Girl's Guide to Voodoo Bounty Hunting
Book 7: Dread Languages
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CHAPTER ONE

Nessa could handle the dog that used to be a person.

But the cat that used to be a dog?

So wrong.

The creature had the body language of a dog but the appearance of a cat. It didn't cross the Uncanny Valley between right and wrong it flew over it and expanded in size exponentially.

Nessa ran a hand through her hair. It was going to be one of those days at Barracuda Bail Bonds.

She and Pim had sped to the office on Nessa's bright orange scooter after a text from her boss, Roman Barracuda, said, 'Get your skinny blond self over here right now.'

She and Pim had been splurging on a late lunch at the In and Out Burger in Marina Del Rey. The burger place was less than two miles from her school, Santa Monica College. 'Splurge' because they were on a tight budget. Nessa was saving to transfer to CSU Long Beach. Her plan was to become a meteorologist. Work for the government or some TV station somewhere. If she wanted to make the most of her Air Elemental abilities, her choices were limited.

A gal has got to make a living. Meteorologist seemed the logical choice even though supercomputers were replacing a lot of a meteorologist's work. Supercomputers, however, did not have magic. She could fine-tune *her* forecast with a little Witchy spellcasting. Magic for the win.

If meteorology didn't work out, she could always fall back on rainmaking. She and her dad had made a good living off her rainmaking skills in dry Southwestern states. One of his few projects that was not a magical scam.

Most days she scrounged her Aunt Emeralds' kitchen for leftovers to box-lunch it. But with three classes and a Chem lab in a row, it would be almost two o'clock before she and Pim had time to eat. They'd decided Monday would be Fun Day.

Going out for lunch gave them something to look forward to as they sat through lectures. 'They' because of course, Pim endured them with her. He was her Familiar. They were never far apart. Which was a good thing when it came to Calculus. Nessa sucked at math. Pim excelled. He was a clever cat.

The text came as they were finishing lunch. The day bright and sunny, a salty tang in the air from the sea. Pim was on Nessa's lap at an outdoor table. She'd cut his meat and fries into small pieces, shielding him with her body.

Since Pim was invisible, food vanishing into thin air tended to draw stares.

Pim, full name Pim's Cup Whiskers Rampant, Grand Champion of the 1871 Crystal Palace Cat Show, was invisible due to an unfortunate curse. He was Nessa's Great Grandmother Violetta Chevalier's Familiar then, travelling on a ship from England to their new home in America. Pim fell for a Gypsy Witch's winsome Calico. The Gypsy objected. *Abracadabra.* Now you see him, now you don't.

Nessa could see Pim, of course. So could other animals and a select number of magic users. Her boss, Roman Barracuda, being one of them.

Nessa showed Pim the text. He gave a resigned kitty shrug. Mr. Barracuda knew she didn't come into the office Monday. Lots of classes. Lots of homework. Maybe some Bail Bond emergency? Another slime trail supernatural skipping out on their Bond who for some reason only novice Bounty Hunter Nessa could handle.

It wasn't like she could say no. All Barracuda had to do was tug the magical tether tying her and Pim to the Bail Bonds office, and she'd have to go. They had been forced into their new career as supernatural Bounty Hunters when Deadbeat Dad skipped out on his Bail Bond.

Learning he had run out on his debt was not surprising. Her dad was a con artist who used his magic for less than desirable purposes. However, leaving her, his one and only child, as collateral to a supernatural Bail Bondsman on the wrong side of the 91 Freeway, had hit her like a sucker punch. Especially since the debt wasn't money. It was magic.

California had recently made changes in its Bail Bond law. Those changes cut directly into Barracuda's human bail bond business. As a result, the office was focusing more on the supernatural criminal element.

As well as bailing out your standard human felons, Barracuda Bail Bonds kept supernatural bonds for various magical tribunals and demonic agencies including the Greater Los Angeles branch of the Infernal Court in nearby Redondo Beach. The office was well-known among the SoCal supernatural substrata for financial aid on a swiftly tilting scale of spell-fed crimes. Ones not necessarily against the great State of California. Roman Barracuda had her dad on his client list.

Which is where Nessa's current indentured servitude came in. Even at the age of nineteen, Nessa was a powerful Witch. Just the addition to his crew Barracuda was looking for.

Nessa parked her scooter to the toothy ten-foot electronic Barracuda sign flashing fitfully in the sun. The green neon crackled as the fish opened and closed its electronic jaws. Yellow dollar signs in the

fish's eyes blinked on and off in sync to some rhythm all their own. Below the fish, a billboard announced Barracuda Bail Bonds in bold black letters.

She swung the heavy lock and chain around one of the sign's steel struts. The chain had shock charms drawn on each link. It needed them in this neighborhood.

