

HOLIDAY HEXMAS



A Christmas Crossover
By Eden Crowne

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Author's Message

This Holiday Crossover story incorporates characters from my *Avenging Angel* Series, *Girl's Guide to Voodoo Bounty Hunting*, and the upcoming *Cursed Objects* books. There are a few spoilers if you haven't read any of the *Avenging Angel* books, so be aware.

CHAPTER ONE: Hermosa Beach, Second Street

The bells woke her.

An insistent jingle, jingle, jingle.

Riley groaned, shoving the pillow over her head.

Jingle, jingle, jingle.

Riley sat up, cursing under her breath.

Jingle, jingle.

“Ahhhh!”

Her room was dark. The sky outside her window was dark. The whole hemisphere was dark. Why was she awake?

She looked at the clock.

Ten.

Nooooo, she'd only been asleep an hour.

Today had been a long, painful one. A demon from a cursed comic book had proved reluctant to be exorcised. The demon enjoyed cursing the comic's owners with gruesome deaths. He did not want to stop, and Riley had twelve stitches and a black eye to prove it.

Riley broke curses for a living and most of them tried to break her right back. Fighting dark magic involved much more actual fighting than she expected when she took over R.I.P. Investigations six years ago at the ripe old age of nineteen.

She looked at the foot of the bed.

No large, furry, four-footed lump.

“Prince is that you jingling?”

No bark in reply.

Jingle, jingle, jingle.

Riley cocked her head, listening.

The noise was coming from... outside?

Groaning, she slid out of bed, pulling on a fleece hoodie and slipping into her furry moccasins. Contrary to popular belief, Southern California did have a winter season. Here on the coast, December was cold and damp at night no matter how warm it got during the day.

God, was it too soon to take more ibuprofen? Everything hurt.

A warm glow from the living room told her the Christmas tree lights were on. She was sure she'd turned them off before bed. Maybe she hadn't. She'd been in pretty bad shape when she got home.

A cold draft greeted her as she limped down the stairs. Scrunching down on the step, she saw the sliding glass door to the backyard was open.

Christmas tree lights on. Sliding door open. Jingle bells. If Santa had woken her up, she was going to kick him. Hard.

Most women living alone would have immediately dialed 911 or grabbed a baseball bat or both. Riley was not most women. She was a witch of the Thirteen Families and her little house on Second Street in Hermosa Beach had been warded by three generations of spellcasters. Nothing and nobody got in without her permission.

Except maybe Santa...

"Prince!" she shouted. "I know you opened that door. Did you turn on the Christmas tree lights too?"

Prince came prancing in from the backyard, tail wagging. He thrust his nose into her hand and woofed an exuberant greeting.

Prince resembled a large black Belgian Shepard, but appearances can be deceiving. He was more demon than dog. His full name was Prince Machiavelli Spawn of the Devil because he had been a very bad puppy.

He looked from Riley to the yard and back at Riley. When Riley continued to stare at him, he pawed her leg, repeating the process.

She looked at the yard.

She looked again.

"Is that... is that a reindeer?"

Prince woofed, spun around, and trotted out to stand proudly beside the animal.

A reindeer. A large reindeer. In her backyard. In SoCal. Two blocks from the beach.

She flipped on the patio light.

Nope. Still there. Antlers and all.

Prince jumped up on his hind legs to touch noses with it.

Jingle, jingle, jingle.

Silver bells hung from a collar around its neck.

A jingle bell reindeer had woken her up in the middle of the night.

She felt her forehead.

No fever.

Concussion?

Somehow it would be easier to explain if she was delirious.

The animal in question ambled over to look in the open door. Jingling all the way.

It was too narrow for his – her? – antlers to get through. Probably a good thing since the beast looked ready to walk in and make itself at home.

“Prince, is this a boy reindeer or a girl reindeer? One bark for a boy. Two for a girl.”

He barked twice.

The reindeer met her eyes and Riley could have sworn the animal smiled.

“Excuse me,” Riley said, moving the antlers so she could slide out.

She slowly walked the perimeter of her yard, invoking the sigils surrounding her home to manifest. They did. Every one of them glowing with a calm, azure light to create a net of protection.

She looked up. A small circle high above her was dark. A few weeks ago, a family friend who also happened to be a Fallen Angel – a fact she had not known until all hell broke loose between him, a Reaper, an Avenging Angel, and a horde of vengeful Daemon – had pointed out that gap in her warding after flying through it on a surprise visit.

Flying.

She looked at the reindeer.

The reindeer swung her big head to look back at her.

Jingle, jingle, jingle.

A shiver ran down Riley’s back.

Tis the season.

CHAPTER TWO: Hermosa Beach, The Strand

Evie made a slow circle over the Pacific Coast Highway, her enormous wings catching a warm updraft to glide silently for home. Or what she now called home since the rebel Daemon had taken over St. Jude's Church and her little apartment.

She was living in one of the Baron's houses on the Strand, a seaside promenade stretching several miles through the towns of Hermosa and Manhattan Beach. A five-bedroom, six-bathroom *cottage* as he called it worth six million dollars on the current market.

The irony of her current situation was not lost on Evie. As an Avenging Angel, she'd broken so many rules in the afterlife if she was still alive and a cop, she'd arrest herself.

To bring her Reaper lover, Trick, back from the dead, Evie had sacrificed a wing and her heavenly Grace to the Baron. The Baron was a Fallen Angel who lost a wing when he lost his heavenly status. He needed a replacement. Specifically, hers.

Evie's choice had set in motion a harrowing chain of events.

Short version: a horde of ancient Daemon were released from their angelic prison. Evie received a wing from the dying Red Queen of Fae. The wing turned out to be cursed. Thank you so much, Your Majesty.

To stop the Daemon – who felt they should now guide mankind's destiny – Evie was forced to partner with the Baron to storm one of the gates of heaven to free his witchy wife. Ms. Witchy Wife had the power to recapture the Daemon. Or so they hoped.

In the meantime, the Daemon leader usurped control of the earthly Bureau of Checks and Balances that supported earthbound angels and kept tabs on supernatural comings and goings. The BCB was headquartered inside St. Jude's. So was Evie. Goodbye cozy apartment. Hello, former enemy's house.

Evie circled the rooftop patio of the modern three-story glass and concrete building. Stopping in mid-air to hover, she stared down. There was something on the roof. Something big with antlers and four legs.

A demon?

A monster?

The Baron's house was not heavily warded. After all, he was a Fallen Angel. Not many beings had the power to threaten him.

Evie and her companions were not quite so complacent. Their current list of enemies could be listed chronologically, alphabetically, or numerically. They had a lot.

Drawing her golden sword, she arrowed into a dive.

"Stop!" shouted a man's voice.

Trick jumped out from the patio door to stand in front of the creature, arms out in a protective pose. "Evie, stop. Don't hurt him."

She back-winged frantically, creating a downdraft that knocked over several patio chairs, the sun umbrella, and nearly toppled Trick before she came to a stop, balancing on the metal railing lining the roof.

Trick smiled broadly as he gestured with both hands, "Look. It's a reindeer."

And it was.

Evie hopped off the railing, slipping her sword back in its invisible scabbard and folding her wings away in their magical pocket.

She stared at the reindeer.

The reindeer looked quietly back, shaking its big head, and setting a tangle of silver bells to jingle.

"Why is there aon the roof?" she asked.

A man ran out the patio door, "Miss Grace, Miss Grace, look! A reindeer."

"I see that, Leo."

He beamed at her. "We have them in Siberia."

He had a thick accent, so it came out more like, '*Vee haf zem een Siberia*,' but Evie figured it out. "A girl. I mean, zis, *this* is a girl. Big antlers." He mimed antlers on either side of his head. "Only girl reindeer have antlers in winter."

"Is she your pet? Did you bring the reindeer from Russia?"

Leo had fled the BCB when the rebel Daemon took over, joining Evie's merry band of conspirators. A tech specialist who had transferred from the St. Petersburg office. He had only been with them a week now, so a pet reindeer could be possible for all Evie knew.

He gave a hearty laugh, "Ha, ha. Miss Grace is full of jokes. No, it is not me... Not I? I

am *not* bringing her.”

“We heard a noise on the roof,” Trick said. “Leo and I came up.”

“With weapons,” Leo added, though it sounded like, ‘*vit vepowns.*’

“Right. Leo and I came up ready to fight, and there he was. Just standing as calm as can be.”

The reindeer ambled over and gently nudged Evie. She was a beautiful creature. Thick shaggy fur in every gradation of gray. Even her magnificent antlers had a soft gray fuzz on them.

Evie pulled out her phone.

The Baron picked up on the first ring.

“Hello, Miss Grace,” he answered in his deep melodious voice with the hint of an Old-World accent.

“Did you drop a reindeer on our roof?” she demanded.

There was a pause on the other line.

“Reindeer, on the roof,” she repeated. “You?”

The pause lengthened.

Finally, he said, “You’ve got one too?”

CHAPTER THREE: Hermosa Beach, PCH

Nessa was balanced precariously on a ladder, green light bulb in one hand, the other inching along the gutter toward the dead bulb. Aunt Emerald insisted on using holiday lights on the outside of the house that were older than Nessa, maybe even older than her aunt.

Pim, her invisible cat, Familiar, and best friend was at the foot of the ladder meowing directions.

She was only five foot two and even on tiptoe, it was a stretch to reach the lights. Her aunt either needed a taller ladder or better lights.

Emerald was her dad's older sister. Dad had dumped her on Aunt Emerald's doorstep when Nessa declared she wanted to go to college. Once Aunt Emerald realized Nessa's abilities could help her seances, she'd been quite happy with the new arrangement.

Tremulous voice, *"I feel the chill of the nether world."*

Cue Nessa summoning a cold breeze.

"And the soft wind full of love from the departed."

Cue Nessa summoning a warm breeze.

And so on and so forth.

Briefly letting go of the gutter to unscrew the uncooperative bulb, she slipped it in her pocket and screwed in the new one.

It lit up. There. All better.

Multi-colored holiday lights circled the house including the Carriage house and Nessa's little apartment her aunt let her have rent-free. A vintage Glo-Mo Santa and his reindeer were perched on the roof under an oversized star wired to the chimney.

Her aunt liked Christmas a lot. No fault there. Nessa did too. She just wasn't accustomed to celebrating it in a home. Life on the road running from a Fallen Angel lusting after her soul since birth coupled with Deadbeat Dad's larcenous magical scams meant a lot of Christmas holidays in budget motels.

Every room in her aunt's house, including the séance room – Aunt Emerald ran a popular fortune-telling salon in Hermosa Beach – had a Christmas tree. Nessa's too. Which was a good

thing since otherwise, it would have been a 99 Cent Store Christmas for her and the cat. She was on a tight budget. One more year at Santa Monica City College before, fingers crossed, transferring to Cal State Long Beach. The plan was to get an undergraduate degree in meteorology. As an Air Elemental, becoming a meteorologist seemed like a no-brainer. She didn't just study the atmosphere; she could control it.

Things were looking up a little, financially speaking. Their new job as novice bounty hunters for Barracuda Bail Bonds had started to bring in money. Nessa's Deadbeat Dad had skipped out on his debt to Barracuda Bail Bonds leaving Nessa as collateral. Most Bail Bonds offices did not accept nineteen-year-old humans as collateral. Unfortunately, Dad's debt wasn't money, it was magic.

Roman Barracuda was a centuries-old Voodoo King who did a lot of business with the criminal element of SoCal's supernatural underworld. Nessa's talents were just what he needed to track the magical miscreants trying to skip out on their debts.

Nessa shut the ladder and carried it into the garage trailed by Pim.

It was already after ten. No school tomorrow and no Barracuda Bail Bonds.

She went to the front walk for a last look at the lights in case she'd missed any. Once she and Pim went upstairs they were not going out again. Her super-soft Christmas pajamas were waiting. She was going to grab her huggy pillow and jump on the couch with her favorite blanket. They had Christmas movies lined up on the IMBD channel and a party-sized bag of Skinny Pop. The yummy salt and pepper flavor.

Pim noticed the man slumped by the front gate before Nessa saw him. Her attention was focused on the front of the house. It took Pim's meow and the touch of his paw to make her look.

The man had his back to the front gate of the white picket fence surrounding the front yard. In the glare of the Christmas lights, she saw an elderly man with a short trim beard. He was dressed in a hunter green coat, dark pants, and brown walking boots.

Pim meowed.

She didn't need him to tell her, she saw the blood seeping out of a long tear in the sleeve of the coat. Another smear ran down his temple.

More importantly, she saw he was magic.

The tingling frisson of power reached her all the way from the gate. Aunt Emerald's house was heavily spelled against intruders. Nothing magically malevolent could come within

three feet of the property. The man in the green coat was leaning against the gate. He could never get that close if he was wielding dark magic.

Pim's hair puffed out nose to tail and he spun, howling.

Without his warning, the black hex would have hit her. She ducked, rolling to the side, one hand on her summoning belt, the other throwing a wind spell that smashed into her attacker like a cannonball.

Pim transformed in mid-air into his fearsome werecat form. Feline Pim was a gray British Shorthair, though only Nessa could normally see that. He was invisible due to an unfortunate gypsy curse. Werecat Pim was fully visible. Seventy pounds of screaming, spitting terror. Teeth and claws like daggers.

Pim's leap carried him all the way across the street. He landed in front of the attacking *whatever*, howling a challenge.

Nessa brought her flint bracelets together to create a spark. With the true name of the lightning burning her lips, she raised her hands, ready to ignite the spell.

"What do you want?" she asked.

Silent, the attacker stood. He had a human form, two arms, two legs, but the head of a lion and enormous brown wings.

Nessa knew a lot about Angels. Her mother had sold her soul to a Fallen one when Nessa was still in the womb. This creature was no angel, fallen or otherwise.

He had an object in one hand. A circular disk glowing faintly in the dark.

Nessa knew the disk, like the elderly man and this winged creature, was also magic.

"Don't let him take it," the old man wheezed. "Please."

Pim jumped at the winged creature, snarling a battle cry.

With his free hand, the lion-headed man pulled a dagger from his belt, slashing at Pim.

Pim was no novice warrior. He'd guarded three generations of Nessa's family.

Twisting his body up and around, he ripped into the thing's face leaving four long gouges.

The lion-headed man roared.

Pim leaped over the creature. Front paws barely touching the ground, he used his momentum to somersault onto its back, digging in his hind claws.

Nessa had the lightning ready by then.

“Pim!” she shouted.

He jumped free and Nessa swept her hands down pulling the lighting with them.

Two bolts zig-zagged out of the sky. Nessa was sure she had aimed them true, to strike the man and disintegrate him with a hundred thousand bolts of electricity.

But they didn’t. He lifted his wings bringing them together like a shield. The bolts hit, exploding in a waterfall of sparks.

Nessa fingered the sigil for wind on her summoning belt, night was a good time for air magic, the atmosphere unsettled from daytime and nighttime temperatures. She called the tempest to her.

Not fast enough.

The lion-headed man spat a burning ball of blue energy.

Pim threw himself in front of the flaming missile. Blue light burst into a shower of silver sparks. He fell limply to the ground.

“Pim!” Nessa screamed, running to him, heedless of the lion-headed man.

The impact of the magic had thrown him back into feline form. She gathered him up in her arms.

Another ball of light formed in the air in front of the winged man.

Nessa backed away, holding Pim tightly.

The winged man’s eyes were glowing as brightly as the ball of deadly light. Sheathing the dagger, he gathered it in his hand, raising his arm to throw.

