

JINGLE SPELLS

- A GIRL'S GUIDE TO VODOO
- BOUNTY HUNTING
- CHRISTMAS STORY 🐱🎅

by Eden Crowne



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A Girl's Guide to Voodoo Bounty Hunting Christmas Story

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Nessa Scott and her scooter cover art by [Miblar](#)

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CHAPTER ONE

“I’m having a Christmas party and I want you to come. Oh, and your creepy cat is invited as well.”

Nessa lifted her head from the pillow on the couch to blink sleepily at her roommate, Fionna.

The young witch held a coffee mug in one hand, the aroma drifting enticingly across the small living room. She was dressed in a pastel-colored chrysanthemum patterned silk robe that fell to the floor in soft folds, her shoulder-length blond hair pulled carelessly back into a short ponytail.

Pim, Nessa’s Familiar, wriggled into a tighter ball of gray fur, meowing in protest at being awakened.

They’d fallen asleep on the couch watching Christmas movies last night.

“You want who, what?” rasped Nessa, rubbing her eyes crusty with sleep.

Fionna pointed at Nessa, “You. Cat. Christmas party. At my family’s house. Tonight.”

Nessa blinked. “Me? You want me to come? Why? You don’t even like me.”

Fionna made a face. “Gawd, Nessa. You make me sound like a bitch.”

Nessa wisely neither affirmed nor denied that statement.

She did think Fionna was a bitch, but she had good reason.

Nessa and Pim were Bounty Hunters, or indentured slaves, depending on how you look at it. They were employed by Barracuda Bail Bonds, owned by Mister Roman Barracuda, L.A.’s premier Supernatural Bail Bondsman and Voodoo King. The office was housed in a sherbet-yellow house on a questionable side of the 91 Freeway.

They had only recently joined this brave new world of professional bounty hunting. And not by choice. Nessa’s deadbeat dad skipped out on his Infernal bond with Mr. Barracuda. This was actually not surprising. Her dad was a career criminal of the magical kind. Nessa suspected he had more bounties on his head than Billy the Kid.

Only this time, the debt to Barracuda wasn’t money. It was magic. And he’d left his only child, nineteen-year-old Nessa, as collateral.

Barracuda Bail Bonds was well-known among the SoCal supernatural substrata for financial aid in crimes not necessarily against the great State of California. Barracuda kept supernatural bonds for various magical tribunals and demonic agencies on his books. He also worked closely with the Greater Los Angeles branch of the Infernal Court located in nearby Redondo Beach.

California recently made some changes in its bail bond laws. Those changes cut directly into Barracuda's human bail bond business. As a result, the office was focusing more on the supernatural criminal element. Which is where Nessa's current indentured servitude came in. Nessa was a rare Air Elemental with far-reaching and often frightening powers. Just what Barracuda needed to apprehend the felons leaving slime trails across his door. Literal slime trails occasionally.

Roman Barracuda was directly responsible for dropping Fionna Garde into Nessa and Pim's lives.

Fionna had been a bad witch. Not inept. Naughty. She'd thrown dark hexes around to bring down the cost of a house she wanted in Glendale.

Magic is not free. It demands a price. Always.

The darker the spell, the higher the price. Similar to the real estate market in L.A. The better the location, the higher the cost.

Dark Magic users were experts at offloading this magical blowback onto some innocent person, place, or thing – regardless of the consequences. Fionna's offloading triggered a landslide in Topanga Canyon and caused a herd of sacred sheep to drop dead in their field.

Fionna's family was both wealthy and powerful. Nevertheless, it was hard for the Infernal Court to ignore the main road in and out of Topanga Canyon being closed for three days because she wanted to lower her mortgage. Fionna was subsequently brought up on charges of reckless endangerment.

Fionna's family took out her bail bond with Barracuda. When the young witch missed her court date, Roman Barracuda thought it would be the perfect first assignment for Nessa and Pim.

"It will be easy," Mr. Barracuda said. "No trouble at all."

Mr. Barracuda lied.

The Shaman in charge of the sheep felt because of her wealth, Fionna would get off lightly. He decided to exact his own justice.

Nessa and Fiona were thrown into a running battle across Greater Los Angeles to escape a team of Skinwalkers hired by the angry Shaman. They were ordered to take out the entitled witch. It had been a close thing. Blood was shed. Mostly Nessa's. But she'd saved Fionna.

An action she now occasionally regretted.

As part of her parole, the Infernal Court ordered Fionna into a halfway house situation. With dollar signs in her eyes, Nessa's Aunt Emerald offered her home. Hence, the roommate status.

Fionna was also assigned community service at Barracuda Bail Bonds for the foreseeable future. Nessa didn't understand how working for Mr. Barracuda benefitted the community. Maybe they just wanted to keep Fionna and her dark magic off the streets.

It was hard to blame them.

Pim lifted his head, his ears twitching. "Meow?"

Nessa looked down at him. “Fionna is inviting us to a party.”

“Meow?” he said again, kitty eyes wide.

“It will be fun,” Fionna insisted. “So, come. Okay? I’m texting you the address.” She tapped at her phone screen, spun on her heel, and walked back to her bedroom.

“What the heck?” said Nessa to Pim.

“Meeeeooooow,” Pim groaned.

