wrong. If she brought in Reese, she’d get a share of her bounty. Wouldn’t *that* piss off Belencourt.

Reiko moved until her back was to the hallway. Reaching into an inner pocket in Fiona’s fancy Lulu Lemon vest, she withdrew a small spiral pink Hello Kitty notebook. She pressed it into Nessa’s hand.

Cupping her hands over Nessa’s ear, she whispered urgently.

A moment later the Judge’s door swung open. Reiko immediately stepped away.

No one stood in the doorway. The door seemed to have opened by itself.

Nessa and Reiko’s mom exchanged looks. Carefully keeping Reiko shielded, they moved a few steps into the room.

Pim squeezed between them, running ahead to scout for danger.

A woman stood at the window. Her coarse black hair was wound around her head in a complex braided pattern. Ebony skin. Black robes. She certainly looked like the judge who had stared so sternly at Nessa in the courtroom.

Nessa waited until Pim paced a slow circle around the woman, nose in the air.

“Well?” Nessa asked him.

She turned to face them. “Have I passed Mr. Whisker’s Rampant’s inspection?”

Pim nodded.

Nessa let out the breath she’d been holding. She and Reiko’s mom made space for Reiko to enter.

A door in the back of the chamber slid open and two of the towering demon-like Bailiffs walked out.

Mrs. Sömmerhauler stiffened, baring her teeth. Nessa put her hands up then remembered she was nearly defenseless. Pim yowled a challenge.

“Stand down,” the Judge said making a damping down motion with both hands.

Nessa quickly realized she was talking to them, not the Bailiffs.

“They are here for Reiko’s protection. No one will disturb us with them on guard.”

She motioned toward the door and the lumbering monsters, their long arms almost dragging on the floor walked out of the room, shutting the door behind them.

Judge Jelani went to Reiko. “Thank you for coming in.”

“Reese still isn’t here,” Reiko said.

The Judge looked at Nessa, one eyebrow raised.

“I’m supposed to meet Reese not far from here. She says she’s been with Elizabeth Sömmerhauler.”

The Judge’s eyes widened ever so slightly.

Nessa glanced at Reiko, not sure if she should voice her suspicions or not.

Judge Jelani gave a tiny shake of her head.

Nessa kept quiet.

“Are you staying for the spell?” the Judge asked Nessa.

“Me? No time.”

The woman gave a regal nod.

Nessa walked out of the Judge’s chambers with Reiko and Reese’s Bee Buzzed formula burning a hole in her pocket.