Aunt Emerald leaped over the front gate like a gymnast. She was wearing her favorite purple velour Juicy Couture tracksuit from back in the day. Her long curly brown hair streaked with gray floated around her like a halo. Landing in a crouch, she brought her arms forward shouting, “*Venite ad me manes! Venite, venite! Oboedite mihi!*”

A hoard of misty figures rushed forward to obey her command. Ghosts. Dozens and dozens of them.

One or two ghosts on their own are nothing more than will-o- the-wisps. Unable to touch or be touched. A horde of ghosts directed by a Blood Witch is another matter entirely.

“*Prohibere eum,*” Emerald shouted, the magic spinning from her hands into the horde.

Mouths stretched open in silent screams; the ghosts rushed the lion-headed man in mid-throw. They overwhelmed him by their sheer numbers, dragging him to his knees. The ball

exploded, throwing him onto his back. The ghosts contained most of the explosion, which meant it was redirected into him.

Bright white light burst out around the body.

“He has a disk,” Nessa said to Emerald. “The old man says we have to get it.”

Emerald shouted a word of power, forcing the misty forms to draw back. The winged man was down but not out. He propped himself up on his wings, forcing himself to stand. Nessa saw the torn flesh in his chest. From the spell’s implosion.

He snarled, baring his teeth before his face changed. He looked confused, shuddered once, and fell back to the ground.

They waited until the count of ten to see if he was getting up.

“I think Pim’s poisoned him,” Nessa said breathlessly to her aunt.

Pim’s dewclaws in his werecat form carried a nerve toxin capable of bringing down a level-five demon. He must have scratched the creature’s back deeply enough to inject the poison. Generally, it worked much faster. This creature was terribly strong.

Aunt Emerald approached the lion-headed man, the ghosts creating a misty ring of protection around her. She cautiously reached for the disk still held in his man’s hand.

With the silent strike of an eagle, two more winged forms shot down from the sky. Each grabbed the arm of their fallen comrade. On a down sweep of their massive wings, they soared back into the air.

The disk slipped from the unconscious one’s fingers. Emerald jumped for it but the taloned foot of one of the newcomers closed around it before she could grab hold.

Nessa saw he had the head of an eagle. And then they were gone. Winging away into the night sky.

With a word of power and a wave of her hand, Aunt Emerald dispersed the ghostly forms. Swearing in Latin, she walked to Nessa.

“Pim?”

Back in Feline form, Pim was invisible to everyone except Nessa.

She hugged him gently, placing her ear on his chest. His heartbeat was fluttery.

“He’s hurt,” she said, her voice catching on a sob. “Badly.”

“Bring him here,” said the hoarse voice of the old man. “Bring him to me, young lady.”

The old man held out on arm. His other was a bloody mess.

Aunt Emerald clicked her tongue. “We need to get you inside.”

“Wait a moment.”

He motioned again to Nessa.

“Can you see him?” she asked.

“Nothing is hidden from me. Come, let me help.”

Pim was virtually indestructible by human measure. Magic, though. Magic could kill almost anything. Nessa didn’t hesitate. Laying Pim on the man’s chest, she held her breath and watched.

A puff of air that smelled of fresh pines in winter suffused their little group. Swirling green mist appeared in the man’s open palm. He whispered a chant under his breath. The rhythm of the words touched Nessa’s face like gentle fingers easing the awful pounding in her heart.

He pressed the swirl of green lights into Pim’s chest with a word that made the ground under their feet tremble.

Nessa held their breath. Aunt Emerald reached over to take Nessa’s hand, squeezing it. Seconds ticked by.

Pim opened his eyes, blinking rapidly. He licked his nose and whiskers.

“Meow?” he said tremulously.

“Pim, oh, brave kitty. Brave, brave, Pim.”

The old man gently offered the furry form to Nessa. She scooped him up, cradling him in her arms, nuzzling his furry head.

“He *is* a brave warrior,” the man wheezed. “That bolt could have killed you.”

“Thank you,” Nessa said. “So, so much.”

Emerald put an arm under the man’s uninjured shoulder. “Come on, let’s get you inside. Your wound needs cleaning and then you can explain why the hell you are bringing Daemon to my front gate.”

He gave her a weak smile, “I’m sorry for the trouble, Emerald.”

“You know him?” Nessa asked, pushing the gate open with her hip.

“Of course. Everyone knows him. He’s Santa Claus.”

CHAPTER FOUR: Hermosa Beach, the Strand

When the bell rang, Evie opened the door to see a reindeer and a Fallen Angel on the front step.

“Awk!” she shouted slamming it shut and turning the deadbolt.

The doorbell rang again.

“Do not answer that,” Evie said pointing at Trick who had followed her out of the kitchen.

The doorbell rang several times in a row. *Ding dong, ding dong, ding dong.*

Leo came down the stairs. “Who is here? Has Gaius returned?”

Gaius was an earthbound angel sent by...well, they weren't exactly clear on who sent him. He had come to help them deal with the rebel Daemon. He was a Roman Legionnaire before his death and transformation into a heavenly being. Given his background, he was very good at killing.

More loud knocking.

“Not Gaius,” she said.

Trick and Leo looked expectantly at Evie.

“And?” prompted Trick.

A man's accented voice shouted gruffly, “Miss Grace, have the courtesy to open the door to *my* house.”

“You have a reindeer,” she shouted through the door. “Go away.”

“You have a reindeer as well. Let us talk.”

“He brought the reindeer?” Trick asked, eyes wide. “How did he get it here?”

Leo made flapping motions with his arms.

“Really? It would be like carrying a small horse,” Trick said. “That's a lot even for an ex-Angel.”

“Perhaps he can help us bring the reindeer on our roof to the ground?” Leo said.

“Good idea,” Trick said enthusiastically. ‘We’re going to have to get it off the roof or there’ll be hell to pay.’”

“Potty breaks,” explained Leo grimly.

Evie shivered. Yuck.

Knock, knock, knock.

“Open the door,” said the voice.

“You better open it,” Trick said.

Evie frowned, still hesitating.

The lock turned. The Baron walked into the hall.

“This is my house. I have key,” he said in a flat voice. “I was being polite.”

Tonight, the Baron was dressed in jacket and trousers of black velvet and fawn from somewhere around the Napoleonic era. High boots, spiffy hat. He preferred costumes from some of the many centuries he had lived through though seldom anything later than the nineteenth.

After a little careful maneuvering through the doorway, the came jingling close behind

Fallen and reindeer made their way to the bar cart in the dining room. He poured a hefty measure of whiskey in a cut crystal tumbler as the rest of them watched.

The reindeer nudged his arm.

“You want a drink?” the Baron asked.

The beast nudged him again.

He took a crystal bowl from the glass china cabinet next to the cart and poured some whiskey from a different bottle.

The reindeer snorted.

Giving him a narrow-eyed look, the Baron set the bowl on the floor saying, “You are a nuisance. Nuisances do not get thirty-year-old Malt.”

Snorting, the reindeer stamped a hoof. Whatever her opinion of less than thirty-year-old Malt, she bent her head, bells jingling, to slurp the whiskey.

A faint bleating noise made the reindeer lift her head, big ears swiveling back and forth. The bleating noise came again followed rather quickly by the other reindeer clip-clopping down the broad staircase leading into the living room.

Leo made a peace sign. “Reindeer on roof problem is solved.”

Trick winked at him, dusting his hands in a ‘done’ motion.

The two reindeer immediately began nuzzling each other, grunting in happiness.

Evie sighed. Getting the beast off the roof was the least of their problems.

“Okay spill, Baron. I am betting this is your fault.”

He gave her a hurt look. “Why would you blame this on me? Have I ever accosted you with reindeer before?”

“You tried to kill me at least twice.”

It was true, he had.

“You dragged me to heaven to retrieve your wife.”

Also, true.

“You are made of trouble and annoyance.”

“She ain’t lyin’,” Trick drawled, stepping over to the refrigerator to take out two beers. Popping the tops, he handed one to Evie and one to Leo, then pulled another out for himself.

“Except for those damn rebel Daemon, you’ve been the main source of trouble for us.”

“But really, Mr. McKitrick, reindeer?” the Baron gave an insouciant shrug. “*Rangifer Tarandus* are not generally part of my magical repertoire. I am not Santa Claus.”

“Are you perhaps friends with him?” Leo said brightly. “You can tell him we *haff*, I mean *have* his flying reindeer.”

The Baron turned a look on Leo that would make most men wilt. Leo was made of sterner stuff, he returned it measure for measure. In addition to being a technical genius, Leo was an acolyte, a Soldier of God, at least before the Bureau went to heck.

Trick, much to Evie’s surprise, was nodding. “Only a few days till Christmas and a couple of reindeer show up? Whether they flew or were dropped in we don’t know, but the dang things are magical. You two must feel it.” He pointed at the Baron and Evie. “Cuz I sure as hell do.”

Evie did. She not only felt the buzz of magic, she saw it too. A sort of silver twinkle sparkling around their shaggy forms from head to tail.

The Baron took a slow swallow of whiskey. “I believe they are Fae in origin. In addition to the residue of magic within, there is an intelligence about them that is not of this earth.”

“The rebel Daemon?” Evie asked.

Daemon were ancient messengers between heaven and earth. A task they had chosen for themselves. All Daemon had wings, not all looked human. They were the closest things to angels in power.

Long ago a group of Daemon decided they should take an active role in guiding mankind's future. Something heaven seemed disinclined to do. They brought knowledge and technology from the Daemon world to humans who were still barely above the bronze age. Heaven took exception. There was war with heavy casualties mostly among the unfortunate humans who got in the way.

The rebels had been captured and imprisoned. That they were free was largely due to Evie and the Baron's interference. A situation they were desperately trying to reverse.

"Are only we singled out?" asked the Baron with a shrug. "If that is the case, well, current developments certainly point to them. Yet for what purpose? I sense no malevolence in the beasts. And I would think the Daemon have more important things on their agenda than annoying us with practical jokes."

"Singled out is the keyword there," said Evie, finishing her beer. "How do we find out if others have been gifted?"

"Santa Claus does have eight reindeer," Trick pointed out.

The Baron snorted. "Don't be ridiculous. That is a children's story."

"How is it ridiculous?" Trick persisted. "Christmas is coming and we have reindeer."

Evie considered who was most connected to the far-ranging supernatural substrata of Southern California.

"What about...what about Roman Barracuda?"

"The Voodoo King?" asked the Baron.

"And top bail bondsman," nodded Trick. "Not much gets by him in this town. He might have a lead on all this. I'll call." He pulled out his cellphone.

Leo held up a restraining hand, "Is late, yes? He will not like a phone call so late."

"Barracuda Bail Bonds never sleeps," Trick said with a knowing look.

CHAPTER FIVE: Hermosa Beach, PCH cont.

Emerald had stitched the wound on the man's arm and another on his shoulder. They looked like claw marks.

After seeing the claws on the winged figures, Nessa was pretty sure how he got them.

"Santa Claus?" Nessa had asked several times after they settled him at the kitchen table.

"I am not Santa Claus," he said irritably when the worst was over.

"Yes, you are," said Aunt Emerald, heating up some leftover tortellini and marinara sauce in the microwave.

"Santa Claus is a modern construct," he said, stabbing the table with a forefinger.

"Saint Nicholas?" Nessa persisted. "Are you Saint Nicholas?"

The microwave pinged and her aunt grated fresh parmesan over the top before setting the plate in front of the man.

Aunt Emerald was good at feeding people. A part of her character chronically poor Nessa and Pim were extremely grateful for.

"I am no Saint," he grumbled, taking a big bite of pasta. His eyes lit up, "Oh, this is good, Emerald."

"But you are, Niklaus," her aunt said, pronouncing it with a sort of Eastern European accent. "A saint."

He shook his head. "Not in the religious sense."

Emerald made a face at him.

"All right, all right. Close enough." He pointed his fork at Nessa. "My companions and I do not bring toys to good little girls and boys."

"What do you bring?" she asked.

"Joy," he said simply. "That is our purpose and our honor."

She glanced at her aunt who made a damping down motion with her hands. "Let the man eat."

Aunt Emerald uncorked a bottle of red wine, pouring glasses for herself and Niklaus. He made as if to refuse.

“Doctor’s orders,” said Aunt Emerald.

Smiling, he took the glass. “Medicinal.”

“Absolutely,” she said touching her glass to his.

Nessa put some cat treats together with part of a tin of Pim’s favorite tuna in a bowl. Setting fresh, cold water out as well, she sat by him with her back against the kitchen cabinet as he ate.

After both man and cat had finished their meals, Nessa picked Pim up. She set him on her lap, taking one of the chairs at the table.

“The Daemon. Those beings you saw outside work for Elysia,” Niklaus said with a tired sigh.

“It’s true then.” Her aunt put the dishes in the sink, picked her wine glass up, then leaned back against the kitchen counter,

“Who’s Elysia?”

“Elysia is the leader of the rebel Daemon.” The old man’s face was grim. “The Daemon escaped from their prison a short time ago.”

“Demons?” Nessa asked because it sound like maybe he’d given the word a European pronunciation.

He gave a bark of laughter. “No, not demon. *Daemon*. Though this bunch is perilously close to the former. Daemon served as messengers between heaven and earth for uncountable years. A role they chose for themselves, I might add. Mostly they try to keep some of the worst supernatural creatures from crossing into this world. Others Daemon though, believe heaven should take a more active role in guiding mankind.”

Nessa’s stomach sank a couple of inches. Heaven? Heaven meant angels and angels could attract the Fallen, like Frank. Her own personal curse thanks to her mother’s dark and fatal bargain. Nessa’s mother Genevieve had not inherited the air power of the Chevalier clan. Her jealousy led her to sell her soul to a Fallen Angel not knowing she was pregnant. When her mother died in childbirth, the Fallen considered Nessa part of the bargain. She and her father had spent most of Nessa’s life hiding from him.

Of course, Frank wasn't his real name. Names have power in her world. They must be used with extreme care.

Pim squirmed in her lap. She set him on a chair.

"What does any of this have to do with you?" Aunt Emerald asked.

"They want to stop Christmas."

"Nothing can stop Christmas," declared Nessa.

He rubbed his eyes and forehead. "I am not explaining this very well. They wish to stop the spirit of Christmas or whatever you choose to call the surge of joy that comes at this season by stopping me."

"He's the reason for the season," said Emerald affectionately.

"I thought that was Jesus," said Nessa.

"Don't be flip, Vanessa. Mid-winter celebrations are far older than any one religion. They are as old as mankind itself."

"And I am feeling every bit of those years tonight," he sighed.

Emerald topped up his glass.

Nessa felt a little breathless. "You're responsible for holiday joy. All of it?"

"No, of course not. Impossible."

"Tell her, Niklaus. She doesn't know much about the magical world."

"I and my kind are corporeal spirits. We sow seeds of joy for one month before the midwinter solstice to one month after. We have done this since humans walked this earth. Though the world has grown far larger than our small cadre of spirits, we continue to do what we can where we can."

"And you spread Christmas joy in Los Angeles?"

"Here and elsewhere."

She shook her head, "Well you're not doing a very good job. Have you seen the news?"

"Nessa," warned her aunt.

"The joy is there. Small pockets of it. Sometimes tiny. We make a difference. Maybe only briefly, but it matters."

Nessa looked at Pim. "Do you know about this?"

He shook his head.

“How do *you* know?” she asked her aunt. “You run a fortune-telling salon. A good one,” she added quickly. “Really, really good.”

“Precisely. The dead tell me many things. They tell Niklaus as well. We have been friends for some time. He stops here once or twice every season.”

They exchanged fond smiles.