Nessa interpreted this to say, “Need coffee.”

“I agree.”

Scrambling around the large gray tabby, Nessa climbed out of her nest of blankets, slipped her feet into fuzzy moccasins, carefully circumvented the Christmas Tree taking up that corner and into the kitchen.

One of the only good things about Fionna moving in was the state-of-the-art coffee machine on the kitchen counter. That and a constant supply of coffee pods. Good ones. Like, really good.

Fionna might be a pain in other ways, but she was no cheapskate. She urged Nessa to have as much coffee as she liked.

Nessa and Pim liked coffee very much, thank you.

She slotted in an espresso pod and waited to fill Pim’s little ceramic bowl before making a cup for herself. Bringing them back to the couch, she set the bowl on the coffee table.

Pim stretched languorously from head to the tip of his long tail. Pim, full name Pim’s Cup Whiskers Rampant, Grand Champion of the 1871 Crystal Palace Cat Show, was invisible due to a rather unfortunate century-old curse. Nessa could see him. So could many animals and a few select people.

Pim lapped his espresso and Nessa sipped from her tiny cup.

“Sooo...a Christmas Party. What do you think?”

Pim paused to consider her question. He wrinkled his furry forehead before finally giving a nod.

“We’ll go?”

He nodded again.

Pim was fully sentient, several hundred years old, and quite brilliant. But he was not telepathic. At least not usually. Also, Kitty lips were not made for human speech. Nessa could interpret his expressive feline vocalizations and body language remarkably well. For deeper conversations, they had his *Speak and Spell*.

Nessa’s Grandmother Hattie had hit on using the toy back in the day. Its chunky keyboard was just right for kitty-sized paws, and the speech function gave Pim a voice. Since then, Hattie, Nessa’s dad, and Nessa made many modifications, turning the toy into a WiFi marvel.

“A Christmas Party,” repeated Nessa.

“Party?” chirped a voice. “Party? Poppy party! Whoop, whoop!”

Poppy, the Gray African Parrot, swooped onto the couch. She hadn’t been in the room before. Nessa guessed she flew in from Aunt Emerald’s side of the house. Somehow, doors were no barrier to Poppy. This should not be a surprise. Like Pim, she was far more than she seemed.

Poppy had been the Familiar to a young Warlock, Brian Samejima. Brian was killed a couple of weeks ago by a demon he’d stupidly summoned.

It had not been love at first sight between Nessa, Pim, and the bird.

However, after saving Nessa’s life twice from demon attacks, Nessa decided the bird could stay with them until they found a new Witch or Warlock to bond with. Familiars often die of a broken heart after losing their partner. She didn’t want that to happen to the talkative little bird.

“Party?” the bird said again.

“Bring Poppy,” Fionna called from her room. “There will be a lot of magic users there. Maybe she can find a new partner.”

The parrot bobbed up and down excitedly on the couch.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she chanted. “New daddy? New mommy?”

“Maybe,” agreed Nessa.

Fiona sailed by, now in one of her signature Chanel boucle suits. This one navy blue with a white blouse underneath the jacket. “Gotta’ go. Hair and nails to be done. Be there by seven.”

She wriggled her fingers, singing “Byeee.”

And was gone.

Nessa drained her little cup and stood. “I need another shot. What about you?”

Pim gave a feline sigh, pushing the empty bowl toward her with one paw.

“Meow,” he said, agreeing it was going to be a quadruple espresso kind of a day.

CHAPTER TWO

Thankfully, no urgent calls from Barracuda Bail Bonds forced her to cancel tonight's plans. Although she wouldn't admit it, Nessa was secretly excited about being invited to an upscale party. She was no party girl but loved people-watching and knew she would have fun even if it meant sitting alone in a corner with Pim. There would be food and drink.

Food and drink were not to be looked down upon. She'd learned that lesson all too well in her vagabond existence.

Nessa spent the day catching up on her homework. She was a second-year student at Santa Monica College on track to transfer to Cal State University Long Beach. Her dream was to become a meteorologist. Work for the government or some TV station somewhere. As an Air Elemental, meteorology seemed like a logical choice. If she didn't correctly predict the local weather, she could always change it to match.

Magic for the win.

That is if she could ever find a way to wiggle out of her curse and escape the Fallen Angel chasing her soul.

Right now, as much as she didn't want to admit it, Bounty Hunting was the best way to save money for school. She earned her room and board at Aunt Emeralds by helping with seances.

Her aunt was a medium. A real one. Able to call the spirits and, more importantly, communicate with them. Spirits were everywhere, though most people couldn't see them. Most were silent, even to the gifted. When they did speak, it was gibberish or inarticulate moans or random words to those without a very special gift. Aunt Emerald had that gift. She spoke the Language of the Dead.

Understanding the Language of the Dead was one of the rarest gifts among supernaturals. Aunt Emerald could have made a lucrative career on television and streaming services, writing books, and giving lectures. But she didn't. She owned her house/salon. She worked alone and liked it that way.

When Nessa decided to stop remote schooling and attend a real college, her dad arranged a deal with his elder sister, Emerald. A sister Nessa hadn't even known he had until they pulled up at the Cottage-style house just off the Pacific Coast Highway in Hermosa Beach.