They walked into the office to an unusual scene. A dog, a cat, and a strapping woman in a green Camo sweatshirt and matching pants sat in front of Mr. Barracuda's large desk.

The woman turned to look at Nessa. She had jet-black hair in a jagged Goth cut, multiple piercings, and a neck tattoo of an orange and black carp swimming up behind one ear. Her skin was the color of a strong café latte. Eyes green. A full moon face.

Nothing strange about that. Especially the tattoos and piercings. This was a Bail Bonds office. It was seldom full of shiny, happy people. What was odd was seeing Barracuda's formidable enforcers Rose Marie and Pansie LaRue sitting with the client.

The six-foot-plus twins, built on Amazonian proportions, with a massive updo of bright red hair, generally stayed at their desks. Occasionally, they stood nearby, arms crossed in front of them, listening as their boss consulted with a client. Nessa had never seen them sit with any of them.

"This is Antonetta LeClerc." Barracuda said to Nessa, indicating the Goth-looking woman. "Though she prefers to be called Tony."

The woman gave a brief nod in greeting.

"This is her sister, Gabriela." Barracuda pointed at the dog.

Nessa felt her eyebrows creep up to her hairline. "I…I beg your pardon?"

"Gabriela," said Barracuda. "Sister to Tony. She was murdered and reincarnated as a dog."

Nessa's voice came out as a strangled "Oh."

"Gabriela's dog, Chip," he now pointed at the cat, "was murdered by the same killer. He came back as a cat."

Nessa's voice escaped as a hoarse squeak, "Dog…cat."

The cat pranced over, hips swinging, tail wagging wildly to sniff at Pim. Pim jumped back, the hair on his back rising. He yowled a warning to the cat. Or dog. Or whatever it was.

Cat/dog's tail drooped. Barracuda said the dog's name was Chip. Nessa thought that signified a boy cat/dog. The animal dropped to its front paws in a play bow, rump in the air, panting.

Whatever the gender, it was big. Long fur. Large ears. Norwegian Forest Cat maybe? At least twice the size of Pim. Not that it would make any difference if Pim decided to transform to his formidable werecat self. As a werecat, Pim was as big as a lynx with paws the size of salad plates and claws to match.

"What's he looking at?" said the Goth lady, Tony.

Nessa examined the woman's features more closely, feeling a little frisson of recognition. She looked a lot like the LaRue twins. Minus the tattoos and piercings. The twins wore no jewelry that Nessa had ever seen. Nor any visible tattoos though it was hard to tell since they always dressed in their signature long-sleeved, skin-tight leather jumpsuits.

Nessa cleared her throat which had gone dry. "My Familiar, Pim. A cat. Is invisible."

"No way," said Tony, twisting all the way around to get a better look.

The enormous cat/dog began to bounce. Tippy-tapping its front paws like an over-enthusiastic Golden Retriever, tail wagging furiously. It made strangled sounds that Nessa realized was the cat trying to bark.

"What kind of dog was Chip?" Nessa asked.

"Pit Bull, Labrador mix," responded Tony. "Gun metal gray."

Dogs loved Pim. They fell in love with him at first sniff. Apparently, this applied to reincarnated dogs as well. Pim, however, was having none of it. He rose up onto his haunches, hissing a warning.

Nessa cleared her throat again. "How long ago did this happen?"

She thought reincarnation meant merging into an infant, at least for humans. Tony looked to be around thirty or so.

"Two days. These guys," she ran a hand over the dog's head, its tail thumped the floor, "showed up this morning."

"And you know they're your sister and your dog how?" Nessa asked, genuinely puzzled. "Are they telepathic?"

That was a possibility. Cat lips and dog lips were not made for human speech. Even magical ones.

Pim was not telepathic. Not in the truest sense. He could reach Nessa's mind in emergencies, but that was rare. They used an old converted Speak and Spell toy when they needed to talk. Nessa's Grandmother Hattie had hit on the idea first. The toy's chunky keys fit Pim's nimble paws and the virtual voice gave him speech. Since then, they'd upgraded the bright red machine beyond recognition, adding WiFi and more.

"Not telepathic," said Tony. "At least nothing yet. The cat came first. To my house. Not Gabby's. When I opened the door, he scooted in and ran to Chip's bed. There, he picked up Chip's favorite stuffy, a toy otter, and ran back to me. He turned in three circles and did a play bow before dropping the toy in my lap. He jumped on the couch, grabbed one of the lap blankets, rolled himself up until only his nose peeked out. This is all stuff Chip did. I asked, 'Chip?' He wriggled out to lick my cheek."

"And you weren't freaked out?" Nessa asked.

Pansie put a hand on Tony's shoulder. "We're first cousins. Tony is not new to magic."

Nessa nodded, understanding. As a supernatural, weird was normal.