“The rebel Daemon are still only a small group. Elysia’s focus is on Southern California. Day by day month by month they will nudge things in their favor. Violence will escalate. Fear will spread. Eventually, when it has reached a crisis point, the Daemon will reveal themselves as heavenly messengers of salvation. From here, their influence will spread. Social media will see to that,” he laughed ruefully, shaking his head.

Nessa sat back down. This was a lot to take in. Also, Santa knew about social media. “We pushed their agenda back a little by saving Christmas, right? Okay, the spirit of Christmas if not actual Christmas.”

“Christmas is not entirely saved,” said Niklaus shaking his head.

“The disk,” said Aunt Emerald. “The one the Dameon took. You need it?”

Pim smacked the table with one paw, nodding knowingly.

“The disk,” Nessa said, “it helps you fly. Spreading joy and stuff, right?”

He raised his eyebrows. “How could you possibly know that?”

“There was air magic resonating all over it. I saw the aura.”

He raised his eyebrows, “Oh.”

“Air Elemental,” explained Aunt Emerald pointing at Nessa.

“Oh,” he said again.

With his good hand, he pulled up his shirt.

“The missing disk is not my only problem.”

Dark rings of sigils wound around his chest. They were moving. Wriggling like worms in the dirt.

“They are strangling me. I cannot use my power.”

Aunt Emerald sucked in her breath. “That’s a curse.”

The old man winced.

“We need Riley O’Ryan,” she said.

CHAPTER SIX: Compton, Barracuda Bail Bonds

Roman Barracuda swiveled his big desk chair around to change the stack of LPs on his record player. He'd been going through his favorite collection of Christmas albums. Maybe a little Beach Boys to liven up the end of a long night? He pulled out a couple of their Christmas albums.

The desktop phone rang. He automatically stretched one arm back around to pick the receiver up despite it being close to midnight. This business was not a nine-to-five job. Not by any means

"Barracuda Bail Bonds," he said, tucking the receiver under his ear to finish stacking the LPs on the center spindle.

"Hey, Roman. Trick McKitrick. How ya'll doing?"

Roman laughed, a booming deep baritone. "Why Trick, you old cowboy. Ain't you dead for real yet?"

"Not yet. Been pretty close the past few months."

And he had.

Trick and Roman's friendship went back many years. Both his status as a Reaper formerly indentured to a demon and his current somewhat complicated relationship to Avenging Angel Evie Grace were known to the bail bondsman.

"We've got an interesting problem, Roman," Trick started to say.

"Hold...hold on a minute," he looked to the front door.

A shadow had passed across the front window. The wooden blinds were drawn but the light from the big neon green barracuda in front of the office illuminated the entrance.

He set down the receiver. Barracuda was a big black man with big black hair and a history that stretched back centuries. He got up and walked to the front door. Today he was wearing his favorite maroon slacks paired with a maroon and navy geometric patterned wide-collared shirt. Roman Barracuda loved the seventies. The nineteen seventies to be precise since he had lived through several others as well.

Given the sort of humans and supernaturals leaving slime trails across his door, the office threshold wards had to be somewhat fluid. As a precaution, he picked up his ceremonial spear on the way to the door. Last time he'd been careless a group of zombies led by the Loa of the Dead, Baron Samedi himself, had invaded the office and taken him prisoner. He was not anxious to repeat that mistake.

Sparks of power illuminated his hand as he turned the handle to throw open the door, spear raised.

Two big brown eyes regarded him calmly. The eyes were part of a large shaggy four-footed animal with gray fur and antlers of awesome proportions.

A reindeer?

On his front porch?

In Compton?

It took a moment for all this information to sink in.

Barracuda lowered his spear. "Hello. Are you lost?"

The reindeer shook a shaggy head, setting off a chorus of jingling from a set of silver bells around its neck.

Not only a reindeer. A reindeer with jingle bells.

Roman looked under its belly.

Girl reindeer. Okay.

The reindeer reached her nose across the doorway.

Barracuda patted the animal's head like a dog.

"Hey, Roman," came faintly from the telephone receiver.

Trick. He was still on the phone. Walking back to the front of his desk, Barracuda reached across for the receiver.

Turning her head from side to side, the reindeer managed to get her antlers as well as the rest of herself through the door.

"I heard jingle bells," Trick said, "jingle bells, right?"

"Yeees," said Barracuda drawing the word out still staring at the animal.

The reindeer thrust her warm black nose into Barracuda's chest, snuffling in a friendly way.

"Reindeer," Trick shouted. "You've got a reindeer, haven't you?"

“How could you possibly know that?”

“Because we’ve got one too.”

“*Santa Claus is comin’ to town...*” crooned the Beach Boys.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Hermosa Beach, Second Street cont.

Niklaus had his good arm wrapped around Nessa's waist as her little orange scooter zipped along the Pacific Coast Highway. Traffic was light since it was barely seven on a Saturday. They'd stopped briefly at Starbucks for some caffeinated courage and almond croissants courtesy of Aunt Emerald's Starbucks card. Pim sat in the front basket, blinking into the chilly morning air.

Niklaus was chuckling in her ear, "Oh, this is most fun," he said happily. "Most fun indeed."

She gave him a thumbs up.

The wounds from the Daemon were almost healed but the black curse around Niklaus's chest seemed to have doubled in size, causing him considerable pain.

Nessa had the address of Riley O'Ryan, R.I.P. Investigations, on her phone. It was only about ten minutes from her aunt's house, on Second Street right here in Hermosa Beach.

"Curse breaker," Emerald had explained last night. "Damned good one. I worked with her parents a couple of times when I had clients with vindictive ghosts attached to them. She's taken over the business. I know she can help. It's only a few days till Christmas, Niklaus needs to get back in the air."

Nessa pulled up to the house.

Or...sort of.

The two-story house was there, but not. *Glamour* didn't work on Nessa. Part of her legacy from Dad's side of the family. The shimmery quality meant the house was under a veil. To normal humans they might get a brief look then *poof*, it was gone from their consciousness.

Apparently, it worked on supernaturals as well as normal humans. Emerald had called ahead otherwise, Nessa guessed she would not even make it onto the property. She had to work to keep her balance on the front walk. The house kept fading in and out of focus. Pim stayed in the front basket, his eyes tightly shut as she parked the scooter.

Niklaus seemed to have no trouble at all. He walked up to the front door and rang the bell. As a spirit of goodness, Nessa guessed most wards would welcome him instead of the opposite.

The girl who opened the door was a little older and a little taller than Nessa. She was wearing navy blue sweats, strawberry blond hair pulled back in a ponytail. Fair skin, slim build, and a black eye the size of a baseball. She also had three fat flesh-colored Band-Aids spread across her forehead. Oh, and a split lip.

“Hey,” said Nessa giving her a finger wave.

The girl, she must be the Riley O’Ryan her aunt told them about, did not return the wave.

Instead, she gasped as Niklaus’s aura reached out to give her a hug. She stood in the doorway as if frozen.

A large jet-black dog with triangle ears and a wagging tail pushed in front of her.

He looked at Niklaus and paused in the same frozen pose.

Niklaus leaned down to smooth his ears.

This broke the spell, for lack of a better word, and the girl cleared her throat, choking out, “He...hello.”

Pim trotted forward, stretching up on his hind legs to sniff noses with the dog. After a small start of surprise, the dog sniffed enthusiastically back, wagging his tail furiously.

“I have an invisible cat,” Nessa explained.

“Oh,” said the girl in the same choked voice.

“His name is Pim. He likes dogs. A lot.”

The girl gave herself a physical shake. “Oh good because my dog loves cats. His BFFs are my friend’s rag dolls, Flotsam and Jetsam.”

Prince promptly threw himself to the ground, rolled over on his back, tongue lolling, and waved all four paws in the air.

Pim reciprocated by rubbing against his muzzle.

“My cat has claimed your dog,” Nessa said half-laughing, half-serious. “Sorry.”

Riley smiled. “He won’t mind. I’m Riley, please come in.”

She stood aside ushering them into the house with a sweep of her hand.

Niklaus strode in. Nessa entered more cautiously. The wards were crawling all over her skin like fire ants. She sucked in her breath as pricks of pain danced across her face and hands

The girl was watching her closely. “My wards don’t like you,” she said.

Nessa cringed.

“They only act like that for one other person, Evie Grace. Do you know her?”

She shook her head.

“Evie is an Avenging Angel. She fell from Grace,” the girl paused. “Maybe that’s relevant maybe not. But she has the wing of a Nephilim who is half-Fae.”

Nephilim were human/angel hybrids. Beings of immense power. And Fae?

Nessa’s stomach sank into her Chuck Taylor canvas shoes. She had been carrying the curse of a Fallen Angel since birth. Only recently she’d learned as an Air Elemental, she was also of Fae blood. Riley’s comment hit way too close.

The girl noticed Nessa’s distress. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Maybe I should wait outside,” she said edging back to the door.

“No. It’ll be fine. Let me get an amulet from upstairs, it should make you feel more comfortable. Okay?”

“If you’re sure...”

“I am. Wait here.”

Nessa waited politely at the foot of the stairs. The house was an open plan with the living and dining rooms adjacent to each other. A small kitchen stood at the far end of the dining room. The dining room table was a long slab of natural wood, knots and all. Mismatched antique chairs lined both sides. A desktop computer plus laptop and small tablet were set up at one end.

“Here,” said the girl skipping down the stairs. “This should help.”

She handed Riley a small, embroidered amulet on a blue string.

The amulet lay quiet in Nessa’s palm, radiating a soft buzz. She put it on, a little hesitantly until she felt the warmth radiating out to soothe the fiery pinpricks on her skin.

“I’m Nessa Scott. This,” she indicated the old man who had wandered into the kitchen and was inspecting the contents of Miss O’Ryan’s refrigerator, “is Niklaus. He is under a curse from the Daemon. They want to...” They wanted to what? “Um, stop the spirit of Christmas.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute.” Riley’s eyes were wide. “Nicholas. Like Saint Nicholas? As in...”

“Shh. Don’t say it,” Nessa put a finger to her lips.

“Santa Claus.”

“You said it.”

Niklaus walked back into the dining room

“You’re...” Riley started to say.

“No exactly...” said Niklaus with a shake of his head.

“But...” she pointed, making a gesture to encompass the beard and green outfit.

“Close,” he acknowledged with a nod.

“And...” she started to say.

“And it’s almost Christmas, I know. “

“No. *And* I have something to show you. Come on.”

Taking Niklaus by the hand, Riley pulled him through the living room into the backyard.

She pointed from Niklaus to an animal playing what looked like a game of tag with her dog. Pim was playing too, though they couldn’t see him.

“Reindeer, Santa,” Riley said. “Santa, reindeer.”

Jingle bells jingling, the reindeer gave a bleat of joy, galloping to the bearded man.

Niklaus threw his arms around the animal’s neck, hugging him tightly.

Pim and Prince danced in circles around them both.

“Is this one of Santa’s reindeer?” Nessa asked.

“I am not Santa,” Niklaus said grumpily as he smoothed the reindeer’s big ears.

“How did he get through your wards?” Nessa asked.

Riley pointed up. “Dropped in through a hole.”

As she said it a winged figure dived to earth, landing in a silent crouch.

Nessa had her hands on her summoning belt.

Pim howled, transforming into a werecat and jumping between her and the figure.

“Daemon!” Nessa shouted. “Niklaus look out.”

“Not Dameon,” Riley said calmly, walking to the figure.

It was a man. Or at least human-shaped. No lion’s head, no eagle’s head. His face was aristocratic rather than handsome. He flexed his enormous wings, one white, one black. He stood, brushing some non-existent dust from a vintage velvet costume.

No, not Daemon. Worse.

One of the Fallen.

Nessa backed up, automatically swinging her backpack in front to pull out the bone-handled calligraphy brush. She'd need time to paint a protective blood circle. Time she didn't have.

Pim snarled all teeth and claws.

Riley turned, a puzzled look on her face but the winged man targeted Nessa with a stare like a laser scope.

"Touched," he breathed, his eyes shifting to black.

"Run!" Nessa shouted to Pim. They bolted through the living room and out the front door. She knew from experience the house wards would not let her throw down a protective circle inside Riley's home.

They were out the front door almost to the sidewalk when the man dropped down in front of them. His wings snapped out to block her way.

"Pax," he said, holding out both hands. "*Pax decorum. Primum non nocere.*"

Nessa's heart was in her mouth, choking her. Pax *smax*. He would take her to Frank, trade her for a favor, Fallen to Fallen.

A hand on her arm made her spin. She threw it off in a twisting motion.

"Ow," said Riley, shaking her wrist. "Take it easy. Whatever you think, he's not here for you. Are you Uncle Sebastian?" She added the last part with a sarcastic twang.

"Correct. Calm yourself. I am here to speak to Riley. Though you are an unexpected bonus."

"Sebastian!" Riley hissed. "Don't make it worse, can't you see she's terrified."

Nessa was panting, holding herself ready to run or spell or both.

Pim was growling continuously. He looked from Riley to the Fallen, ready to take them on at a sign from Nessa.

"Pax, as I said. Peace. I am mean you no harm. Whoever you believe I might be aligned with, you are wrong. I call no Angel friend in this world. Whatever their status. You may call me Baron. *Not* Sebastian." He leveled a glare at Riley.

She winked at Nessa. "He was my parents' friend. I grew up calling him that."

"Now, let us go back in the house like civilized people to discuss the more pressing enigma of reindeer in the garden."

"Reindeer and *Santa*," Riley said stepping aside for Nessa.

“Santa is here?” the Fallen asked quirking an eyebrow.

A shout of, “I’m not Santa,” came from the backyard.

Swallowing her fear, Nessa followed them back inside.

Riley brought them to the living room. She took a corner seat on an oversized L-shaped white couch. The Baron sat at the other end. Nessa remained standing nearer to possible escape through the front door.

“What brings you here, Sebastian? Coincidence?”

“I sincerely doubt it. My wife has placed tracking spells near the house Miss Grace and the others are using. Also, our own home and yours. They are set to trigger if a Damon passes close.”

“And mine went off?”

He nodded. “The Daemon know you are involved with me, Miss Grace, and Mr. McKitrick.”

“I’m not though. Not really,” Riley said shaking her head.

“Your magic helped Mr. McKitrick power the spell to defeat the Red Queen in the desert.”

“Not that it did much good. She still freed the Daemon and then got herself stabbed.”

“Nevertheless, I worry.”

“Thank you.”

Nessa and Pim exchanged shrugs. Neither of them had any idea what the two were talking about.

“Could they be looking for the reindeer?” Riley asked.

The Baron leaned forward, looking interested. “Why would the Daemon care about reindeer?”

“They could be trying to hold it hostage against Niklaus.”

“Not it. Them. I have a reindeer as well,” the Baron said leaning back.

“No way. You, too?”

“Do you have a reindeer?” he said to Nessa.

She shook her head.

Niklaus came in. “You have one of my reindeer?”

“Yes, she dropped into our backyard. Apparently, much like Riley here. There is another at Miss Grace’s home and one more with Roman Barracuda.”

“Did you hear?” Niklaus shouted over his shoulder. “The others have been found!”

The reindeer bleated a funny high-pitched call. Prince barked dancing on his hind legs pleased for his new friend.

“Barracuda?” Nessa interrupted. “Of Barracuda Bail Bonds?”

“The one and only,” said Riley with a laugh.

“He’s my boss.”

Both the Baron and Riley gave her a measuring stare.

“What do you do for him? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Indeed,” said the Baron.

“We’re Bounty Hunters. Me and my cat.”