As part of the deal, Nessa used her Elemental powers to send cold or warm winds, little whirlwinds, or a scary chill into the seance room to enhance the experience for Aunt Emerald's patrons. Because of these little enhancements, Aunt Emerald was busier than ever.

In the middle of the afternoon, her phone buzzed with a text.

Ravi.

‘Hey,’ she texted back. ‘You okay?’

This was not a casual question. Ravi Singh was an investigator for the Infernal Court in nearby Redondo Beach. He was often bringing in God-knows-what sort of supernatural creature.

‘I’m good,’ came the reply. ‘Are you going to Fionna’s party?’

‘Are you?’ she tapped back.

He sent some laughing emojis. ‘I am. She invited me. At least, I think so. She said, *Hey Roger, want to come to a party?*’

Fionna practiced her Bitchcraft by purposely calling Ravi every name beginning with ‘R’ but his own.

Ironically, Nessa met Ravi because of Fionna. He’d been sent by the Infernal Court to prevent an unlicensed vendetta they suspected had been started by the Sacred Sheep’s Shaman. He’d been dragged into the subsequent Furry/Skinwalker madness with her and Fionna.

It turned out Ravi was as new at his job as Nessa and Pim. They’d become good friends since then. Something rare and wonderful for her.

Nessa did not have friends. She’d been on the run from a Fallen Angel since her birth. Genevieve Chevalier, Nessa’s mother, sold her soul for a chance to have the same Air Elemental magic as the other Chevaliers. Magic sometimes inexplicably skipped a generation as it did with Genevieve.

Genevieve didn’t realize Nessa was already growing in her womb when she sold her soul. The Fallen Angel considered Nessa had been included in the deal. Nessa’s dad did not agree. After Nessa’s mother died in childbirth, dad grabbed her and ran.

Hermosa Beach was the longest she’d ever been in one place. Meeting Ravi for coffee or lunch to talk about their cases was the closest she had to a friend. And she liked it.

Nessa tapped the cell phone screen, ‘Pim and I are coming. I have to look up her address.’

‘I already did. I warn you,’ he replied, ‘it’s a 90077 zip code.’

Nessa had lived in L.A. long enough to know that meant exclusive Bel Air. It was in the hills off the 405 Freeway, not far from the Getty Center. Or not far in map terms. Mileage and actual travel times in L.A. traffic lived in their own unique universe.

Her little orange scooter could only make it up to forty-five miles per hour, too slow for the Freeway. That meant surface streets all the way.

Ugh.

Another text from Ravi quickly followed. ‘That’s why I texted. It will be a pain on your bike. Do you and Pim want to ride with me? I’m driving over from the office.’

The Infernal Court, where Ravi worked, was in the town right next to Hermosa Beach.

She held one palm out to Pim. He high-fived her with a paw. “That would be awesome. Yes. Please.’

‘Great. Traffic being traffic, how about I pick you up around six?’

‘Sounds good. And thanks again!’

Nessa finished up all the odds and ends of her homework, remembering to tell Aunt Emerald she and Fionna wouldn’t need dinner. Dinner was included in Nessa’s room and board deal with her aunt. For which Nessa was profoundly grateful. Her aunt was a great cook and always made enough for lunch leftovers the next day.

Nessa and Pim were stiff from sitting all day by the time she had to get ready for the party. Not that it would take long. Nessa only kept enough clothing to stuff in a duffel bag. The result of a life spent on the run.

Poppy roused herself from her nap behind Nessa on the couch and followed them to Nessa’s closet, walking behind Pim with her odd little rocking gait. The little apartment above the garage had two bedrooms, two baths, a compact kitchen big enough for a table-for-two and a cozy living room with a generous couch and soft easy chair. Before Nessa came, Aunt Emerald rented it out to college students by the semester.

Since they were taking Ravi’s car, she could wear her one and only skirt if she wanted. But it was chilly today and would be colder tonight. Even with tights, she’d freeze. Instead, she opted for her single pair of black, fleece-lined leggings, a warm, long-sleeved undershirt, and her black turtleneck sweater. Red or green would have been more festive except she didn’t own any red or green.

Converse Chucks or the black flats?

“What do you think, Pim?”

Pim cocked his head to one side, considering her question. Finally, he tapped the Chucks and mimed pulling something over his paws.

“And socks, right? Just in case running is involved.”

He nodded firmly.

Running was all too often unexpectedly involved in Nessa’s life.

She had a hip-length brown puffer jacket that should keep her warm. She tossed that on the floor by the door and brushed her blond hair. Her side-swept bangs were slowly de-evolving into the definition of ‘unkempt.’ A trip to the discount hair salon would have to be worked into her schedule in the near future.

There were no mirrors in her part of the house. After her dad’s scam with the Djinn’s Inferni coin, Nessa covered every mirror she could. Djinn travelled through mirrors. As far as she knew, the Djinn whose coin Dad had used or *abused*, was still seeking revenge. Which wasn’t entirely fair. Dad had not

been the thief who originally stole the coin. He'd bought it through an online auction site. People would be terrified to know how many magical objects found their way into those things. He had, however, used it to offer expensive trips into the Inferni world. Expensive one-way trips. Though the client didn't know that when they paid big bucks for the thrill.