She didn't know what the Twins were, but she believed they were only marginally human. Same for the cousin, Tony, Nessa guessed. There was always a lot of magical energy buzzing around the office. She couldn't pinpoint what belonged to the Twins and what belonged to the newcomers.

The cat/dog inched forward. Pim gave it a warning swipe to the nose. Cat/dog's tail drooped. It made a strangled mewling sound Nessa interpreted as a whimper.

"Be nice," Nessa whispered, though secretly she was tempted to do the same thing. The vibes the chimera was giving off were too weird.

The dog at Tony's side *wuffled*, heaving a deep sigh.

To Nessa, it sounded impatient. Like the dog was saying, "Hurry up and get to the good stuff."

"Gabriela was easier," Tony said. "She knocked 'shave and haircut, two bits' on the door. You know. Five short, two long? *Bang, bang- bang, BANG BANG*, *bang- bang*. She always does that. I let her in. She ran to the bar cart, picked up the gin, took it into the kitchen, and set it down. She opened the fridge, took out a bottle of tonic water and set that down too. Then pulled open one of the kitchen drawers and lifted out a pack of Marlboros. Set it by the gin and tonic bottles. That's when I knew."

"So… she's sentient," Nessa said.

Tony and the dog both looked offended.

"Of course," said Tony. "She's not an animal."

The dog barked roughly in agreement.

Cat/dog just panted.

Nessa put her hands in front of her in a placating gesture. "Sorry. My bad. You should get your sister an oversized computer keyboard and a voice synthesizer." Nessa quickly explained how she and Pim talked.

The dog jumped up into a sitting position. It put one big paw on Tony's leg, nodding vigorously.

Tony smiled, "Great idea. I never thought of that."

"There's also those sound buttons people teach their pets to use but that's not going to let her communicate subtly, you know? Easy to find online though."

Rose Marie stood. "Keyboard for sure. Right Gabriela?" She looked at the dog.

Gabriela nodded, tail wagging.

"I'll go online right now and find one." She strode to her desk in the next room, tapping at the keyboard before she'd even sat down.

Nessa took a good look at the animal. It was more dog, than wolf. But big. Almost as big as her friend Chuck, the Lobo. Lobos were wolves who could shift into human form. She didn't think Gabriela was a Lobo.

“Oh, and apply for a service dog vest and registration,” Nessa added, thinking of Chuck. After being freed from the curse keeping him from transforming into a human, the Lobo partnered with Nessa’s fellow Barracuda Bail Bonds bounty hunter, Jun Hee Kim.

“The Service Dog designation will let him, I mean her, enter buildings with you.”

Roman Barracuda raised his eyes to meet Nessa’s over the rim of the wire-framed Granny Glasses perched on his broad nose. He’d been sitting quietly, arms folded over his chest. “My, my. You are bursting with good ideas today, Miss Nessa.”

Nessa felt her cheeks flush, unsure if her boss was being sarcastic or complimenting her.

Pansie stood. “I can work on that. We’ll get you a certificate printed out before you leave. Shall I have the vest delivered here or to your place?”

Tony turned to Mr. Barracuda.

Today, Nessa’s boss was wearing a neon bright yellow and green polyester shirt that mirrored the colors of the sign outside. The tips of the collar came halfway to his shoulders. For Roman Barracuda, the Seventies had never died. The 1970s, to be clear. He was rumored to have lived through the 1770s and 1870s. However, he’d picked the 1970s as his decade of choice. Those glittering disco days were reflected in his clothes and choice of music.

“Is here okay, Mr. Barracuda?” asked Tony.

“Certainly, Miss Tony,” he said in his deep baritone. “Anything we can do to help. You and your sister are family.”

Pansie hurried to join Rose Marie in their half of the office.

Nessa knew from experience the Twins were expert forgers. The Private Investigator’s License in her wallet was proof of that.

Now,” Barracuda continued. “I gather your cousins know the whole story. Why don’t you tell me, Miss Nessa, and Mr. Pim, how this happened.”

Tony ran a hand roughly through her hair. “My sister was dating a man.”

The sister in question growled deep in her chest.

Tony blew out a long breath. “Bastard. Anyway, we *thought* he was a man. Or mostly. Nothing special. No big buzz of magic around him. A steady resonance, you know?”

Nessa and Pim both nodded. Magic could almost always sense magic.

“Turns out he was hiding exactly how powerful he was. He murdered Gabriela and her dog. Then he took my sister’s soul.”

Nessa’s nerves jumped to high alert. Pim growled.

“A Soul Eater?” Nessa choked out.

“Yes,” Tony spat.

Nessa put her face in her hands, moaning, “Oh no. Not another one.”

CHAPTER TWO

"You've taken on a Soul Eater before," Barracuda said.