“Wow,” said Riley. “Did not expect that. What are you fifteen?”

“Nineteen,” she said, straightening up.

“Is that even legal?”

“Mr. Barracuda says it is.”

Riley made a face. “Cuz that makes it true.”

“Interesting. We are all related to each other in some way. Is that your doing mister...”

The Baron paused. “We have not been introduced.”

“Niklaus,” the old man said with great dignity. “I am Niklaus.”

“I thought you had eight reindeer,” Nessa said.

“Four,” he said firmly.

“What about Rudolph?” Nessa asked in a small voice.

Niklaus scowled.

Pim gave a sad mew.

She ran her hand down his back. “That’s okay, we can still believe,” she whispered.

Pim nodded.

“But you must have a sleigh,” Riley said. “Reindeer and sleighs go together.”

“Indeed, they do. My sleigh will find its way to me.”

“And how did you lose your reindeer here on the South Coast of Los Angeles, Mr. Niklaus?” asked the Baron in a dismissive tone. “Seems rather careless. Given the season.”

He frowned. "I did not lose them. The Daemon surprised me. My own fault. I never expected an attack. Most powerful entities do not even know we exist. When they lassoed me with the hex, I scattered my reindeer with a spell. The spell spirited them to places they would be safe."

"Safe?" Riley sniggered. "Sebastian, that means you're on the nice list."

"The devil I am," he snorted. "Why didn't the Fallen girl get a reindeer then?"

Nessa flinched as if she'd been struck.

Niklaus moved to stand beside her. "I sought refuge with her aunt. We are friends. Emerald Scott has a powerful set of wards around her home. Even the Daemon cannot approach too closely. Miss Scott and her valiant invisible cat Pim fought the Daemon. Because of them, I am standing here."

"She has an invisible cat?" the Baron asked. "The beast I saw before? I was wondering where it had gotten to."

"Really?" said Riley with a roll of her eyes. "Cat? That's your takeaway on this?"

"I do not believe I have ever met an invisible cat," said the Baron.

Pim meowed.

He squatted down, holding out his hand.

Pim walked away.

"He doesn't want to shake your hand," she said.

Their eyes met as he stood. Nessa did not look away despite the weight of the Fallen's power. Her size and youth often mislead people to assume she was weak. Frightened? Yes. Often. Weak? No. She carried her own Angelic legacy from her mother's dark bargain.

Nessa's hair began to float as she pulled a sliver of power to her.

"I do not think you should make her mad, Fallen one," Niklaus said, standing between the two. "I believe she is dangerous when she is angry. Quite as dangerous as you."

Niklaus touched her hand.

A wave of comfort washed over her. Warm and wonderful.

"He will not harm you," he whispered.

He touched the Baron's hand next. The Fallen's face relaxed, his frown transforming to a rueful smile. "I beg your pardon," he said inclining his head. "Even the cat thinks I am rude. I am not fit for polite company."

“That’s true,” said Riley flatly. “Are we done?”

“I believe we are,” said Niklaus.

The Baron put his hand to his head, giving it a shake. His eyes shifted to black “You dare try to bewitch me?”

Niklaus turned to follow Riley up the stairs. “Not dare. I did.” He shook a finger at him. “Don't make me regret sending my reindeer to you.”

“Unless I am misreading my corporeal spirits,” Riley said over her shoulder, “Niklaus can literally cripple you with kindness, Sebastian.”

Pim ran ahead and Nessa followed. Shouldering by the Baron who stood at the bottom of the steps frowning.

Riley brought them upstairs to what was obviously her workroom. Magic resonated from floor to ceiling.

All four walls had runes of protection painted in black ink. A pentagram was carved into the wooden floor in the center of the room. Nessa assumed Riley would draw sigils and runes as she needed depending on how it was activated. Shelves on two walls were lined with glass jars of all different sizes with larger containers on the floor. Under the window was a long worktable. Bookshelves stood on either side of the entry door.

Nessa had never been in a place with so much magic imbued into it. Not even her Grandmother Hattie’s home had this sort of energy. It took her breath away. Pim rubbed against her legs, sensing her anxiety.

Riley moved a chair from the table to the center of the pentagram. She indicated Niklaus should sit.

“Will you show me?” she asked politely.

The old man unbuttoned his green coat. Aunt Emerald had mended the sleeve. Nessa stepped up to take it.

“Thank you.”

This was followed by a woolen sweater, also green. One sleeve was still ripped and stained with blood. Same for his red plaid felt shirt.

His thick chest was solid with muscle. The smooth skin was marred by a thick band of black symbols wriggling restlessly.

Riley sucked in her breath.

“You must be in a lot of pain.”

Niklaus shrugged.

“He said yesterday it was strangling him, squeezing his magic.”

Riley made an ‘understood’ motion. She began pulling jars off the shelves mixing powders in a wooden bowl.

Pim walked over, jumping on the table to observe.

The Baron finally joined them, going straight to the bookshelves. He pulled out a leatherbound book. Nessa felt a little whoosh of energy as he opened it. Grimoire maybe?

She stayed where she was, still holding Niklaus’s coat.

Prince trotted in pacing around the room, sniffing everyone. He barked at Pim, wagging his tail. Pim stayed where he was. His job was to protect Nessa. Prince went back downstairs perhaps to keep the reindeer company.

Before long, Nessa brought the bowl to the pentagram. She wrote sigils with a Japanese-style bamboo calligraphy brush. Nessa didn’t recognize them. She drew the marks at each point of the star.

Pulling down a bowl of brown powder, she sprinkled a circle around the outside of the sigils leaving a small opening. Near the opening, she placed several objects that she took from a drawer. These should be personal things to activate and anchor the circle to Riley.

Nessa put some distance between herself and the circle, moving so her back was against the wall, close to the door. Her dad was a scam artist who used his magic in the most larcenous ways possible. He had taught her to always keep her exit plan in mind.

Riley stepped inside the circle with Niklaus. She closed the circle with a handful of the brown dust, whispering a word of power.

A slight blue glow showed the circle was now active.

Riley had brought a jar and brush in with her.

Accompanied by a quiet, slow chant, Riley painted a circle of symbols above and below the curse marks on Niklaus’s chest and back. Niklaus sucked in his breath, hands tightening on the seat of the chair.

She set the jar and brush on the floor under the chair.

Bringing her hands together, Riley stood in front of Niklaus, weaving her fingers in a complex series of gestures. Finishing on one that must be a truly painful contortion, Riley said a word.

Even separated by the barrier of the magic circle, Nessa felt the power of the word slap her in the face. Pim jumped with a surprised meow.

Even the Baron took a step back.

The symbols in the cursed ring on Niklaus's chest squirmed. He moaned through clenched teeth, his knuckles white in their grip on the seat of the chair.

Nessa spoke the word again.

The ring around his chest faded to a dull gray but it didn't disappear.

Riley put her hands on Niklaus's shoulders for a moment before kneeling to sweep open the circle. Her magic dissipated in a rush of air.

Riley was pale. "I didn't break it. The spell is a dark one. Like Niklaus, it is Fae. Not of our world. I need something special to power my spell."

She paused looking at the Baron.

"Me?" he said, slipping the book back in place.

"No. Evie. Since she got the Red Queen's wing, her angelic blood has been undergoing a change. She is a hybrid angelic/Fae creature. The Daemon's spell should not be able to withstand Evie's unique combination of Fae and Earthbound angelic blood. I think..." she paused. "I hope I can break the curse with her help."

"Do you have her number?"

"I do, I'll call now." Her cellphone was on the worktable. She picked it up, tapping the open screen.

Niklaus was buttoning up his shirt. "I still have to get my disk back."

"True. They don't know you," the Baron said indicating Nessa.

"Who doesn't know me?"

"The Daemon. They would have taken the disk to St. Jude's," the Baron said.

He reached for Nessa's hand. "Come on, we're going to save Christmas. Bring your invisible cat."

CHAPTER EIGHT: St. Jude's Church, Torrance

Nessa did not drink alcohol but today was seriously making her reconsider that choice. She had a Fallen Angel on the back of her scooter. They were on their way to the rebel Daemon stronghold to retrieve a magical disk to save Christmas for L.A.

In Torrance.

What was it about Torrance? In the past few weeks, she'd been chased by Skinwalkers, confronted her own personal Fallen Angel not once but twice, battled zombies, and defeated a legendary samurai wielding a cursed blade. Oh, and been hit by an SUV and kidnapped by warlocks.

She was really beginning to hate this town.

The grounds of St. Jude's took up an entire block behind the sprawling Del Almo Mall. The Baron had Nessa drive by slowly.

She wasn't impressed with what she saw. St. Jude's was a rundown cluster of buildings surrounded by dead grass, broken trees, and dry brush. The lower windows on the...what? Nessa wasn't sure you'd call it a cathedral. She thought cathedrals had to be big. Church? Whatever. The lower windows were boarded over. Upper windows still had their stained glass. The bell tower looked intact.

A high fence of iron bars stretched around the entire property with a narrow door in the center the only entrance Nessa could see. Parking was inside a separate fenced-in lot. It held only a handful of cars.

He instructed her to keep going before turning the next corner to park.

She popped the lock on Pim's basket putting her helmet and the spare one Riley had lent her for the Baron inside.

"There is more land at the back. A large garden. Let us take a look."

She followed a few steps behind, Pim at her side. Before they crossed the street, he held up a hand to stop. The air around him buzzed with energy as he unfurled his wings. He bent the black one forward and pulled out one of the small inner feathers.

“Take this, tuck it in your shirt or somewhere safe.”

Nessa backed away as if he’d offered her a viper.

Pim hissed, baring his teeth at the Fallen.

The Baron sighed with impatience. “This feather will mask your own signature. We do not want the Daemon to become more aware of you than they are. If we are successful or even if we are not, they will only sense me.”

Pim took his hissing down several notches.

“What do you think?” she asked him.

The Baron wisely held the feather down for Pim to sniff.

Following a careful inspection, Pim nodded.

She took the feather tucking it into a little pouch attached to her summoning belt.

“Thank you.”

“Stay close,” he said. “Keep in the shadow of my wings. We are shielded until we reach the fence at least.”

They walked across the street. He walked so quickly; Nessa had to jog to keep as close as he wanted her. They went around to the back of the building.

The Baron was right, there was much more land here, all of it a wreck. Dozens of trees bent and broken, the ground churned up. Raised beds for vegetables or flowers were smashed.

The Baron’s wings flashed out to hide them as a large animal approached the fence.

“Shhh,” he whispered in her ear.

Pim leaped into her arms. She held him inside the Fallen’s veil.

Nessa couldn’t see what was approaching. Something heavy-footed that made snuffling noises as it walked, *thump, thump, thump*. It sounded more like a cow or a pig than a dog. Dogs didn’t thump when they walked.

After it passed, he opened his wings enough Nessa could see the back of a big animal with leathery gray skin trotting by. It looked suspiciously like a hippopotamus. The thing spun and Nessa bit her lip to keep silent. The front of the beast had a crocodile’s snout and legs like a lion.

Thrusting its impossible snout in the air, the monster snuffled and sniffed. Nessa held her breath until with a final snort it resumed its patrol.

“What is that?” she whispered.

“An Ammat,” he replied equally quiet. “They serve the Daemon. The Egyptians called them the Devourers. They ate the hearts of the dead who were judged impure in the underworld.”

Nessa made a squeaking sound. “Hearts of the dead?”

“Quiet, another comes.”

They waited while a second Ammat lumbered past.

“Where there are Ammat, there will also be Dirj.” His voice sounded grim.

“And that is?”

“Worse.”

Folding his wings, he motioned for them to follow.

Directly behind some long buildings that looked like offices, the Baron stopped. A stand of broken trees came right up to the fence line.

Reaching into the inside pocket of his velvet coat, the Baron removed what looked like a pocket watch with numerous small dials. He fiddled with the controls a bit, pulled out a ribbon, and motioned to Pim.

Nessa set him down so the Baron could tie the ribbon on.

“This will scan for energy emanations from the disk. Cover as much ground as you can. Hold still. I must make it as invisible as yourself.”

The Fallen spoke a short spell, setting the air around Pim buzzing. Shimmering, the object faded from view.

“Done. Go,” he said with a wave of his hand.

Pim squeezed through the bars, slinking invisibly through the churned dirt and dead brush.

Together they stayed low behind the broken tree trunks. Nessa had her phone out, trying to time the patrols of the hippo-crocodiles. They were probably under a *glamour* to look like large dogs. Sometimes being able to see through veils was a definite advantage.

“What are we looking for?” said a deep voice behind them.

Nessa jumped.

A tall broad man in a black cassock with a mop of unruly black hair and a much-broken nose stood behind them.

The Baron spun around, an icy blue sword shimmering into shape in his hand.

“Father Harry,” she said.

Father Harry did not reply. He held a golden sword and the look on his face was one Nessa had never seen. His lips were drawn back in an animal-like snarl. His eyes glowed as golden as his sword.

“Fallen,” he hissed.

CHAPTER NINE: Hermosa Beach, Second Street, cont.

Riley stood in her doorway, Prince by her side. She was waiting for Evie Grace. Her wards did not like the Avenging Angel. Not since she took the Red Queen's wing to reclaim the skies. The Red Queen had been a Nephilim. Half Fae, half Fallen Angel.

The Fae DNA from the wing was corrupting Evie's angelic blood. Riley had discovered that when Evie sought her help to break nightmarish visions she thought might be part of a curse. They were. She was cursed all right.

Evie had broken a lot of laws in the afterlife. Eventually, there was a price to pay.

She watched Evie glide down to the front walk, tucking her wings back in their magical pocket. Her angelic aura hid her from prying eyes while she flew. Riley hoped that would continue as the Fae blood chipped away at her divine powers.

Evie was a tall woman with thick, long brown hair, strong features, brown eyes, and a slightly crooked nose. She'd told Riley it had been broken several times during her career as a vice cop before she was murdered. Today she was dressed in jeans, walking boots, long-sleeved white tee-shirt, and a gray fleece hoodie tied around her waist.

"Hey!" Riley called. "Wait there, I'll walk you through the wards."

Evie cast around looking for the source of the voice.

Riley knew her house was completely hidden from the Avenging Angel. Or ex-Avenging Angel. She was sort of Fallen, though not in the worse sense of the word. For a short time, Evie had access to Riley's house but that had been before...before bad things happened. Although not precisely unwelcome, she was not Riley's favorite person these days.

Riley stepped out of the veil onto the sidewalk.

"That is so weird the way you just appear out of nowhere," said Evie.

Riley shrugged.

Prince came running out the front door. With much tail wagging, he jumped up, trying to reach her face to give her a doggy welcome. He liked Evie.

"Take my hand, I've talked to the threshold wards, they'll let you through as long as you come in with me."

Hand in hand they started up the walk, Prince running in circles around them.

Evie gave a small sigh of relief. "Okay, I can see the house now."

"Good, good," Riley replied absently. "So...Are you all right with this?"

"Helping break the curse or coming into your house?"

"The curse."

"Sorry, I was being a smart ass. Well, according to you if I don't, Christmas will be ruined."

"Yep, that's pretty much the size of it. Hey, you should have brought your reindeer."

Evie gave her a startled look. "Why?"

"Didn't the Baron tell you? I have one, too."

"You are kidding me?"

"Nope. Jingle bells and all. Hold on a minute while I have a little talk with the front door ward."

Riley let go of Evie's hand, placing her palm on a complex sigil carved on the left side of the doorway. She chanted a spell to temporarily lift the ward and allow Evie entrance.

Even so, Evie had to physically push her way through to get inside.