Portals into to the Inferni mirror-world did not lead directly back to your starting point. For a mere mortal, finding the same mirror they entered through was almost impossible. There were literally thousands and thousands of mirrors on the other side. Each one served as a Portal for the Djinn. Djinn, of course, knew exactly where they were going.

She and Dad lived the high life until the coin's Djinn owner found them.

Nessa didn't mind the absence of mirrors. She knew what she looked like. A slim, pale girl, five feet two inches tall with regular features and a serious expression. Her mother had been more voluptuous. Bee-stung lips. Upturned nose. Size 36-B bra. Nessa knew this because the Fallen Angel, Frank they called him, had cruelly conjured her mother several times.

Last of all, Nessa slipped in her blue contacts. She often let them rest in their contact solution when she and Pim were home. They were custom-made and expensive for a girl on a tight budget. No matter the cost, she needed them. Her eyes were jet black from side to side. Only demons and Fallen Angels had black eyes. Another reminder of her mother's bitter bargain.

Just before six, she grabbed her jacket. Poppy flew up on her shoulder. With Pim in the lead, the three of them went to wait for Ravi.

Something was waiting for Nessa outside and it wasn't Ravi. Well, three things, actually Three things she had very much hoped not to encounter tonight.

Her trio of fairies squealed when they saw her, shooting into the air on a flutter of dragonfly wings, zipping back and forth in front of the gate. Red, green, and blue. Their fluffy dresses, full petticoats, thigh-high socks, and even their hair in their signature colors

"Taco, taco, taco!" they chorused.

Tacos were their favorite food and one of the few words they knew in human language.

Nessa dropped her face in her hands, "Crap, crap, crap," she moaned.

Ravi pulled up as Nessa was calling Fionna. As he got out of his car, the fairies rushed him, squealing, "*Raveee, Raveeee, Raveee!*"

They liked Ravi. He bought them tacos, giving him an A+ rating in their world.

To Nessa's surprise, Fionna picked up the call. Nessa was sure she'd have to text.

Plugging one ear with a finger, Nessa said, "Um...my fairies are here."

"What? Say again?"

"My fairies,". Nessa raised her voice. "My fairies are here. They just showed up."

She'd met the trio on her first trip into Faerie. The world, that is. Not the beings. Fairies are not the cute, fluttery beings of legend. They are fierce and have far too many teeth. Nessa fought and beat them and, as a result, fell afoul of Faerie law. Because she'd beaten them, the fairies were now her bondmaidens. Sworn to defend her to the death. And eat her out of house and home if they could. Nessa never knew when they would show up or how they managed to traverse the barrier between their worlds.

"Bring them," said Fionna. "It will be fine. As long as the don't eat anyone."

Nessa hesitated. "I...I can't guarantee that."

Fionna laughed gaily like Nessa was kidding and hung up.

Nessa was not kidding.

Aunt Emerald's house was Warded against ghosts, supernatural beings, and much more. The fairies couldn't cross the threshold.

Nessa stepped outside the gate. "Hey!" she shouted. "Girls! Listen!"

The fairies stopped pawing at Ravi and swooped over to her, bowing and kissing the hem of her sweater.

"Silly fairies," Poppy said disdainfully. "Silly, silly." She flapped her gray wings to reinforce her opinion. "Silly."

Poppy knew a lot about the supernatural world across the border. Nessa often wondered who the bird belonged to before coming to the young – now dead – Warlock Brian Samejima. Pim was at least two hundred years old. Poppy could be that and more.

Although she knew the girls were cloaked in a *Glamour*, Nessa often worried what the trio looked like to anyone passing. *Glamour* was a magical illusion all creatures of Faerie were capable of casting in the human world. The magic disguised their features into something people could accept.

Glamour did not work on Nessa. Her Dad and Aunt Emerald said it came from their family's ability to see ghosts. This was both an asset and a liability. Some things you did not want to see in their true form.

"Do you want to go to a party with me?" Nessa asked. She put her hands up, shaking them around, "Party."

Communication with the trio was often hit or miss.

The girls threw their hands in the air, imitating Nessa. Twirling around they howled, "Paaaartee, paaartee! Taco, taco, pandaaaa!" and rubbed their tummies.

Party equaled food in their wacky little brains. Taking them was easier than somehow communicating they could not come. Besides, they had fought bravely for her in some desperate conflicts. She owed them a little Christmas cheer.

“Are they coming?” Ravi asked jogging around the car to Nessa, tucking his shirt back in his pants with one hand and trying to smooth the mess the girls had made of his hair with the other.

“Yes,” sighed Nessa.

“Yeeeeesssss!” screamed the girls happily.

Ravi felt around his throat. “Do you see my tie? I was wearing a tie.”

Her fairies loved trophies from the people they cared about. One still had Nessa’s old Chuck tucked in her waistband.

Nessa looked at her fairies. The blue fairy had a striped tie wound around one arm.

“Oh Ravi, I don’t think you’re getting it back.”

CHAPTER THREE

Traffic was predictably heavy on the 405 Freeway. It was a good thing they'd given themselves an hour to make the run to Bel Air.