Nessa instinctively backed away several steps, putting out both hands in protest. "That was a total *fuster cluck*. Pim and I nearly got killed and he's the reason the Infernal Court gave me these." She shook her wrists causing the glowing red hex pentagrams circling them to spark.

The pentagrams were Jinxes. Punishment from the Infernal Court for summoning tornadoes over the LA South Bay during her recent battle with a Soul Eater.

Barracuda's eyes flicked to one of the two monitors on his big desk. "They're coming off tomorrow," Barracuda said flatly. "You'll have your Elemental powers back."

"And I would like to keep them!" Nessa said adamantly.

The Court mandated Jinx had locked out her Elemental powers for thirty days. And a harrowing thirty days it had been. Filled with a bloodthirsty cursed sword, evil alchemists, fast zombies, water demons, curses flying around the South Bay like confetti, traitorous coven witches, an encounter with the indigenous demigod Coyote, and a fight with her own nemesis, Frank the Fallen Angel. Not to mention the disastrous dinner with Ravi's family.

That dinner had wiped out any hope she had of moving Ravi from friend zone to a more-than-just-a- friend zone. Ravi's mom hated her. Since Ravi's mom was an Indian Nagini with the power to turn into a semi-divine giant cobra, Nessa hadn't wanted to argue with her assessment.

Besides, Nessa knew in her heart Ravi's mom was right. Ravi was an investigator with the Infernal Court. Ambitious, well-educated, and rich.

What was she? A poor witch attending Junior College with a curse following her around.

"I'd like you to look into this," Barracuda said. "They need your skills."

Nessa couldn't help looking from the cat/dog to the big black dog, and the Goth lady. Rose Marie and her sister came out of the office to stand by Barracuda's desk.

"*We* would like you to look into this," Barracuda amended.

Oh, hell.

Rose Marie and Pansie had been nothing but nice to Nessa from the day she crossed Barracuda Bail Bonds' threshold. She couldn't repay them with disrespect.

Pim put a paw on her leg, gently tugging on the hem of her jeans. She met his big green eyes.

He nodded.

Pim thought they should help.

"I understand," Nessa said with as much sincerity as she could muster.

Barracuda gave a quick nod. "Good. Go with Rose Marie and Pansie to Miss Gabriela's house. See what you can sniff out."

Tony pushed back her chair to stand, smoothing the loose V-neck thermal camo top with a shirttail hem over her camo cargo pants. "Let's go."

The big black dog got to her feet and cat/dog ran to Tony, jumping up to bump her hand with his furry forehead.

Nessa and Pim followed the group out to the parking area. Pim meowed querulously.

"Rock and a hard place," Nessa whispered.

Rose Marie opened the back door to their heavily muscled SUV.

"Ride with us," she said, indicating the inside with a wave of her hand.

Pim easily hopped into the jacked-up vehicle.

Nessa needed the step at the back seat to get the boost to climb in. She was not six foot plus like the Twins.

"Put your seat belt on," Rose Marie said as Pansie gunned the engine. They roared out of the parking area with Tony in a brown Jeep in the lead, rocking and bumping over the curb into the street.

Nessa and Pim exchanged wide-eyed looks as her Familiar balanced on the back seat, crouching low for traction.

"Where…where are we going?" Nessa asked.

"Not far. Carson. Beyond the Mall."

Nessa didn't know which Mall she meant. Or Carson.

The Twins kept quiet, so Nessa did the same. Despite eating dinner with them at least a dozen times at the office over the past couple of months, being out in the real world with the sisters felt a little weird.

Turns out Carson wasn't far from Compton and the Bail Bonds Office. They were able to take surface streets all the way. Good thing. The 91 Freeway was already crowded with afternoon traffic.

They paralleled a big canal that bisected the area until Nessa saw a giant oil refinery up ahead. The factory's towering chimneys pumped smoke into the clouds dotting the blue sky. From a busy six-lane street they turned into a tree-lined residential area where the factory still dominated the skyline. Houses were a mix of one and two-story homes. Not new but well cared for despite their proximity to the enormous refinery.

Tony's jeep turned into the driveway of a gray ranch-style house with a shingle roof and a brown lawn.

Rose Marie pulled the SUV up to the curb.

Nessa and Pim jumped out, waiting for Rose Marie and Pansie. Together they joined Tony and the two animals by the front step. A faded seagrass mat lay half-on half-off the step.

It did not say 'welcome.' As well it shouldn't. Witches understood that simple word meant you were welcoming anyone and anything inside – good or bad.

Fragrant rosemary bushes flanked the door. Another sign a witch lived here. Witches planted rosemary by the entry to keep away evil. Too bad the plant hadn't fulfilled its duty this time.

"This is Gabriela's place," Tony said, turning the key in the deadbolt lock. "Nothing has been touched since I was here."