"It's like walking through freezing cold Jell-o," Evie moaned struggling across the entrance. "I feel like it's harder than the last time I was here."

Riley stayed silent knowing it probably was. The contamination of the Fae blood was slowly spreading. Her wards were not happy.

With a final push from Riley, she managed to get all the way inside.

"Okay, I'm in. Do you know what this is all about? I mean really know?"

"Sort of."

Riley explained about Niklaus, the attack by the Daemon, the theft of his disk.

Evie was shaking her head. "You've got to be kidding me. Santa Claus has a disk that lets him and the reindeer fly?"

"I'm not Santa Claus," came a shout from the kitchen.

"He sort of is Santa Claus," Riley whispered.

"No, I'm not!" shouted the voice again.

"How did he hear that?" said Evie staring through the dining room to the kitchen.

“Niklaus,” Riley called, “would you come out? Evangeline Grace is here. She’s the one I told you about.”

Niklaus walked slowly out of the kitchen. He had one arm wrapped around his waist, holding in the pain, Riley was sure. Although the Daemon curse had initially lightened to a pale gray, it was now as black as before.

Trick followed the old man. “Hey Evie,” he said. “It’s good you’re here.”

“That’s me,” she said in a lighthearted voice, “saving Christmas.”

“Come upstairs.”

Riley hadn’t brought Evie upstairs before. They weren’t friends. Hardly even acquaintances. Yet they’d been through some tough spots magically speaking.

“Niklaus, if you’d sit in the chair again.” She pointed to the pentagram.

Evie walked around the room, taking in the complex variety of alchemical and summoning supplies.

“Wow, you really do look like a witch in here.”

“Is that a compliment?” Riley asked. “Or are you implying I don’t look professional elsewhere?”

Evie walked over and put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m trying, Riley. All I want to do is help if I can.”

Riley dropped her eyes to the worktable. The two of them had a complicated history. “Okay. Fine. Let’s try to figure this out.”

“What should I do first?”

“Could you go to Niklaus and put your hands on the black band of sigils around his chest. See if you get any impression.”

Riley’s power lay in reading the meanings behind magical symbols, no matter how arcane. Sigils, runes, even hieroglyphs spoke to her. This singular talent is what made her such an excellent curse breaker.

These Daemon markings in Niklaus’s curse kept blurring together. She couldn’t separate one from the other as they wriggled around. If she couldn’t read them, she couldn’t come up with a counterspell.

Evie walked to the man. He had taken off his sweater and shirt exposing four jagged claw marks on his arm. Neatly stitched and mostly healed. If he was Fae, he'd heal fast. The curse was another matter. Two wide bands circled his chest and back, wriggling and moving restlessly.

Riley watched as Evie touched it. Niklaus sucked in his breath as if in pain. A flash of light burst out from the dark band temporarily blinding her. When her sight cleared, Riley saw Evie stretched out on the floor.

Trick bent to gather her in his arms.

"No, don't," said Riley, pushing him away. "You know what will happen."

Trick's face went pale.

Riley had been the one to discover the Fae DNA from her new wing was corrupting her angelic blood. What was so much worse for Evie and Trick was that Fae and Reaper were poison for one another. As a Fae, Evie could not touch Trick without hurting him. Even a simple hug left burn marks on his body.

"Stay there," Riley said, putting an arm under Evie's head and helping her sit up.

Her eyes opened and she stammered, "Okay. I'm...I'm okay."

"Did you see the curse?"

She nodded.

"Can you draw the hexes?"

"I think so. They're dark, Riley. So dark."

She gave Riley an anguished look, her eyes filling with tears. "I don't know if I have enough light left in me to help you."

Riley didn't know what to say. Evie might be right.

"Perhaps I can help," said Niklaus. "If you can draw a summoning circle of sufficient power, I may be able to call on some of the other spirits. The ones like myself, for aid."

"How can you contact them?"

"Can I borrow your cellphone?" he asked with a grin.

CHAPTER TEN: St. Jude's, Torrance cont.

The Baron shoved Nessa behind him, shielding her with his black wing.

"Get away from that child," Father Harry snarled.

"Make me," said the Baron with icy calm.

Their swords touched, releasing a burst of energy that threw Nessa into the fence. She bounced painfully off the iron bars onto the ground, smacking her chest so hard, it knocked the wind right out of her. She lay in the dirt for a few heartbeats trying not to blackout.

With a gasp, her lungs inflated. Wonderful, wonderful air rushed in. Her vision cleared only to have to immediately shut her eyes again.

Too bright.

The Baron and Father Harry were haloed in incandescent white light. The hiss of blade on blade made the hair rise on the back of her neck.

The clash of energy weapons both hellish and divine hit her like a punch to the stomach. She'd suspected Father Harry had Angel in him, now she knew. He'd sensed the Baron's status as a Fallen and assumed the worst.

Idiots. The guards, the monsters, the Daemon would hear. They'd never get Niklaus's disk back.

The light seared painfully bright even through her closed eyes.

Pim growled by her ear. He'd come back. And judging by the growl, he was now in werecat form.

Nessa still had her hands over her eyes when she heard the sharp exclamations of pain.

The blinding light abruptly went out.

Carefully peeking through her fingers, she saw both men had long bloody scratches on their hands. Pim was spitting with anger, ready to spring at them again.

"My cat is saying cut it out. Why are you fighting each other? I called Father Harry to come and help. He's local and magic. You said we were going to a church. Father Harry is a church guy. He's at St. Stephan's in Pasadena. Put two and two together God damn it."

"You know this...*this*?" he pointed at the Baron, his Irish brogue thick.

“We only met today but he hasn’t tried to kill me so I’m okay with him. He’s kind of a dick but helping me with this Christmas thing I told you about.”

Pim growled looking to the fence.

“Now shut up,” she said. “One of those hippo-crocodiles is coming.”

The Baron drew Nessa and Pim, still in werecat form, into the shelter of his wings. She figured Father Harry could fend for himself.

After the monster passed, Father Harry stared after it. “What in the seven hells is that?”

“The Baron called it an Ammat. They serve the Daemon.”

“Sonic cannons on four legs,” the Baron added. “And where the Ammat are, there will also be Dirj.”

“Can’t wait to meet them,” Father Harry said sarcastically.

Nessa shook a finger at them warningly. “We’re working together for the holidays, *okay?*”

“Understood,” said Father Harry, sheathing his sword in an invisible scabbard on his back.

‘How did that even work?’ Nessa wondered. Father Harry was part Angel. Or maybe all Angel. Nessa didn’t know how much. Frank had a sword. A black one shaped like a scimitar. She shivered.

Pim had changed back to a cat. He stood on his hind legs, pawing at the Baron. He had the ribbon with the object attached between his teeth. It was fully visible though Pim was not. The ribbon must have torn when he transformed, negating the power of the veil.

The Baron took the small machine, staring at the clock face, turning the dials this way and that. He nodded at last. “You said the disk was imbued with Elemental Air magic?”

Nessa nodded.

“Then this is it. The disk is inside the main church building, it looks like in the Nave but low to the ground. Perhaps under the altar.”

Father Harry stood, picking up a leather satchel he’d dropped in the fight. “Leave that to me.”

“You should take Nessa. She is an Air Elemental. If there is a binding spell on the disk, I will wager she can break it.”

Nessa’s stomach dropped several notches. Could she? She had no idea.

“Give us a few minutes to get into the sanctuary. After that, we’ll need a distraction.”

The Baron waved a hand vaguely in Nessa’s direction. “Send your invisible cat out when you are ready.”

Pim nodded.

“He says okay,” Nessa explained.

“Come along then. We’ll take the long way around. Brush yourself off, you’re covered in leaves and dirt.”

Geez, he was right. She was.

She brushed at her dusty clothes.

“You too, Father.” She indicated the hem of his cassock.

“Jayzus!” He bent down to clean himself off as well.

They walked around the block to approach from the opposite side.

“How are we getting in?”

He winked at her. “Already paved the way. Talked to the neighborhood liaison right after you called. A Ms. Tahl. Charming woman. Seems the South Bay interdenominational community is having a bit of a festival. Or so I told her.” He chuckled. “St. Jude’s is a historical part of the area. Which is true, didn’t make that up. We’d like to take some commemorative photos of the sanctuary and the nave, you know, to display with the other churches. Used my charm. She tried to set a date. I said I was losing signal. You’re my photographer, by the by. Here take these and hand them to her.”

He pulled out a file-size clear folder with color flyers inside.

“Made these up on my iPad en route. Got a printer in the car.”

The satchel didn’t look big enough for a camera.

“Is my cellphone okay?”

“Ah, sure, of course. That’s all the rage these days, isn’t it?”

They walked up to the gate near the front of the church. There didn’t seem to be a bell or intercom.

“I’ll just give her a call.”

After a short time, he began speaking cheerfully. “Ah, it’s yourself is it, Miss Tahl. Father Harry here. Just outside with my photographer. Grand girl. Won’t be a minute with the photos.”

He waited while she spoke.

“Well now we lost signal, sorry about the confusion. Won’t take above ten minutes. And St. Jude’s is still consecrated. Would look strange for it to be left out of the party and all, don’t you think?”

Apparently, she did think so. Nessa figured the Daemon wouldn’t want to draw any more outside attention to the church than they already had. Refusing to participate would do exactly that.

He hung up and they waited. A plump middle-aged woman with a dark brown bob wearing a tunic sweater and trousers came bustling out.

Father Harry gave her an exuberant wave. “Haloo!”

She was accompanied by a large man dressed all in black. He keyed in a code in a handheld receiver. The latch on the gate clicked open.

Father Harry shook hands with her and the guard, exuding goodwill. Nessa suspected most of it was magically enhanced. Even she felt like shaking his hand.

“Now, here’s the flyers about the festival.”

Taking her cue, Nessa handed the woman the file.

“You can see the list of churches. A few of them like dear St. Jude’s here are no longer holding services but we wish to remember them.”

Miss Tahl looked over the color pamphlets and letter-sized poster.

“Oh, ah, very nice, yes. Of course, St. Jude’s should take part. Um, in a modest way. That would be only normal. I mean natural.”

“We’ll need just a few photos then. The nave, the sanctuary, the altar. Don’t think we need the choir loft. We’ll blow them up nice and bright. Make a banner. All the trimmings.”

He gave her a brilliant smile.

“Sounds um... lovely, yes,” she stammered with a glance at the guard.

His face remained impassive.

“Follow me.”

They walked to the church doors. The path leading to the entrance was as torn up as the garden in the back.

“You know,” said Father Harry, “I don’t remember the fence being here at all.”

“Ah yes,” she cleared her throat. “That’s a recent addition. We had a terrible fire, arson, you know. Ruined the garden. Damaged the outside of the church. We’ve had to close things off. For safety.”

“Ah, now isn’t that a shame.” He was laying his brogue on especially thick. “What’s the world coming to? Attacking a church. Only temporary I hope.”

Ms. Tahl busied herself with a set of keys and didn’t answer.

“And Father James has retired I heard.”

“Yes,” she hesitated before nodding, “health issues.”

Father Harry tut-tutted.

Nessa followed silently, the camera ready on her phone. Pim beside her.

Ms. Tahl finally decided on one of the keys and unlocked the door.

“Find a back way out,” she whispered to Pim.

He slipped through as soon as the door opened a crack.

The church was only dimly lit from the undamaged upper windows. It smelled heavily of smoke.

The guard remained outside.

They walked down the long center aisle of the nave, their footsteps echoing in the silence.

Father Harry rubbed his hands together. “Let’s get started. How about some pictures of the stained glass that’s still intact, a couple panorama shots looking toward the altar and then back from it down the nave to the vestibule. Then we’ll have a look at what you’ve got and decide.”

“It’s rather dark,” Ms. Tahl said apologetically.

“Not a problem,” Father Harry said jovially. “Nothing a bit of Photoshop can’t fix up.”

Nessa started dutifully taking pictures as Father Harry engaged Miss Tahl in conversation, chatting about the old St. Jude’s.

She needn’t have worried about finding the disk. As she approached the altar, the air magic zinged out like a lasso to wrap gently around her. It wanted to be found.

Pim ran back from the far-left side of the altar. He rocked back on his hind legs, pointing with both front paws.

“Exit?” she whispered.

Pim nodded.

“The disk is under the altar.”

Father Harry had Ms. Tahl near the entrance, pointing over their heads to an organ loft.

Nessa ducked behind the altar to lift the cloth.

The disk was in a box, held down by knotted ropes hammered into the floor. It was also hexed to the max. She reached forward but a buzz of energy flashed at her touch sending sparks of pain all the way to her shoulder.

They’d spelled it against magic users.

Her dad had encountered objects under safety hexes like this a couple of times before on various scams. He’d found they were hexed, generally with blood, against spellcasters of the two-legged variety.

Not four.

“Pim.”

He was already crawling under the altar cloth. He’d done this before.

Nessa stood; she’d draw more attention by crouching there.

She took pictures of the stained glass behind the altar and the gloriously ornate candelabra stands held by two gilded angels.

That was ironic after what had happened to the poor church.

She waited until Father Harry and Ms. Tahl were by the vestibule. He was talking some nonsense about the baptismal font.

Nessa felt a little tingle of energy.

Pim’s tail peeked out from under the altar cloth. He had transformed into werecat form. The rest of him emerged tugging what was left of the rope and the box holding the disk.

He’d chewed right through the hexed knots.

“Good kitty,” she whispered.

Once clear of the altar, the box levitated and floated to her, rubbing against her legs like a puppy.

“Excuse me, young lady,” Marilyn Tahl called out. “What are you doing up there?”

“Pim,” she said, dropping down. “Tell the Baron we’re ready.”

She popped back up.

“Dropped my phone, sorry.” She waved it in the air.

Pim dashed through the open doorway. He hadn't changed back to his feline form and was fully visible.

Damn.

"What was that? What just ran by?" Ms. Tahl came striding up the nave.

The guard entered through the front door.

The woman must have a call button or something.

"Something was by the altar," she yelled at him.

The guard drew his gun, aiming at Nessa. "Step away from the altar."

Nessa backed away and turned on the tears.

"Father Harry," she wailed, "he's going to shoot me."

Nessa could cry on command. She'd been trained well by her father.

"*Waaaaah*," she sobbed pitifully.

Father Harry took Miss Tahl by the shoulder, physically pulling her back and placing himself between Nessa, her, and the guard.

"This is a church!" he stood to his full height bristling with holy indignation. "How dare you bring a gun into the sanctuary. Is this what St. Jude's has come to?" he shouted.

Nessa cried harder.

"For heaven's sake, man, put your weapon away," said the woman. "She's a child."

The box bumped her leg and began to levitate.

"What is that?" said Miss Tahl.

"What is what?" said Father Harry.

Nessa cried harder.

The box floated as high as Nessa's chest.

"That!" shouted Ms. Tahl.

"Oh crap," Nessa said.

"Oh bother," said Father Harry.

Producing a bright purple canister from a side pocket in his cassock, he proceeded to thoroughly mace Miss Tahl and the guard.

"Argh!" they both shouted.

The guard began firing his weapon though he couldn't see a thing.

Father Harry had his sword out and smacked the man on the temple with the hilt. He fell like a stone.

Miss Tahl was fumbling for her phone, her eyes and nose streaming.

Father Harry ran to the church door and shot the inside bolts.

Father Harry made a 'Go, go, go,' motion.

Nessa went.

Grabbing the box, she ran for the exit Pim had used.

Bullets pinged into the walls around her before she ducked into the cover of the hallway. She had a small whirlwind at the ready, but it wouldn't stop bullets.