Bel Air was an exclusive community in the Santa Monica foothills not far from Brentwood. Lush and lovely and home to many celebrities. Although it was called a 'gated community,' several gated entrances were open to the public during certain hours.

The gate Fionna instructed Ravi to enter through closed at seven. However, Ravi flashed a code from Fionna, and the guard flagged them through.

Nessa had never been to this part of town. Not a lot of bail jumpers, human or supernatural, hiding out in Bel Air. Also, because of the presence of the Infernal Court, Dad avoided running his scams on the West Coast. He preferred more rural areas far from the Court's investigators.

Ravi was familiar with the area. No surprise there. His family was rich with a capital R. They probably came and played tennis or croquet or whatever Bel Air people did in their free time. Cocaine...

The winding streets proved confusing to Ravi's map app. It took another ten minutes before they finally located the correct intersection to Fionna's. Pulling up to the security gate by the Garde home, Ravi held up a QR code on his phone to the gate's camera.

"Name?" barked a brusque voice from the speaker.

"Singh," Ravi answered.

"And?"

He looked at Nessa, "Um, Scott? Nessa Scott."

"*And,*" the voice said gruffly.

Nessa looked behind her.

"And fairies," she said a little hesitantly. "Three."

"Isn't there supposed to be a cat with you?" the voice sounded irritated.

"Yes," said Nessa. "But he's invisible."

"Invisible cat," said the voice. "Fine. Proceed to Valet."

With a strident buzz, the gates slowly swung open.

Pim and Nessa exchanged impressed looks.

'Valet parking,' Nessa mouthed.

"Meow," agreed Pim.

The two of them peered through the windshield as the brightly lit house came into view. Nessa would characterize the mansion as French Country with one mismatched wing. The wing had more of a Mediterranean flair that clashed with the original design. It must have been added later. Two floors. Gray tile roof.

Nessa knew a lot about houses despite never having lived in one. At least not for more than a couple of weeks, and that was only her Grandma Hattie's. The curse that had followed her since birth, coupled with dad's criminal career, kept them constantly on the move from hotel room to hotel room.

She'd grown up looking longingly at houses in city after city, wondering what it would be like to have a permanent home. Neither French Country nor Mediterranean was to her taste. She preferred Contemporary. Big windows. Lots of sunshine.

Stands of spot-lit trees flanked either side of the house. She could see Gingko, Birch, and Japanese maple. The Gingko and Maple were in their fall colors: Golden for the Gingko. Scarlet for the Maple.

A movement caught her eye as she looked back at the house. Something scuttled across the roof. Nessa blinked, peering harder.

Another brief flash of movement, and it was gone.

Pim chirped a curious meow. He'd seen it too.

"Did you see something on the roof just now?" she asked Ravi.

"Roof? No. I was watching the car ahead of us. What did it look like?"

"It looked..." she blew out a deep breath. "It looked like a big spider."

Ravi stole a glance at her. "A spider? In Bel Air?"

Nessa shrugged, "Sure was something with a lot of legs."

"Maybe a kind of supernatural sentry? Do you know anything about the Gardes?" Ravi asked, slowing as they pulled into a line of cars waiting for the Valet station.

"Nope. Except Fionna said they do a lot of importing and exporting from Asia."

Nessa knew this because they had recently attended a party at Ravi's parent's house. Fionna invited herself along to see Ravi's father's famous collection of ancient Chinese bronze vessels.

"Surface stuff only," he answered. "Lots of human world businesses. Factories in Southeast Asia producing machine parts and lenses, joint ventures in China and Korea. Auto parts, I think. Then there's the supernatural side. Plants and herbs. Potions and alchemy."

Nessa's heart thudded. "They're not alchemists, are they?"

Pim growled low in his chest.

They'd had enough trouble with alchemists in the last few weeks.

Poppy sighed, "Poppy daddy."

Nessa reached to caress the parrot's head. "I know. Poor Poppy."

"They also, rumor has it, maintain an ancient contract with the Yule Spirits."

Nessa's eyebrows inched up. "Santa-type Yule Spirits?"

"Sounds like it. Beyond that, I don't know."

Soon it was their turn at the Valet station. The fairies couldn't figure out how to open the car door. Nessa was going to get it for them, but the Valet stepped forward, swiftly swinging the door wide. All three girls tumbled out in a knot of arms, legs, and wings, knocking the Valet to the ground.

The fairies popped to their feet, hissing.

"It's okay, it's okay, girls." Nessa ran to place herself between the fairies and the young man still on the ground. "Come on. Come with me and Pim."

Pim meowed a long sentence in cat. The fairies sometimes understood him better than Nessa's English.

Poppy added her voice in a language Nessa didn't know.

Whatever the two animals said, it did the trick. The girls smoothed their poofy dresses and with a last hiss at the startled Valet, flounced away.

"Sorry," said Ravi, handing the Valet a folded bill and his Key Fob.

A wide flagstone path bisected a verdant green lawn spilling from the entrance to the driveway.

Falling into step with one another, Nessa and Ravi walked along the path leading to the house. The fairies fluttered behind, bouncing into the air and back again, excited for the outing. Or more likely the prospect of food.

The walk was lined on either side with towering Christmas trees shining with warm white lights. Steel ribbons were wound artfully around each tree decorated with antique-style metal clock faces and oversized cogs and wheels. The look was decidedly Steampunk.