"What about the police?" Nessa asked.

"Didn't call them. Kept it on the Dark Web downlow. Had Gabriela's and Chip's bodies put into Francis Lareau's freezer storage place in Lawndale. The cops would only complicate things. Besides they'd never find this guy."

Nessa had to agree. The police were useless in supernatural crimes.

"They…" Tony paused, swallowing. "They were in the living room. On the floor."

Nessa nodded.

Tony pushed the door open, revealing a darkened foyer. As if in silent agreement, Tony, Rose Marie, Pansie, and the animals stepped aside, waiting for Nessa and Pim to take the lead.

Nessa paused on the front step. "Your sister and Chip. Are they protected?"

Tony looked at her quizzically. "From what?"

"From being tracked. They're not wearing amulets. Chip maybe not so much but Gabriela is going to leave a magical signature everywhere she goes."

"She's right," Rose Marie said.

Swinging her backpack around to the front, Nessa unzipped it and pulled out a black Sharpie. "I've got a temporary solution until you can get some protection for them. We'll put sigils on their paws." She glanced at Tony, "You're protected, right?"

"From what again?" Tony asked looking puzzled.

"Tracking spells."

Tony smiled slyly, "I'm good. We don't leave anyone behind to track us. Scorched earth. That's how we roll."

Nessa's stomach tightened. What exactly did these sisters do? Rose Marie and Pansie generally brought the bail jumpers to the Infernal Court or human court, whichever, *alive*. Didn't sound like the other sisters did the same.

Swallowing, she said, “We don’t know how clever this guy is. It’s important he can’t fasten onto your sister or Chip’s signatures.”

Nessa reached for Gabriela’s front paw. Understanding, she lifted it to Nessa’s hand.

It took a few minutes to get the animals protected. Chip kept squirming around, thinking it was some sort of new game.

Pim showed Nessa his paws so Nessa could double check he was still protected. She did this routinely for them. Her shoes had the sigils lightly carved into the soles and inked in with marker.

“What about your truck?” she asked Rose Marie and Pansie.

Pansie held her hand up to her chin, “Warded up to here and back. No one tracks us.”

“Okay,” Nessa said on a long exhale of breath. “Let’s get this done.”

Together with Pim, Nessa cautiously stepped through the front door. She was expecting anything from a tingle to a punch in the stomach from the threshold wards but there was … nothing. No buzz of magical energy at all.

“No warding?” Nessa asked, looking over her shoulder to Tony.

“I hadn’t even noticed,” she answered. “You know. Last time. Are they down?”

“Completely.”

Gabriela gave a moaning whimper and hung her head.

“Did you take them down?” Nessa asked the dog.

Gabriela nodded, pinning her ears back.

“Why would you do that?” Her sister said shrilly. “They were protecting you.”

Nessa thought it over. The guy was Gabriela’s boyfriend. A slippery, sweet-talking son of a bitch from what Tony had said.

“He asked you to do it, didn’t he?” said Nessa. “Gave you some excuse and you believed him.”

Gabriela hung her head even lower, her furry body drooping.

“Oh Gabriela,” her sister moaned. “How could you be so stupid?”

Gabriela slunk all the way down, her belly on the front walk, and hid her eyes with one oversized paw.

Nessa and Pim walked into the narrow foyer. A bench with a flower-patterned seat cushion and a row of coat hooks were along one wall. A pretty gilt framed mirror on the other. A palm that must have sat next to the mirror had been uprooted, the ceramic container broken, dirt scattered across the floor. A carpet runner lay crumpled and tossed in front of a closed door. Nessa guessed the door led to a bedroom or guest bathroom.

Waves of low-resolution energy lapped at Nessa’s feet and knees as she approached the living room, teasing and tickling her skin.

Through the doorway at the far end of the room, she saw two shadows moving across the floor.

Pim hissed, the fur standing up along his back.

“You see them too, right?” she asked him.

Pim growled an affirmative.

“Trap?”

Pim stared across the open space finally shaking his head.

Tony followed them inside with the Twins close behind though they stayed in the foyer.

Tony leaned over Nessa’s shoulder as Nessa stared into the other room. “What?” she asked, “What do you see?”

“Leftovers from the ceremony,” Nessa explained.

“Leftover what?” Rose Marie asked, following Nessa’s line of sight.

“Spirits. Give us a minute to check.”

Side by side, Nessa and Pim stepped across the threshold dividing the foyer from the living room.

A sensation like a hundred needles slapped her across the face, racing up and down her body. She gasped at the pain, grabbing onto the door frame to keep from falling.

The magic hit Pim too. With a screech of surprise, he flipped into a somersault as if launched by a catapult, coming down beside her in full werecat mode.

Arching his back, he bared his fangs.