The deafening sound of a flashbang went off no more than a few yards behind her.

"Come on, disk," she said, holding it against her chest. "Santa's waiting."

The opening led to a short hallway and out onto a large terrace. Probably for weddings and outdoor services. Beyond the terrace was the ruined garden. It was huge. Much larger than Nessa had realized.

The Baron swooped down to land on the flagstones.

"Run," he shouted, "the Ammat are coming."

He took up a position by the open door, icy blue sword ready.

Nessa ran and didn't look back. Pim galloped beside her, still in werecat form.

There was the sound of automatic weapon fire abruptly cut off.

Nessa ran through what must have been a grove of fruit trees. Now they were bent and broken.

Two Ammat galloped from the far side of the garden, one from either side.

Nessa kept the trees between her and the hippo-crocodiles. She shifted the box into her backpack to free her hands.

To get to the fence, she'd have to leave the shelter of the trees. She needed at least one clear path. Touching her summoning belt, she called a whirlwind. There was a lot of latent magic in the ground around the church, it didn't take much effort.

Nessa threw her whirlwind at the Ammat on the right. Whirling and twirling, it churned the dirt and broken branches, smacking into the creature.

And did absolutely nothing.

The Ammat was the size of a full-grown hippo. It stood its ground as the wind spun dizzying circles around it.

Nessa should have called a bigger wind. A *much* bigger wind.

The other one stopped its charge. It opened its cavernous crocodile snout revealing a bright blue light.

Nessa ran, swerving to put the other Ammat and the whirlwind between her and the glowing one. She was not quite fast enough.

Opening its toothy snout, the Ammat let loose a deep-throated sonic blast of energy. It was like standing in front of an artillery gun combined with a freight train.

The blast clipped the other Ammat who bellowed in pain, letting loose its own cannon blast of blue light into the air. Nessa went flying backward to smack into the church's bell tower.

For a moment, she couldn't move. She'd hit hard. Nausea temporarily overwhelmed her and her stomach heaved.

She heard Pim's war cry as he leaped onto one of the Ammat. The beast roared in pain and anger.

Throwing up helped, at least her sight cleared.

"Come on, Nessa," she urged herself. "Keep it together."

Pim was clinging onto the Ammat's head, clawing at its eyes. It thrashed from side to side trying to throw him off. He dug in his hind claws. If she knew Pim, he was injecting the neurotoxin in his dewclaws, hoping to paralyze the beast.

Nessa wasn't sure it would have any effect. The thing was massive.

"Come on, Nessa. No time for a nap."

Father Harry scooped her up. Half holding, half dragging her, they ran for the fence.

The whirlwind had dissipated, and the other hippo-crocodile was glowing with the same blue light, powering up for a blast.

They stopped by the blackened stump of a eucalyptus. It must have been huge before the garden was wrecked. Father Harry leaned her against the trunk.

"Stay," he said.

He pulled up his cassock and took something round from a belt slung around his hips.

The glow inside the Ammat's open mouth was building. Father Harry ran directly up to its snout and threw the round thing inside. The Ammat's mouth shut with a snap of surprise.

Father Harry spun, his cassock flaring out like a flamenco dancer's dress.

"Get down!" he shouted as he ran.

A hum of energy like a dynamo on overload built to an intolerable whine.

The Ammat exploded.

Globs of blue flesh, blood, and innards rained down across the ruined garden in every direction. Something wet and nasty splatted onto Nessa's hair.

Pulling herself together she left the shelter of the trees, jogging unsteadily to Father Harry.

"Was that..." Nessa said breathlessly, "a grenade?"

He gave her one of his brilliant smiles. "A Reaper I know taught me that trick," he said laughing.

Dirt and dust clouded the air. The other Ammat was wobbling as it tried to lumber after them. The blue glow of its sonic cannon pulsed unsteadily.

Pim's poison must have worked after all.

Pim was already at the fence. He howled at her – werecats weren't much on meowing – motioning with his paw to hurry.

"Up," said Father Harry cupping his hands.

He boosted her with a push that sent her over the bars to sprawl on the ground in a heap.

Looking up, she saw the Baron high in the sky.

He was locked in an aerial battle with two Daemon. His icy sword glowing blue against their silver blades.

Nessa got to her feet, keeping her eyes on the battle.

One of the Daemon faltered. The Baron must have scored a hit. Wings limp it spiraled into free fall.

Abandoning the fight, the other Daemon dove to save his comrade. He grabbed the injured Daemon under the arms, flying out of sight to the far side of the church.

She turned to check on Father Harry only to be knocked to the ground when something huge rammed the fence. For a second all she could hear was the roaring in her ears.

When the world came back into focus, she saw Pim beside her, propping up her shoulder. He had the strength of a cougar in his werecat form. She turned her head trying to focus on what had happened.

The iron bars had folded nearly double from the impact. Father Harry was on the ground rolling this way and that to keep from getting trampled by a nightmare. The thing had an oversized vaguely human head, spiky black hair, heavy jaws and cheekbones, atop a professional-wrestler-on-steroid chest. The real horror revealed itself below. Its body was wholly reptile, scaled with a long tail.

“What the hell,” Nessa said.

How were all these monsters in Torrance?

Torrance for God’s sake.

Father Harry must have dropped to the ground, flattening himself so the impact of the charge passed right over him. He held a pair of silver daggers, stabbing up to slash deeply into the monster’s underbelly.

It screamed. More in rage than pain Nessa thought, judging by its expression. She crawled out from under the bent bars until she could stand.

Father Harry, now splattered with green blood, vaulted up and over the bent bars almost faster than Nessa’s eyes could follow.

The monster backed up and ran at the fence again. The bars buckled. Bellowing like a bull, it pressed against them until with a scream of metal they snapped.

“Get behind me,” Father Harry shouted.

Nessa stayed where she was, Pim at her side.

She’d held this spell ready since they fled the Sanctuary. She brought her flint bracelets together to create a spark and spoke the true name of the lightning. The words burned her throat like raw fire.

A blinding streak of light zig-zagged out of the sky to strike the monster. She’d timed it well. The impact of the lightning shook the ground and the monster fell, blackened and burned.

It did not get up.

The Baron dropped beside them looking perfectly poised in his velvet suit, not a drop of sweat or blood on him.

Maybe Angels didn’t perspire, Nessa thought a little hysterically.

“That,” he said, “is a Dirj.”

Father Harry’s twin silver daggers disappeared up the sleeves of his cassock so he could lean forward, his hands on his knees, panting. “Aren’t you a handy girl in a tight spot?”

Nessa pointed. "I like your spring-loaded daggers."

He lifted his arms. They shot back out, then up again. "Well now, there's an interesting story about ...oh holy Mother of God!" he shouted grabbing hold of Nessa's sleeve

Another Ammat bellowed, running from the far side of the church. Its mouth open, the bright blue glow of a sonic blast building. The fence was down, there was nothing to stop it from rampaging right through.

The beast's roar was joined by the high-pitched cry of a raptor. More Daemon. Nessa saw one of the eagle-headed ones spreading its wings on the bell tower.

A dozen guards came running out of the church's back door. Guns out.

Pim leaped in front of her, howling a challenge.

Father Harry brought his daggers up.

"Any more grenades?" she asked.

He shook his head.

Nessa looked at the Baron. He had put his sword away and was looking utterly relaxed.

"Incoming!" Nessa called, pointing at the Daemon.

The Baron quirked an eyebrow at her.

She pointed again. "A little help!"

He gave a bored sort of shrug, put his fingers to his lips, and whistled.

Two black dogs appeared, wagging their tails and barking.

'Dogs?' Nessa thought wildly. '*Dogs?*'

They looked like oversized black Labradors. Short coats, shiny and sleek.

The Ammat bellowed louder.

The dogs ran to sit attentively in front of the Baron. He nodded at them, and things got really weird.

Standing impossibly straight on their hind legs, the dogs folded back their fur to reveal shiny, black skin. Their bodies grew and lengthened as though they had somehow been crouched inside those four-legged forms.

Genderless, featureless, as black as volcanic glass.

Nessa stared. Pim stared.

"What in the name of bleeding Jesus and the Holy Spirit, are they?" shouted Father Harry.

“My dogs,” said the Baron as though it was a perfectly normal thing. He made an ‘away’ gesture with one hand.

The two beings flowed across the broken fence and onto the church grounds.

“We should go,” said the Baron walking away.

“But, but, but,” sputtered Nessa. “The monsters.”

“Will no longer bother us but we would be wise make our escape before more Daemon join the fray.”

There was a horrifying scream from behind Nessa.

“Don’t look,” said Father Harry placing himself between her and the church. “Really.”

The Baron’s walk turned to a jog. “Five, four, three, two, one,” he counted.

The explosion shook the ground setting off car alarms for blocks.

Father Harry grabbed Nessa’s arm to keep her from falling.

She did turn to look then. St. Jude’s was hidden behind clouds of black smoke. There was more screaming. Lots more.

“How...” she gasped trying to catch her breath. “How will they explain this?”

“Gas leak,” said Father Harry and the Baron simultaneously.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Torrance, cont.

Nessa was tired and beaten up and sore. Pim wasn't in much better shape. Turns out being blasted by hippo-crocodiles with sonic cannons wasn't something you could shake off with a couple of aspirin.

She leaned against Father Harry's Volvo station wagon, gulping water he pulled from a flat on the floor of the back seat. His car looked like a traveling survival camp with food, water, weapons. She saw the printer he'd used to make the pamphlets for the fake church festival on the back seat.

"We better get a move on," he said scanning the skies. "Don't want our new flying pals to drop in. Do you need a ride?"

She pointed up the street. "My scooter's just around the corner."

The Baron chose not to ride back with Pim and Nessa. Spreading his black and white wings, he launched himself silently into the sky.

"Good riddance," said Father Harry with feeling. "You know I think I'll make my way to this Riley O'Ryan's. What sort of priest would I be if I didn't help save Christmas?"

Seeing as how he carried spring-loaded daggers and grenades Nessa wasn't exactly sure how to answer that.

She texted him Riley's address.

"On Second Street, you say?"

"Turn left off the PCH by CVS then right on Second. It's the only magic house on the block."

Father Harry offered to take the disk, but the object – still locked in the box – refused to leave Nessa. She'd taken it out of the backpack thinking to hand it over. The box stubbornly hovered, zigzagging out of his reach until the priest broke down laughing. "You've made a friend."

"Pim and I will bring it."

She zipped it back inside.

“Ah, you better take this then.” He dug into a basket in the trunk, pulling out a colorful embroidered cloth. “This has got some good shielding runes sewn into it. Just in case they send an aerial patrol.”

He walked Nessa to her scooter to make sure she got off safely. “Not that you can’t take care of yourself,” he reassured her. “The lightning strike on that ugly beast was beautifully done.”

He waited, waving while she sped away. Nessa was grateful. Life on the run from the curse of a Fallen Angel coupled with Deadbeat Dad’s magical mystery scams gone wrong had not allowed for friendship. Her only relatives were Aunt Emerald and her late Grandmother Hattie. Hattie had been murdered three, no, almost four years ago by Frank the Fallen.

Unlikely as it seemed, since starting at Barracuda Bail Bonds her solitary life had shifted. Not a seismic shift. Not earthshaking. Still, a noticeable tilt in a good direction.

Riley’s house was only about half an hour by scooter from Torrance. Nessa nearly crashed the bike when the shadow of wings passed over her as she turned onto Torrance Boulevard. She screeched to a stop only to see a pair of turkey buzzards riding the thermal air currents. No Daemon in sight.

She and Pim breathed sighs of relief.

“I’m freaked, Pim. How about you?”

He nodded vigorously.

“It wouldn’t hurt to have a little aerial surveillance of our own. Just in case. What do you think?”

“Meow!”

She pulled into a taco place in a nearby strip mall. Going into the ladies’ room, she closed the stall door, reached into her backpack, and took out her silver crown. Placing it on her head, she pictured a field of sunflowers and a huge, toppled tree. The Portal opened and she and Pim stepped through a blast of icy air into Faerie.

She had only recently acquired the crown and the Fae title that went with it. She’d also gained three slightly crazed yet devoted fairies. Her fairies could fly. They could also fight.

“Taco, taco, taco,” she called.

It was one of the few words they knew in English. Also one of their favorite things about the Mortal World.

“Meow, meow, meow,” said Pim.

She waited a moment before calling again, “Hi, fairies. Taco, taco, taco. Hi!”

“Taco, taco, taco,” came a trilling response.

Three fairies sped over the yellow heads of the sunflowers giggling and laughing. Their dragonfly wings beat so fast they were almost invisible. One blue, one red, one green.

“Haiii!”

“Haiii!”

“Haiii!”

They sang, clustering around Nessa, kissing her hands before kneeling to cover Pim in feathery kisses. Pim was fully visible in Faerie. Both a perk and a disadvantage depending on the circumstances.

“Hey girls, want some tacos?”

“Taco?” said the blue fairy jumping to her feet.

“Taco?” trilled the red fairy dancing in a circle.

“Taco?” cheered the green fairy shooting up in the air to do a loop-the-loop.

Taco was a magic word.

“Tacos,” said Nessa fist-pumping the air.

They threw themselves on the ground bowing again and again. Nessa hadn’t been able to cure them of that yet. Communication was still rather limited.

They grinned at her. Nessa held back a shiver.

Too many teeth. Way too many teeth.

“Come on,” she said, motioning for them to follow. This time she pictured the bathroom stall complete with the graffiti on the inside of the door.

She had to carefully visualize where she wished the portal to open, or Faerie only knew where she’d end up.

It was cramped in the stall as they all stepped through the Portal. The red fairy almost fell in the toilet.

Nessa put her crown in the backpack, and they trooped up to the counter.

When they were in her world the fairies *glamour’d* themselves as teenage nineties wannabes with dyed hair and wacky clothes to match. It wasn’t much of a disguise since everyone stared anyway.

Nessa got as many tacos as she could afford plus a couple of beef burritos for herself and Pim.

They went outside to sit because she never knew what the fairies were going to get up to. Nessa took out a little notebook and pen. She recently discovered she could communicate with them through simple drawings.

She drew herself on the scooter. The fairies cheered. Then a Daemon with big fangs and claws, wings spread in the sky. She drew an 'X' through the winged figure and mimed it attacking her.

The fairies growled. The green fairy grabbed the drawing of the Daemon and tore it to bits with her teeth.

Okay. They had the idea.

In a much calmer state of mind, Nessa and Pim motored back to Second Street, the fairies flying guard overhead.

Nessa had called Riley from the taco place to see if the fairies could get through her wards. The call went straight to voice mail. Hmmm. There was no way the fairies could walk in without help. Perhaps they could use the hole in the warding like the Baron.

Father Harry's Volvo was parked next to the curb. Empty. Looked like he'd made it through the wards somehow.

She parked the scooter by the front door as the fairies fluttered in worried circles outside the net of wards.

Nessa ran out onto the sidewalk so they could see her. She pointed dramatically over the house, throwing both arms in the air. "Up, up there. Go."

She ran in the front door – luckily the wards remembered her – through the living room, and out into the garden. There didn't seem to be anybody downstairs.

The reindeer had settled itself on the patio love seat and looked quite comfortable. It bleated a greeting and set its jingle bells ringing.

Nessa stood under where she thought the opening was shouting, "Taco, taco, taco!"

Almost immediately three winged shapes came fluttering above.

"Come down," she shouted, motioning to the ground. "Down! Through the hole."

They hesitated, flying in tight little circles until they found the hole. One by one they dropped through.