Flanking each tree were displays that made them stop and catch their breath.

Open triangular platforms as tall as the trees were decorated with nooks filled with colorful Poinsettias and strings of warm white lights. Until they weren't. In a flash, each nook held a white jack-o-lantern carved in a menacing demonic face with a tangled mane of hair and curled ram's horns. Bells clanged jarringly with each transition.

Pim growled, leaping in front of Nessa. The fairies joined him, their talon-like nails held out, barring their teeth.

So many teeth.

Pim and the fairies held their ground as other guests passed their little group, chuckling.

Nessa touched the fairies on their shoulders and made a calming down gesture with her hands.

"I'm okay. We're okay." She pointed toward the house. "Taco, taco, yum, yum."

“Yum yum?” the fairies repeated hesitantly, turning from Nessa to the display and back, still showing their teeth.

“Yes. Yum. Yum.” Nessa made a shooping motion as the demonic pumpkins flashed back on.

The fairies jumped.

Nessa nudged them forward, chanting, “Yum, yum, yum.”

They moved away, hissing as they passed each Steampunk tree and jack-o’-lantern display.

“What the hell is that?” Ravi pointed at the demonic face on the pumpkins as it reappeared.

“Krampus, I think.”

Pim growled.

“And that is?” Ravi asked.

“Vengeance Demon. In Germanic folk tales, he’s the opposite of Saint Nicholas. In mid-winter, Saint Nicholas rewards good children with gifts. Krampus punishes the bad ones.”

Ravi gave her a suspicious look, brows together. “Punishes them how exactly?”

“In some stories, he carries a basket of switches on his back to swat the bad kids. He also gives them coal instead of fruit or sweets.”

“And in other stories...” Ravi prodded.

“In other stories he grabs the bad children and tosses them in his basket.”

“And?” said Ravi, looking wide-eyed.

“They’re never seen again.”

Ravi turned to look back along the walk at the display. “Oh, man. Is this going to be one of those Gothmas parties?”

Gothmas was exactly what it sounded like. A mixture of dark Halloween themes with Christmas. Black and white instead of red and green.

“Fionna likes her dark magic,” Nessa mused. “Given that they are a supernatural family, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Ravi made a face, “Ugh. All I want is a holly, jolly Christmas. No demons, thank you.”

“Aren’t you Hindu?” Nessa laughed. “I mean, you and your mom are sort of divine Hindu Demigods, right?”

And they were. Ravi was a Naga and his mom, a Nagini. They transformed into giant anthropomorphic snakes with serpentine bodies and human torsos. Ravi’s mom had a cobra hood, a dozen snakes sprouting from it like an Indian Medusa.

“Do you even celebrate Christmas?” she asked.

“*Sheesh*, Nessa. Who doesn’t love Christmas? Unless you’re in some weird cult. The decorations. The music and food. Everyone is a little nicer or tries to be. It’s the season of goodwill and joy and all that wonderful stuff no matter what religion you are. Christmas really is the best time of year for everybody.”

She smiled at him. “I totally agree.”

A thick swag of real fir branches hung artfully over the entrance to the house, sparkling with more warm white gold lights. No demonic jack-o’-lanterns here, thank you.

Both double doors were wide open. A uniformed man stood to one side, welcoming guests as they walked through.

The fairies skipped inside hand in hand, chattering excitedly.

Poppy flew after them, singing out, “Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night!”

Nessa waited for the familiar buzz of Ward magic to wash over her as she and Ravi stepped through the door. Magical thresholds were Warded against intrusion by unwanted supernatural creatures. You could always tell by the little frisson of energy playing over your skin as the Ward decided whether or not to let you through.

To her surprise, she felt nothing.

Ravi didn’t seem to notice anything amiss and walked boldly on.

Nessa paused to the side of the doors. “I don’t feel any Wards,” she said to Pim. “Do you?”

He wound through the feet of several people entering behind them. Since he was invisible, they didn’t know to avoid him. He ran in and out of the door once, twice, three times.

He shook his head. He looked concerned. As he should be.

Nessa glanced back at the Krampus jack-o’-lanterns. Not all winter spirits were filled with goodwill. No wards meant any kind of supernatural creature could enter.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Are those Reindeer or Elk?” Ravi pointed at three enormous creatures on the lawn, their antlers glowing golden in the night.

“Oh my gawd, those are big,” Nessa said, staring. “Elk look like giant deer. Dark brown. Pointy nose. Brown fringe around their neck. But, *these*. Look at their thick muzzles, big noses, shaggy gray and white fur, and the heavy white fringe around their necks. That’s a Reindeer look. Reindeer are big, but those are Moose-sized.”

Ravi gave a little snort of laughter, “You seem very knowledgeable about Ungulates.”

Nessa laughed. “Ungulates. Ooooh, SAT word. I know my animals and sea life. I love aquariums and zoos. Though I prefer open range zoos like San Diego Wild Animal Park.” She made a face. “Cages. Yuck. Also, no dolphins show please and thank you.”

“What about Orcas?”