Nessa heard the tell-tale snap as Rose Marie and Pansie shouldered around Tony, unbuckling the illegally high voltage tasers strapped to their hips.

“What is it?” the sisters said together, standing on either side of Nessa as their eyes scanned the room.

“We are not alone,” Nessa explained.

Pim’s large werecat ears swiveled flat against his head.

Staying on the foyer side of the threshold, Tony strained to peer around them. “I don’t see anything.” She sounded genuinely puzzled. “I was here before. Nothing attacked me.”

“Just because you didn’t feel it doesn’t mean they weren’t here,” Nessa said.

“They who?” asked Rose Marie.

“Ghosts. Two of them.” It was hard to take a deep breath, like gravity had suddenly increased, pressing against Nessa’s lungs. The Scott ability to see spirits was making itself known big time today. “In the living room, the residual energy from the Wizard’s spell is containing them.” She shrugged, “That’s what I think, anyway.”

“Gabriela and Chip?” Tony asked, then added, “no that can’t be possible. They’re here.”

Nessa felt Gabriela's oversized furry body push between them all to stand at the entrance to the living room.

"Two others," Nessa said, trying to see the ephemeral figures more clearly.

A flare of heat by her legs caused Nessa to turn away and look down.

What she saw made her automatically reach for one of the sigils on her summoning belt forgetting in her surprise that she couldn't access them. The Jinxes from the Infernal Court flared on her wrists, reminding her she had no Elemental power.

A black beast with flames licking out from its shaggy fur had crossed the threshold between the foyer and the living room. Heat emanated from it in scorching waves. Lips drawn back from three-inch incisors; saliva dripped from its lips. Every drop sizzled, burning into the floor.

What a time to be without her magic.

CHAPTER THREE

Nessa backed away.

"Gabriela," Tony gasped, reaching out a hand but not moving. "It's Gabriela." Now they knew what sort of supernatural Gabriela's spirit had jumped into.

Another beast stalked crossed the threshold between the foyer and living room, a step behind the Hell Hound.

A cat.

Or sort of a cat. Nearly as big as Pim in his werecat form and covered in silver needle-like spikes. Two twisted horns jutted out from between its ears, and a long, barbed tail swept back and forth.

"Chip?" asked Tony.

"What the hell," said Nessa.

The creature had its back arched in a classic angry cat pose, joined to Gabriela. It screamed out a high-pinched wail that made the windows rattle.

Pim jumped between Nessa and the beasts, growling a challenge of his own.

The two creatures didn't even look at Pim and Nessa. They were stalked stiff legged into the living room.

"Is this the first time they've been back since the murder?" Nessa asked. She had to raise her voice to be heard over the menacing growls of the three animals in the room.

"Yes," admitted Tony.

"Jeezus, why didn't you warn me? They're reliving their murders and are hyperactivated by the residual death spells."

"What death spells?" Tony's eyes searched the room as if she could see them. "There was nothing here…" she hesitated, a catch in her voice, "before…when…when I found them."

"Take my word for it," Nessa said, "the room is full of leftover dark magic. They are not who they were, you sister and her dog. They can feel this."

The wooden floor under Gabriela's paws started to burn.

Tony pushed by Nessa, stamping her feet to put out the sparks.

Rose Marie and Pansie pulled Nessa back into the Foyer. Pim moved with Nessa, still keeping his body between her and the living room. The Twins took a step to stand shoulder to shoulder in the doorway. Speaking in low voices, they began to chant, simultaneously moving their hands in intricate,

interlocking gestures. Their outlines shimmered in the air, magic building with every movement and syllable.

The light around them flared as they brought their hands together in a resounding *slap*, shouting a single word. A powerful word that exploded in green flame, ricocheting around the room beyond like a bullet.

Nessa dropped to the floor, covering her head as the spell shot back into the foyer smacking from wall to wall before flying back into the living room. It hit the Hell Hound and the demonic cat in a blinding flash of light.

For a moment Nessa could see nothing. When the lens flare finally cleared, she saw the canine form of Gabriela and feline Chip sprawled on the floor, legs akimbo. They raised their heads shaking them groggily.

Tony ran over, kneeling to run her hands over their bodies. “Are you okay? Gabriela? Chip?”

Chip thumped his tail in a far too dog like manner for a cat.

Tony gave the twins an angry glare.

“Don't be mad,” said Rose Marie breathlessly. “They’ll be fine.”

“Transference spell,” continued her sister. “If we didn’t do something the Hell Hound would’ve burned the damn house down.”

Tony ran her hand lovingly over the dog’s head. “You’re a Hell Hound,” she whispered.

Gabriela grumbled deep in her chest. She didn’t sound particularly pleased by this news.

Werecat Pim growled at the animals.

Chip pulled himself up onto his paws to wobble over to Pim. He tried to rub against the werecat’s chest.