Squealing with delight, they rushed to Nessa.

The fairies squealed even louder when they caught sight of the reindeer.

Nessa expected it to bolt. Instead, the animal jumped off the love seat, trotting to the trio bleating in delight. He nuzzled them quite as happily as he had greeted Niklaus. They covered him with kisses and pats, taking turns to hug his shaggy neck.

Fairies liked reindeer. Who knew?

Prince came running out of the house barking. He looked very different than the dog she had seen this morning. This version of Prince had sharp spines rising off his back and sides. He bared his teeth showing a double set of fangs every bit as scary as werecat Pim's.

Pim jumped up to touch noses with him and he stopped barking though he stood alertly, head in the air sniffing.

"They're with me," she said pointing at the fairies.

He walked over to the group. The girls turned their attention to the dog, trilling and cooing over him. Smoothing his ears. Tickling his chest. Prince's spines retracted and he wagged his tail.

Good. It looked like everyone was going to get along. Riley would not appreciate Nessa bringing a battle between her dog and fairy pals to the backyard.

"Pim, I'm going to check on the others, okay?"

He nodded, staying with the happy little group.

Quietly making her way up the stairs, Nessa carefully opened the workroom door a crack and then wished she hadn't.

Shutting the door, she ran down the stairs. She wanted no part of that.

No way. No how.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Hermosa Beach, Second St. cont.

“I don’t know how much longer I can hold this,” Riley said, her voice quavering with strain.

“They’re coming. I can feel them,” said Niklaus, on his hands and knees. He was shaking, racked by pain. The cursed band had become so tight, he was fighting for every breath.

A nest of summoning circles glowed fiercely white, red, yellow. In each ring stood one of their group. Niklaus in the center. Evie anchoring the next. Then Trick. Riley stood outside, manipulating Evie’s unholy mixture of Fae and divine essence. Trick, as a Reaper, had the power of the dead at his command. Parallel magical forces that would never merge in nature.

Since there was nothing natural about this curse, Riley thought her plan combining them might work.

She couldn’t do it by herself. That’s where Niklaus’s comrades came in. Five of them had answered his call to boost her spell.

Evie had given Riley the shape and pattern of the sigils she saw after touching Niklaus. Correctly, Riley hoped. After reading those patterns, she’d found arcane runes in her grandmother’s Grimoire spellbook to both attract and compel the curse once it was free of Niklaus.

The room was vibrating from the power bleeding off the magic. Riley was sweating as the sigils in each ring pulsed with the heat of magical energy. She had to hold it together until Niklaus’s fellow spirits astral projected into the smaller rings of white birch ash. Those five rings were at five points of a larger double pentagram she had created with corpse powder to attract the dark spell anchoring the curse. She hated to use corpse powder but sometimes the only way to defeat dark magic was with something even darker.

Niklaus’s fellow corporeal spirits better start projecting fast. Her control was slipping.

A dull glow appeared in one of the white ash circles. Then another, and another. Dim forms took shape, shadows of men and women. They had their arms out at their sides, eyes closed in concentration.

Riley sobbed with relief. She felt them, each one. The force of their power singing in her mind.

Niklaus was on his hands and knees, groaning pitifully. He had his shirt off, the curse squirming over his entire chest.

Riley began her spell to draw the curse out. Bring it to her and the still open ring of protective sigils at her feet. They were drawn with the charcoal of the Rowan tree. Rowan was often used in protective spells against the Fae and witchcraft. The Daemons were of the Fae, as was their magic. They might look like winged angels, but they were not divine.

Once the curse came to her, she would close the circle. The Rowan charcoal should hold the curse immobile until Riley could complete the spell. Emphasis on *should*. Riley had never attempted anything quite like this. If the spell failed, she'd probably die. Merry Christmas.

As she chanted, she added five drops of Evie's blood to a silver box. Evie's unholy mix of angel and Fae was the key component to the spell work. The combination would be irresistible to the curse. The container was also half-filled with Blackthorn and Hawthorne ash. Both plants powerful conductors of dark magic. Riley needed their nasty kick to boost the scent of the blood.

The curse would have to be forced into the silver box because she could not obliterate it. This was a 'Living Curse.' Once summoned, it could not be destroyed, only contained. A Black Arts Mage would use such a curse over and over. If Riley's spell failed, the curse would escape, turning rogue. Infecting whoever was nearest.

And today that would be Riley.

The shaking in the room became more violent as she neared the end of her chant. Bottles and containers tumbled off the shelves.

Niklaus's fellow spirits poured their energy into her. She felt more than saw the curse lift from Niklaus's body. She hoped he was still aware enough to break the circle, releasing it into Evie's. The circles were meant to contain magic. They must be opened for the magic to travel from one circle to the next and ultimately, her.

With a cry of agony, the curse lifted completely from Niklaus.

'Please, please, please, don't faint,' Riley pleaded in the little part of her mind not focused on directing the spell.

Black sigils threw themselves at the magical wall, raging to escape.

Niklaus stirred, his hand inching forward to brush the ash aside.

Screaming in triumph, the curse flew into Evie's space. Evie's wings were wrapped protectively around her. The curse could not penetrate that barrier both divine and enchanted.

Again, the black sigils raged and roared.

Evie opened her circle.

They went to Trick almost giggling with glee to find a new victim. Riley believed since he was a Reaper and already technically dead in the real world, the curse would pass right over him. What was the point in tormenting someone already dead?

To Riley's horror, they attacked Trick. Burrowing into his exposed skin before he had time to do anything but give a choked cry. His body went rigid with pain and shock.

She'd gambled wrong.

Riley opened the container of Evie's blood, emptying precious drops onto the floor around her. Standing outside any protective circle, she would immediately be vulnerable if the curse did not follow the blood to the silver box.

Trick stood, motionless, his face a mask of pain. The black sigils poured out of his body, sensing Evie's blood. Falling, gasping to his knees, he swept the ash aside.

The curse was now free inside the workroom. If Riley's plan failed, she was an ex-curse breaker.

Black sigils swarmed in a whirlwind around her feet, swooping to consume the drops of wonderful, wonderful blood. They circled her body, looking for more. She could feel the power of their dark magic. The glee the sigils felt in their deathly power.

With shaking hands, she coaxed the last drop of Evie's blood to land next to the silver container.

The swarm massed in the direction of the newest scent. They surged over the box.

Riley dropped to the floor, completing the last sigil with the stick of Rowan ash in her hand, trapping them.

Heat surged from the curse, burning Riley's face. The sigils threw themselves against the circle, knowing they'd been tricked. Just as quickly, they hesitated, swirling in a thick mass above the container. The tantalizing lure of Evie's blood, Hawthorne, and Blackthorn ash was making them forget their rage as the divinely enchanted substance lured them with its siren's call.

'Go in!' Riley screamed in her mind. Only a little more and the trap would spring.

Instead, they rose in a dense black cloud, focusing their intent on Riley. Their anger hit her with the force of a hammer blow. Her hold on the complex interlocking magic within the spell wavered. She swayed, falling forward, barely supporting herself with her hands. The figures in the white ash became indistinct. They were fading. If she lost touch with them, all would be lost.

A strong hand on her arm pulled Riley to her feet.

Evie stood at her side, holding her hand tightly. She gave Riley a curt nod and faced the swarm, willing her energy into Riley.

Trick joined her a second later, taking Evie's hand though he winced in pain. He too faced the curse with grim determination.

Stumbling, barely able to keep his feet, Niklaus joined hands with Trick.

Niklaus's fellow spirits once again became more solid, but the curse was still too powerful. The Rowan sigils at Riley's feet were beginning to smoke.

A burst of light from an open door made her blink. A man in a priest's cassock with an unruly head of black hair strode into the room as if he belonged there. He took her other hand without a word.

The first of the Rowan sigils caught fire. No. They were so close. So close!

She felt the energy of another being before she saw who it was.

The Baron strode in. His wings fully extended, the glory of his dark magic radiating from him to dim everything else in the room.

He took the priest's hand, closing the circle with Niklaus.

Momentarily, the Corporeal Spirits astral projections became clear and bright. Riley could see the faces of these rare beings, men and women, dark-skinned and light. Their only purpose to bring a brief glow of joy to the often-joyless world of mankind.

Power surged into Riley with the strength of an ocean wave. It washed through her and into the Rowan circle, flooding it with magic.

The curse screamed in protest.

Too late. Too late. Too late.

Riley had the power she needed now.

With the others feeding her energy, she forced the darkness into the trap sigil by sigil.

Riley spoke the last spell. The lid snapped closed. The magic locked inside.

Suddenly, there was silence.

They dropped hands.

The astral projections began to fade. Riley bowed her thanks just before she collapsed onto the floor.

They had done it.

Together.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Hermosa Beach, Second St., cont.

Pim and Nessa went into the kitchen in search of cold drinks. Her head ached which, besides a possible concussion from being blasted by hippo-crocodiles, meant she was dehydrated.

“I’m stealing your mineral water,” she shouted over her shoulder even though Riley couldn’t hear her.

She found a bowl for Pim and poured him some cold water before taking a drink.

They sat on the stools around the butcher block island in the middle of the kitchen.

Riley had a paperback copy of *Shirtless Werewolf Christmas* open on the table.

“Pim look! A new *Shirtless Werewolf* for the holidays!”

Pim put his front paws up, swishing his tail, eyes bright. He was a big fan of the books. Pim liked paranormal romance and Nessa often read aloud to him from the series. Not that he couldn’t read himself, of course. Pim was an intelligent feline. He liked Nessa doing the voices saying it was as good as an audiobook.

She opened to the first page. They were almost through the chapter when she heard maniacal giggling from the backyard.

She knew those giggles. The fairies. What were they up to?

Please don’t let them have flown out and set a house on fire or kidnapped some passerby to tie up and torture. So far, the fairies Nessa had encountered were not made of sweetness and light. Instead of dancing on flower petals, they were more likely to dig a hole, bury you in the garden, *then* plant some flowers on your corpse.

Together, she and Pim ran to the backyard.

She stopped on the patio; her mouth open.

“Meow?” said Pim, eyes widening.

The green fairy was riding the reindeer who was flying – *flying* – in circles as high as Riley’s net of wards would allow. The other fairies were dancing on their toes clapping their hands, dragonfly wings fluttering in delight.

The green fairy pointed to the ground, chattering happily, and the reindeer landed.

Any doubts Nessa had about how the reindeer was enjoying her airborne adventure evaporated as the green fairy slid off. The animal immediately started prancing, jingle bells jingling, snout pointed in the air as if trying to rise again.

After a brief shoving match between the red and blue fairies, the blue one hopped on his back. Her wings vibrated at an impossible speed sprinkling golden dust over the animal. Almost immediately it began to hover, then climb.

“What do you know,” Nessa said to Pim. “Tinkerbell had it right all along.”

Closing the patio door, they went back to the kitchen and their book.

They’d made it through a couple of chapters when Nessa’s phone buzzed.

Caller I.D. said, ‘Barracuda Bail Bonds.’

“Hi, Mr. Barracuda.”

“Hello yourself, young lady. Are you still at Riley O’Ryan’s?”

“Yes, sir. Everyone is upstairs doing *mucho* mojo magic to save Christmas. Pim and I are downstairs hiding.”

“That explains why no one has been picking up. I got a sleigh sitting in my front yard. Just fell out of the sky a couple of hours ago. Dang if I know what to do with it.”

Nessa sat up straighter. Pim’s tail shot up like an exclamation mark.

“A sleigh? Santa’s sleigh?”

“I’m not Santa!” came a faint voice from upstairs.

“How did he *hear* that?” Nessa asked Pim.

Pim shook his head.

“I got a reindeer, a sleigh, and half of Compton parading in and out of my front yard taking pictures.”

“Does the reindeer like the sleigh?”

“Can’t get him to leave it. Just stands there being friendly, lets the kids crawl all over him. Pansie and Rose Marie went to the supermarket for cookies and cider. It’s a party. Here, I’ll show you.”

A moment later several pictures came over the line. Sure enough, a small sleigh, brown, not red, sat on the lawn with the reindeer backed up to it as if he was properly hitched. The pictures showed a family posing, all in their Christmas outfits, another group wearing blue and

white Hanukkah sweaters, teenage boys making silly faces, girls in their Christmas best taking selfies.

“And that is just the tip of the holiday iceberg.”

“Well, Mr. Barracuda, if they can remove Niklaus’s curse, we’ve got the flying disk and one of the reindeer here.”

“Two more of the reindeer are at Miss Grace’s.”

“Oh, that’s the Avenging Angel, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I think Miss Grace is upstairs. Before me and the Baron left...”

“The Baron?” Barracuda interrupted. “They let you leave with a Fallen Angel? That *man*?”

“He kind of volunteered to help us get the disk back. He did, too. Help I mean. Father Harry came as well. From Pasadena. Do you know him?”

“I do,” he made an impatient sound. “What were they thinking, sending you off like that? And you with your...” he paused. “Your problem.”

She wasn’t sure how much her boss knew about her curse. Her burden of a Fallen Angel. Maybe more than she realized.

Nessa felt she had to stick up for the Santa crew. “The disk is air magic. Since I’m an Air Elemental the feeling was, I needed to go. They weren’t wrong.”

“Are you all right?”

Hmm. How to answer that? She was kind of a mess. At least she was still walking.

“It could be worse,” she finally said.

“Hmph.” He did not sound happy.

“Mr. Barracuda, we need to get not-Santa, the reindeer, and the sleigh all together ASAP. He has a lot of cheer to spread over Los Angeles. He’s already lost a couple of days.”

There was a lengthy pause on the other end of the line. Nessa could hear a happy buzz of voices and laughter in the background.

“You tell Miss Grace and the others to get the reindeer and what’s-his-name over to the Compton Family Recreation Center no later than six tonight. We’re having our annual Holiday Get Together. Barracuda Bail Bonds is the sponsor. It’s not like I can’t show up. The twins and I

will get the sleigh and the reindeer to the center. You all are responsible for bringing the rest. Can you and Mr. Pim handle it?"

"Yes, sir. I think I know how to get the reindeer there."

"Good. I'm counting on you both."

And he rang off.

The *clomp clomp clomp* of feet on the stairs announced the ceremony must have finished. For better or worse.

She went into the dining room, fingers crossed.

Prince squeezed by the tall man who looked like a cowboy to run out into the garden. He was Trick McKittrick, the Reaper. The Baron had explained a little about him on the scooter ride to St. Jude's. He was followed by a tall, pretty woman with dark brown hair. She must be Evangeline Grace; the Avenging Angel Riley had brought.

She looked tired and pale and had a hand on the railing to steady herself. At the foot of the stairs, the man waited but didn't reach out to help her.

Nessa and Pim exchanged looks.

"He likes her," she whispered. "Why aren't they touching?"

Niklaus and Riley walked down together. He was leaning on her. Dark circles ringed his eyes. He was smiling. A tired smile but a smile, nonetheless.

Riley looked just as beat.

They were followed by Father Harry.

Nessa waved and he waved back.

The Baron was the last one down. Keeping his distance from the others.

"Success?" Nessa asked. "Please say you broke the curse."

Riley gave her a thumbs up.

Pim jumped into Nessa's arms. She kissed the top of his head.

The group trooped into the living room to collapse onto the big L-shaped sofa.

Riley leaned her head back on the cushions with a groan. She was positively ashen. Breaking the curse must have taken a lot out of her. Nessa didn't know anything about breaking curses which was funny since she was dragging around a huge one of her own

Trick McKittrick and Evangeline Grace sat near each other. Still not touching. The look in the man's eyes said he wanted to if Nessa was reading his body language correctly. What was stopping him?