Nessa wrinkled her nose, frowning. “I don’t like that they’re captive, of course. But I am not a fan of Orcas. At least not those along the California coast and Baja. They hunt and kill baby whales. I am Team Whale, not Team Orca.” She held up a warning finger, saying fiercely, “And do not tell me that’s the natural order of things.”

Ravi made a zipping motion across his lips.

Nessa had been hunted all her life; she knew precisely the bone-chilling feeling of terror as a predator closed in.

Ravi turned his gaze back on the animals. “They must be animatronics. Like Disney uses. Or, given where we are, an illusion spell.”

This was shaping up into one crazy deluxe party.

After passing the threshold, they’d been instructed to wait to be escorted to the garden.

December seemed a little chilly for garden parties. The Gardes probably had standing space heaters or firepits to keep their guests warm.

The foyer was large, as to be expected. A huge Persian rug covered most of the floor. A grand, lion-footed dark wood table dominated the center of the room. The table held a lush floral decoration packed with every flower imaginable, a ton of greens, shiny Christmas baubles, and little figurines placed inside.

Pim jumped into Nessa’s arms, and they went to have a closer look. Grandma’ Hattie had a beautiful English-cottage style flower garden at her home. Nessa knew Pim missed puttering around the

flowers when he was Hattie's Familiar. Nessa didn't know much about gardening, but flowers? Oh, yes, please. Anytime, anywhere. One of the promises she'd made Pim and herself was when she graduated and – hopefully – had a real job, she'd buy a fresh bouquet for them every week.

The little figures in the arrangement were not cute elves or little Santas in red and white suits. They were Krampus figures, wearing fur clothing, tiny bells adorning each one, smiling maliciously. Some even had switches in their hands, ready to whip naughty children.

Pim growled, the rumble vibrating through his chest.

"I agree," she whispered in his ear.

A different uniformed man from the one at the door walked their group through the foyer, down a hall and directed them through a set of open French doors into the back garden.

Nessa, Pim, Ravi, and even the fairies stopped to stare.

Poppy whistled.

"Hot dog!" she said and whistled again.

Hot dog, indeed.

Globes of light crisscrossed the entire open space. They appeared to be floating.

The patio was Hollywood-sized. Far bigger than any patio needed to be. Clockwork Christmas trees, these ones about six feet tall, were placed at careful intervals. At least thirty or more small tables were placed around them, leaving enough space for guests and servers to navigate easily.

The tables were covered in standard white tablecloths. The chairs were upholstered dining chairs, also covered in white but with large bows on the back in Christmas-colored plaids.

Each table had either a jack-o'-lantern, complete with a leering Krampus face, or a miniature Steampunk tree in the center.

A band was playing at the far side of the patio. Jazzy Christmas tunes.

Instead of being cold, the party area was cozy warm. Nessa stretched out with her senses, feeling Elemental Air magic surrounding the festive venue. It might be December, but the Garde's party guests would feel no chill tonight.

The lawn looked big enough to graze a herd of horses in. Steampunk-style trees were scattered artfully throughout. Each with an oversized jack-o'-lantern at their base.

Nessa spotted two long buffet tables on the grass with an open bar in between.

Squealing happily, the fairies took off for the food singing their favorite taco-panda tune. As long as there was food, the girls should be fine. Poppy flew off after them.

"Wow," said Nessa to Ravi.

Ravi nodded, "Definitely wow."

A server came around, offering them Champagne.

Nessa declined, and Ravi said, "Can't. I'm driving."

After the server left, he pointed to the bar. "Let's get a couple of Cokes or something, okay? My mouth has gone dry. No wonder the Infernal Court tiptoes around the Garde family."

Nessa agreed that sounded good. Her mouth had gone dry as well. Partially with embarrassment.

There were at least a hundred glittering guests in the garden. The ones they'd entered with through the foyer had been in luxurious gowns for the women and mostly tuxes for the men. Out here though, everything had shot up several levels of lux.

Men and women were dressed in elaborate costumes, either Renaissance royalty or Steampunk elite. They stood, sat, strolled, or just posed. They must have come in via a VIP entrance, Nessa guessed. A direct entrance onto the lawn. Most carried crystal goblets of some green liquid.

A group of four women stood chatting together on the patio. Each one wore flowing velvet gowns full of resplendent embroidery and sparkling jewels. One woman's dress was truly extraordinary. Royal blue with a life-sized peacock embroidered onto the gown, the tail fanning out behind her.

Nessa, in leggings and Chucks, wanted nothing more than to crawl under one of the tablecloths and hide. The serving people were dressed better than her.

"I didn't know it was a costume party," she said *sotto voce* to Ravi.

"I think it's come as whatever you want," he answered. "Besides, Fionna just said 'come' with no directions about what to wear. Are you worried? Because I think you look fine."

She smiled at him, grateful for his friendship.

Since *Glamour* didn't work on Nessa, it was difficult to tell what might be a clever costume and what, or who, really looked that way.

A massively muscled man in a dark metal breastplate, Roman soldier-style leather kilt, and leg armor walked by. He had the head of an eagle. The cruel beak curved at the tip. He turned his head, meeting Nessa's stare with eyes almost as black as hers. He slightly flexed a pair of brown and black feathered wings.

She tugged Ravi's sleeve, "Look at the guy in blue Roman armor," she urged. "What do you see?"