Pim raised one of his oversized paws.

“Pim,” Nessa warned. “Do not whack Chip. He only wants to be friends.”

Narrowing his eyes, Pim hissed but put his paw down. Chip seemed to take this as a symbol of friendship and licked Pim’s furry chest.

Pim spit and hissed again.

“What is Chip?” Tony asked.

“No freaking idea,” Nessa said honestly. Spiky horned cats with scaled snake tails were new to her. Nessa got to her feet. “This is the first time they’ve transformed?”

Tony still squatted by her sister. “Yeah. Yeah, it is. I had no idea they could even do that. I thought they were a dog and a cat. Real ones.”

“No. That’s impossible.” Nessa had studied up on the subject of Soul Eaters and their victims after her encounter with Oliver, the soul-sucking servant of the Fire Queen. “You know that the Soul Eater takes the soul but leaves the spirit, right?”

Tony gave a quick nod.

“The spirit is doomed to wander for all eternity unless it can find another body at the point of death to jump into. The catch is the body can have no human soul. Not that supernaturals don’t have souls,” she added quickly seeing the looks on Rose Marie and Pansie’s faces. “They have a different divine resonance. Which means these guys jumped into supernatural creatures. In your sister’s case, a Hell Hound that can transform into a dog. And Chip…” Nessa shook a finger at the furry cat, “found whatever that is.”

Rose Marie spread her hands wide. “If the body has to be near death, what could kill a Hell Hound? From what I’ve read, they are nearly indestructible.”

“And not from Hell,” Nessa added. “My grandmother’s Bestiary said no one knows where they’re from. Super rare creatures. When I get home, I’ll read more about them.”

She was lucky to have the Bestiary from the Chevalier family’s collection of Grimoire spell books. When Grandma’ Hattie had gotten close to finding Frank the Fallen Angel’s real name, she’d taken all her valuable books and objects and buried them in a waterproof box beneath Nessa’s favorite tree on her property. A weeping cherry. In case Frank found *her*. Which he did.

Tony continued running her hand over Gabriela’s side. “I believe dogs have souls but how did Chip know to jump into another body? I loved, *love,*” she amended when Gabriela swiftly turned her furry head. “I love, present tense, my sister’s dog but let’s be honest. He was no rocket scientist.”

All eyes turned to Chip. He flopped onto his back, waving his paws in the air to look adoringly at Pim.

“My guess is his spirit followed your sister’s to wherever she went. When Gabriela found the Hell Hound, maybe she pushed Chip’s spirit into the cat demon.”

Gabriela barked quick and sharp.

“Is that what happened?” her sister asked.

Gabriela barked again, popping up into a sitting position.

“Do you think they can keep it together if we go further into the house?” Nessa asked.

Tony shifted the question to her sister, “Can you keep it together?”

The dog got to her feet, looking around the living room to her sister and back. She whined.

“Maybe they should stay in the foyer for now. Get used to the vibe, you know,” Pansie said.

Chip padded over to join Tony, butting her with his head.

“Gabriela, you and Chip wait a bit, okay?”

The dog nodded, padding back into the entryway.

Tony scooped up the cat, returning to the foyer. Setting him down she said, “Stay, Chip. Stay.”

Gabby clamped a big paw down on Chip squashing him to the floor in case he didn’t understand.

Pansie and Rose Marie stepped aside, letting Pim take the lead. He always entered first in case of danger.

Nessa followed, clenching her hands into fists as the painful needle-like sensation rushed over her again.

The room crackled with energy. To Nessa, it snapped and popped, sparking off the walls, the ceiling, the furniture.

She gritted her teeth and made herself assess the room.

The living room was spacious. Couch against the wall on the left of the entrance from the foyer. Two easy chairs on either side. All upholstered in a matching blue ivy and bird pattern.

The motif looked familiar. Nessa knew this print. After a moment, she mentally snapped her fingers. William Morris. The British illustrator. She’d seen his work in books and on throw blankets and pillows at high-end stores.

The coffee table lay shattered and broken, pieces strewn across the floor.

The green and blue area rug was shoved all the way to one side exposing a large pentacle carved into the wooden floor. Esoteric symbols and runes covering the space inside the main design. In the center were smears of scarlet.

Nessa didn’t have to ask where Tony found the bodies.

“I’m guessing you and your sister didn’t make this.” She indicated the pentacle with one hand.

“No.” Tony averted her eyes. “Hell, no. I hardly even noticed it was there when I found them. Al I could see was Gabby.”

Rose Marie threw an arm around Tony’s shoulders. “He probably made a copy of Gabriela’s keys. Rolled back the carpet and went to work over a couple of afternoons while you and Gabriela were working a case.”

Tony nodded, looking numb. Her eyes cloudy with tears.