The Baron stood by the patio door. Frowning. Like he wanted to be anywhere but here.

Father Harry went into the kitchen declaring he was making coffee.

"I called him to come help," Nessa told Riley. "He's Father Harry. From St. Stephen's in Pasadena."

She smiled at Nessa. "Glad you did."

Prince trotted back in from the backyard, jumped up to put his paws on the back of the couch by Niklaus to lick his cheek.

Niklaus reached back to rub the dog's ears.

Remembering she still had the disk, Nessa ran to the kitchen, grabbed her backpack, and ran back. Sitting on the big rough-hewn coffee table, she handed the box to Niklaus.

"The Baron, Father Harry, Pim, and I got it."

"Bless you," said Niklaus, clutching the box to his chest. "Bless you all."

A surge of joy burst from the old man, enveloping everyone in the room. Even the Baron creaked out a smile.

Nessa picked Pim up again and hugged him. This is what Niklaus did. He spread happiness a little at a time.

"We did well," she whispered in Pim's ear.

He purred in agreement.

"By the way, we had to blow up St. Jude's to get it," Nessa said to Niklaus.

"What?" Evie jumped to her feet, her wings flaring out knocking Trick off the couch.

"The Baron blew it up," Nessa said feeling like she'd made a big mistake.

"It was most satisfying," said the Baron nodding.

"That's my home," Evangeline Grace said through gritted teeth.

The Baron frowned. "You are dead, Miss Grace, and a Fallen. You do not have a home."

"Easy for you to say. You have like *five* of them," she countered.

"Because I am not dead," he said in a superior tone of voice, his Old World accent stronger. "I have never been dead. I was born a Celestial. The same rules do not apply to me."

Evie's wings flared out wider. Niklaus ducked to avoid being smacked in the face.

“Now Evie,” Trick said gently. “St. Jude’s is lost. The Daemon have taken it, we both know that. Father James...”

She folded her wings back, holding up a hand to stop him. “Not the time or place.”

High pitched laughter trilled in from the backyard.

“What was that?” asked Riley, bolting upright. “Who’s in my backyard?”

“My fairies are here,” Nessa explained.

Riley passed a hand over her face. “I don’t think I want to know.”

Father Harry came in with mugs of coffee on a tray and a small container of what must be milk, setting it on the coffee table.

He paused taking in the tense tableau of figures.

“Maybe I should get the brandy,” he said.

“Maybe you should,” agreed the Reaper. “It’s in the cupboard next to the sink. Top shelf.”

They waited until Father Harry returned with the brandy, handing it round.

Nessa set Pim down, moving off the coffee table as everyone helped themselves.

“Found the cream in the fridge, hope that was all right.”

“Thank you,” Riley said, gratefully taking a cup.

“Can you open the box?” Nessa asked Niklaus.

Laying a finger aside his nose, Niklaus spoke a word. A nice word. Soft. Comforting. The box popped open. Niklaus reached in to take the disk, holding it to his heart.

“I missed you,” he said.

The disk pulsed happily.

While the group sipped or in Pim’s case, lapped, their coffee, Nessa explained what Mr. Barracuda wanted them to do.

Evie rubbed a hand over her eyes. “How are we going to get the reindeer to Compton? I don’t have the strength to fly a guinea pig right now.”

“I, too, am slightly fatigued,” said the Baron.

“We can hire a van or maybe a small truck,” said Trick bringing out his cellphone.

“Actually,” said Nessa, “I have an idea.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Holiday 911

The reindeer flew overhead, the green fairy giggling on the animal's back, leaving a trail of glittering gold dust in their wake. Since *glamour* didn't work on Nessa, she had no idea if they were hidden from view or not.

They were following Nessa on her scooter to pick up the other two reindeer at the house on the Strand. The blue and red fairies were squeezed on the back of the bright orange scooter squealing in delight. They'd never ridden the scooter before.

Back at Riley's Nessa had drawn what she needed the fairies to do which was simply follow her to the Family Center after picking up the other reindeer. It was a simple task. What could go wrong? Besides everything.

Lucky for Nessa, the house was only a short drive away. She wasn't sure how to explain what was going on if the police pulled her over for reckless driving with magical beings.

A tall man with dark hair was waiting by the driveway of the house, two reindeer by his side.

The reindeer caught sight of their friend. They began bleating, dancing from hoof to hoof with excitement.

The man watched her, grinning as she pulled up with the giggling fairies. Pim was in the front basket as usual though the man couldn't see him.

"What do they look like," she asked before he could speak.

"Who?"

She pointed up.

"Ah, reindeer and flying fairies. Like in storybooks."

Nessa put her face in her hands groaning. "No *glamour*?"

He peered up. "Not that I can see."

"*Augh!*"

The reindeer landed beside them on the sidewalk. Much snuffling and enthusiastic bleating ensued.

"Miss Grace says we are to go to Compton. I am Leo, by the way."

He had a thick accent. Eastern European Nessa thought.

She stuck out her hand. "Nessa Scott."

“So nice to meet you,” he said politely.

“Did Miss Grace text you the address?”

He nodded, “Oh yes. I have it.” He patted his jacket pocket. “I am driving there soon as you are going. I mean, *as soon as* you going...go.” He took a deep breath saying slowly. “As soon as you go.”

She gave him a thumb’s up.

His smile stretched wider.

Each fairy mounted a reindeer, fluttering her wings to spread golden fairy dust over the animals.

All three animals rose into the air.

“Goodbye, reindeer.” He waved at them. “Have a good flight. Come back and visit us!”

Revvng the scooter, Nessa headed back to the PCH in the direction of Compton.

It was a magical night for the South Coast as three fairies on reindeer trailed by sparkling gold dust soared through the coastal overcast spreading holiday cheer and uncountable YouTube and Instagram videos complete with musical accompaniment: “Taco, taco, taco,” sung to the tune of Jingle Bells.

She and Pim pulled into the Compton Family Center parking lot. Nessa hopped off the scooter waving the fairies and their reindeer charges to earth in the shadows of a far corner of the lot.

They were not unobserved.

Several members of a local motorcycle gang were leaning on their motorcycles drinking wine out of paper bags.

Nessa knew these guys. A little. She went over to greet them.

“Those reindeer were flying, right?” a big guy in a leather jacket with ‘Crusaders’ patches across the front asked.

“Yep. Absolutely.”

“How’d they do that?”

“Fairy dust,” Nessa said honestly.

A bigger man standing next to him shoved the one in the jacket, “See, I told ya’ fairies were real.”

“They are for sure,” said Nessa as the girls ran by on their way to the brightly decorated Family Center.

“Good. That’s good,” he sighed, giving her a mock toast with the bottle. “A psychotic break is no way to celebrate Christmas.”

“Amen,” said the bigger man in leather.

The reindeer galloped by making Nessa gasp for a heart-stopping moment. They skidded to a stop on the lawn in front of the center. There was the sleigh Barracuda had told her about and the fourth reindeer. A line stretched out to the street of people waiting to take pictures in the sleigh.

Nessa held out her hand to the man in the gang jacket. “We met a few weeks back. I had two people on my scooter and was being chased by a black Escalade through your neighborhood. You helped us.”

And they really had. The Escalade had held deadly Skinwalkers chasing the bail jumper Nessa was attempting to bring in on her first assignment. The Crusaders forced the Escalade out of the neighborhood and gave Nessa and her charges safe passage.

“I work for Mr. Barracuda.”

The man in the jacket smiled. “Right, right. I remember. Invisible cat girl.”

“That’s me,” she said proudly pointing at herself.

He looked around. “Your cat here?”

She picked Pim up and held him out.

“You can pet him. He likes nice people.”

He reached out a hand and Pim meowed a hello.

“Damn. *Damn!* Guys come here. I can feel the cat. Come here.”

The other gang members crowded around stroking Pim gently, oohing and aahing over the invisible cat.

“What you been up to girl?” asked the leader finally.

Nessa smiled her brightest smile. “Saving Christmas. Those are sort-of-Santa’s flying reindeer.”

“Get out of here.”

She crossed her heart. “Honest truth. Santa, though he likes to be called Niklaus, is inside with Mr. Barracuda. He was under a curse. We all helped break it.”

“Well, don’t that beat all.”

“You should go in and meet him. I guarantee he will put you in the Christmas spirit. But you better leave the bottles outside.”

“Word,” said the really big man.

Nessa set Pim on the ground. She waved goodbye, jogging over to the entrance.

Christmas lights decorated the building and the walkway from the sidewalk to the front door. Glow-Mo Santa, snowmen, and nutcracker figures lined the path. The party sounded loud and happy.

The Family Center was just as brightly decorated inside as out. A ceiling-high green tree glowed with lights, tinsel, and decorations the kids – and their parents – were turning out with record speed at the craft table.

The kitchen was bustling with people wearing nametags. Volunteers, Nessa guessed. Two long tables groaned under trays of hot food, cold food, sweets, and treats.

The fairies stood at one end holding heaping plates. They finger-waved to Nessa.

“Haiii!”

“Haiii!”

“Haiii!”

They trilled.

She waved back, leaving them to their food. They’d earned it.

Niklaus was in a high-backed easy chair talking to the children one by one. His cheeks were rosy. His eyes twinkled in the colored lights of the tree. He was certainly spreading joy tonight. The entire room glowed with happiness.

She understood a little better what Niklaus had tried to explain at Aunt Emerald’s while she stitched his injuries. He and the other spirits like him couldn’t change the world with a little winter joy. No one and nothing could. But they touched lives. Here. There. That mattered.

“We did good,” Nessa said to Pim.

He nodded, meowing in agreement.

They really had.

Barracuda Bail Bonds’ oversized and only marginally human enforcers, Pansie and Rose Marie La Rue were standing by the windows watching Niklaus. Jun Hee Kim, a new member of the bounty hunter team, and Father Harry flanked them.

“Now that is a proper Santa,” said Pansie.

“Uh-huh,” agreed her sister.

“Proper indeed,” said Barracuda, wiggling his hips to Brenda Lee’s ‘Rockin’ around the Christmas tree’ as he walked over from the kitchen.

“I love how Santa has become ethnically diverse,” said Pansie.

“What do you mean?” asked Nessa.

“Only proper for the neighborhood,” said her sister. “We’re in a predominantly black area, so we have a black Santa. Good job boss.”

Barracuda nodded, smiling broadly.

Nessa looked at Niklaus.

He was still the same dignified-looking elderly white man in a green coat.

“*Oookaay*,” she said, wondering what she was missing.

“I don’t understand, he looks like an old Coca-Cola Christmas ad tonight,” said Father Harry pointing. “Snowy beard, jolly face, big belly, red suit. How did he do it?”

Nessa looked again. Same green coat as yesterday. Trim beard. Jolly, sure, but no big belly.

Jun Hee made a dismissive motion with his hand. “You’re all on crack. He’s Asian. Korean in fact, I can hear him speaking Korean to the kids. Don’t know what *they* make of it.”

Pim looked from Father Harry to the twins to Jun Hee. He shook his head.

“Meow, meow, meow,” he whined.

“Are you saying he looks like a cat?” Nessa asked.

Pim nodded vigorously.

“Oh come on!”

Leo walked up. “You are all wrong. He is Russian. Long red robe trimmed in white fur. He carries a staff. He is speaking Russian to the children.”

They began to argue.

Trick McKittrick and Evangeline joined the group. Trick was shaking his head.

“What are they talking about? He’s a cowboy Santa. He’s wearing cowboy boots and a big ol’ hat,” Trick sighed, smiling. “When I was a boy, we had a Santa just like that visit the schoolhouse on Christmas Eve. He gave us all a little bag of candy and an orange. Best Christmas ever.”

“You see an old man with a beard in cowboy boots?” Evie asked.

He gave her a funny look. “Heck yes. What’s wrong with you?” He pointed at the elderly man. “He’s right there.”

And indeed he was.

Black, white, Asian, and everything in between. All things to all people.

Nessa watched Evangeline. She seemed excited like her wings wanted to pop out of their magical pocket.

“What do you see?” she asked Nessa.

“I see Niklaus. At least the one he showed us.”

“Me, too. Everyone else is seeing *their* Santa. The one from their culture or imagination.”

“Yep,” said Nessa. “He’s a corporeal spirit not of this earth. Created to spread joy. Pretty cool.”

“So much power,” Evie said, shaking her head.

Riley joined them. “And he just wants to make people happy.”

“So, I guess the world isn’t all bad,” said Nessa.

Pim pawed at her leg. She picked him up, nuzzling his head as he purred. “I need to keep that in mind. Not *everything* supernatural is trying to kill me.”

“Only most things,” said Riley with a wry laugh.

“Ain’t that the truth,” sighed Evie.

Nessa would remember this evening as one of the best in her life. Mr. Barracuda introduced her to people as his new bounty hunter and she shook a lot of hands. He was a well-respected man here, that was obvious.

A group of the Crusaders came in, shook hands with Mr. Barracuda, got name tags slapped onto them, and were sent into the kitchen to help.

Toward the end of the evening, the volunteers brought out piles of wrapped boxes stacking them under the tree. Niklaus was hijacked into handing out presents with help from the twins who seemed to know which child got what.

Around ten they began bagging up the leftovers into gift bags. Kids were yawning. Adults were yawning more.

Niklaus came and thanked each of those who had helped him gather the reindeer, find the disk, and break the Daemon curse. Even Pim.

“Brave kitty,” he said as Nessa held the cat in her arms so Niklaus could pet him. “You saved your mistress; you are a good cat.”

Pim purred with pride.

Helped by Trick, Leo, Father Harry, and Barracuda, Niklaus harnessed the reindeer, side by side. The reindeer snorted, their breath fogging the air around them. The night had turned chilly and cold. They pawed the ground, anxious to be gone.

Niklaus climbed into the sleigh, waving, smiling, and laughing. Nessa saw him just as she first had. A dignified-looking elderly man in a green coat, brown pants, and walking boots.

He laid a finger on the side of his nose and winked at her.

A dozen children came to hug him goodbye. He embraced them all one by one before waving everyone back.

Barracuda and the twins cleared space around the sleigh.

The reindeer tossed their heads, setting their bells jingling. The disk glowed brightly on the front of the sleigh.

Aunt Emerald walked out of the Family Center carrying a thick fleece blanket. Nessa hadn't even known she was there. She gave Niklaus the blanket and a kiss on the cheek.

Settling himself in the sleigh, he tucked the warm blanket around him. He picked up the reins, giving them a gentle shake. Silver light blossomed around the small sleigh, the reindeer, and the magical man.

Everyone in the crowd *oooh'd* and *aaah'd*.

“Happy holidays to all!” he shouted rising in the air. “However you celebrate them, whoever you celebrate them with. Even if you are alone, in the darkest winter, I am with you in spirit. You have my heart, always.”

The crowd rushed forward cheering, exclaiming in surprise, craning their necks as the sleigh rose higher.

The fairies clapped their hands, launching themselves up as an escort, singing, “Taco, taco, taco,” to *Deck the Halls*.

The motorcycle gang cheered.

Pansie and Rose Marie clapped.

Evie and Trick waved.

Father Harry danced a jig.

Leo began singing in Russian.

Riley hugged Prince while he barked and wagged his tail.

Aunt Emerald crossed her arms over her chest and smiled.

Pim rocked back on his hind legs waving with both front paws.

Even the Baron came out. He held up a glass in a silent toast.

Higher and higher Niklaus flew until he was out of sight.

“Happy holidays to all,” said Nessa with a smile, “and to all a good night.”.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS FROM ME TO YOU!

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