Nessa took a deep breath. Her own dark power, the legacy of her mom’s bargain with a Fallen Angel, even locked away in its cage, sparked in response to this filthy blood magic. God, what did that say about her own soul?

“Soul trap,” Nessa explained, the words coming out hoarse and strained. “What the Soul Eater used in his summoning to make Gabriela helpless.”

“And Chip,” Tony whispered.

Rose Marie cautiously entered first. Giving her shoulders a shake, as she walked to Nessa, she said, “I don’t feel anything,”

“Me neither,” seconded her sister, a step behind.

“Take my word for it,” said Nessa, “there’s a mess of magic floating randomly around this room. The Soul Eater guy, what’s his name?”

Tony joined them, staying close to the twins. “Sergei. Sergei North. At least that’s what he told my sister.”

“Sergei. Got it. He may be powerful but he’s sloppy. He didn’t bother cleaning up his magic before taking off.”

Nessa pointed to the area between the living and dining room. “See those black piles?”

Tony, Rose Marie, and Pansie followed her finger.

“Those were people. The Soul Eater used his minions, fellow witches or warlocks, to power the spell for your sister’s soul. I’m guessing Chip got sucked in by proximity.”

“And they turned to dust or whatever that is?” Rose Marie asked. “The minions.”

“From what I’ve read, yeah. He used their life energy to power his spell. Unfortunately for them, it wouldn’t have been fast or easy. Dust or ash is the end of a long and tortuous process. There had to be something extraordinarily special about Gabriela’s soul for him to go to all this trouble. What kind of witch is she?”

Tony didn’t answer right away, and Nessa caught the three women exchange a quick look.

Flushing, Nessa held up a hand. “Sorry. It was rude of me to ask. She has to be special for him to go to all this trouble.”

The other women said nothing which only made Nessa more curious.

“You said you see two sprits or ghosts here in the room?” Tony asked.

Nessa let the change in subject go. “Yep. That’s the life force he used to complete the soul transfer.”

“I did see the ashes when I was here.” She pointed to the piles. “Too shocked to give it much thought, I guess. You’re saying those piles were people?”

“Yes. Which means this guy is not as powerful as the Soul Eater I fought at the cemetery last month. He could rip out souls by himself. No help necessary. These spirits are trapped. They move from here to there.” Nessa held out her hand, indicating their path. “Then fall to the floor right where Pansie is standing before repeating the same thing.”

Pansie hurriedly jumped away.

Rose Marie knelt to run her hand over one of the symbols carved into the floor. “You can still feel the energy.”

“It was bad,” Tony said quietly staring at the floor.

“Had to have been terrible,” Nessa agreed. “For the sacrifices as well. The lingering spell energy and their own trauma are part of what’s keeping them anchored here.”

“If they’re stuck, how come Gabriela and Chip were able to cross into…” Tony waved a hand vaguely in the air, “wherever they crossed to.”

“My guess is he didn’t take the sacrifices souls. Don’t you think, Pim?” She looked to her Familiar.

Sitting on his haunches he considered her question and nodded he agreed.

“Their souls are keeping them anchored to our world. At least for now,” Nessa finished.

“Gabriela and Chip didn’t have anchors,” Pansie said.

“Right. They flowed out from this plane of existence. He could have released them,” Nessa added, “the sacrifices, not your sister. Looks to me like he couldn’t be bothered. That’s lazy spellwork. Leaving them here like this.”

Gabriela whined from the doorway.

“Can they come in?” asked Tony.

Pim meowed and Nessa made a sound of uncertainty. “I guess. I don’t know.” She looked at the three women, “You realize I’m nineteen and playing this totally by ear, right?

Rose Marie chuckled, “Nineteen going on ninety.”

Pansie said seriously, “You are so much more than the sum of your years, Miss Vanessa.”

“Am I? Honestly?” Nessa tried to keep her voice steady, only partially succeeding. “It’s up to you guys. But you might want to grab a fire extinguisher if you have one.”

All three women laughed.

“No,” said Nessa seriously, “I’m not actually kidding.”

They laughed some more.

“Come in,” Tony said to Gabriela.

Nessa took a few steps closer to the kitchen. Hopefully there was a fire extinguisher. In there.

Gabriela shuddered visibly and Chip’s fur stood on end as they entered the living room.

The energy shifted drastically as soon as both animals crossed fully over the threshold.

On the other side of the room, the ghosts came to an abrupt stop above their ashes. Their blurry, indistinct shadows shimmered, rippling eerily up and out in concentric circles like a rock thrown into a still pond. All at once the ripples collapsed and two figures rose up out of the floor.

They began to scream.

Book Seven in the Girl's Guide to Voodoo Bounty Hunting: Dread Languages will be out January 1st, 2027.