Ravi did as she said, saying softly, "Big, Dwayne Johnson- size guy. Black hair, handsome face, Asian. Like Chinese Asian, not my Asian. Why? What do you see?"

"Wings," she mimed a long shape in front of her mouth, "and a beak. He looks like an eagle stuffed in human clothing."

"*Glamour*," Ravi said. "Who else?"

Turning slowly, Nessa described two women with high, pointed ears and white hair that twined around their bodies in a disturbingly serpentine way. Preternaturally long fingers wrapped around goblets of the emerald-green liquid.

Another pair of guests, a man and woman, had narrow slit eyes, blue skin, and twisted horns sprouting from their heads. They also held goblets of the emerald liquid.

The features of a group of laughing men and women in Renaissance costumes of scarlet and green were wreathed in shadows. Nessa got a blurry glimpse of reptilian, almost dragon-like features. Looking down, she saw scaled tails peeking out from their finery.

Ravi followed her descriptions, saying, “*Glamour*,” after each one and telling her what he saw.

Pim sat quietly at Nessa’s feet, but she could feel the discomfort radiating off him like an exposed electric wire. He did not like them being around so many supernatural folk. Part of his job as her Familiar was to pinpoint threats. Here, it could be anyone.

Nessa felt the energy, too. Ebbing and flowing in wavelets around her. The protective talismans Aunt Emerald had crafted prevented Frank the Fallen Angel and his sniffers from sensing Nessa’s magic. Not the other way around. Her hands and feet buzzed uncomfortably. She’d never been around so many magic users.

A movement caught Nessa out of the corner of her eye. On the roof, in the shadow of one of the turrets. Again, something big with lots of legs. Nessa was about to point it out to Ravi when a woman stopped in front of her.

“Hello,” said the woman.

Startled, Nessa replied, “He...hello.”

The woman was petite, like Nessa. Dark where Nessa was light. She had a white and silver floor-length gown dripping with jewels. Her ears were long and pointed, her face narrow, with a straight nose, walnut-colored eyes, and a small, bow-shaped mouth. Delicate white lines of flowering vines wound around her face from her jaw to forehead. Tattoos or face paint, it was impossible to tell. Her hair was black, a loose cascade over her shoulders and down her back. She wore a delicate crown that seemed to be made of either glass or icicles.

“You are Princess Vanessa Chevalier, I believe,” the woman said in a breathy voice.

Nessa felt her eyes pop. Princess was her title in the Faerie Court of Air.

She glanced at Ravi. His eyes were as wide as hers.

Nessa took a deep breath. It wasn’t like she could deny the title.

“Yes. That’s me. Hello. How do you do.” Nessa automatically held out her hand.

The other woman looked at Nessa’s hand.

Nessa kept it out and the woman kept staring.

“Maybe curtsy?” Ravi whispered.

Feeling like an idiot, Nessa dropped her hand and did just that.

With what sounded like a sigh of relief, the Elvish woman curtsied back.

“I am Róisán, of the Seelie Winter Court.”

Nessa had no idea what that meant or how to answer. “I’m sorry, I don’t know much about the Seelie Court,” she said truthfully. She’d briefly read a paragraph about the Seelie Court while searching for information about her heritage. They were more powerful than the Elemental Courts, she remembered that much. “Sort of new at this whole Faerie thing.”

Róisán gave a tinkling laugh. “And how confusing it must all seem. You know we are allies to the Court of Air, perhaps?”

Nessa nodded. “The Queen, Queen Alim, told me so.”

“We at the Winter Court have heard of your talents.”

A flush crept up Nessa’s cheeks. She’d exposed her dark powers, the legacy of her mother’s curse, on several occasions in that other world.

The Elvish woman cocked her head. “I have made you uncomfortable, haven’t I? Such was not my intention, I assure you. I am quite new to this world and find it equally strange. For example, why did you hold out your hand to me?”

“My hand? Oh. Here we often shake hands as a form of introduction or greeting. Like this.” She held out her hand to Ravi. He took it and they shook, saying, “How do you do.”

“See? And we say how do you do when we meet for the first time and often people automatically say, nice to meet you, in return, or something like that.”

“Ah, I understand. What about bowing?”

“Here in the United States, we don’t bow,” Nessa explained, feeling less nervous. “In some countries, people bow when they meet you, or in greeting, or to apologize. Japanese do that. Koreans, too. Though those names may not mean anything to you yet. If someone bows, just bow back. Nobody curtsies,” she added.

“Good to know. You are friends to the Gardes?”

“Fionna’s my roommate.”

A small figure approached the Fae woman. No more than two feet tall. Not a child and certainly not human. The girl was dressed in a gossamer dress that looked like it was made from spider’s web. She was albino white with outsized yellow eyes far too big for her elfin face. She curtsied to Róisán and spoke softly in a language Nessa didn’t know.

“Ah. I am called. Perhaps I shall see you again.” Róisán said it with what felt to Nessa like a sincere smile.

“That would be nice,” she said in return.

“Róisán,” someone called from a nearby table.

“Until we meet again,” she said and walked away, the small woman at her side.

“Princess Vanessa,” Ravi whispered in a teasing voice.

“Shut up!” she said back, though not in a mean way. “Let’s get our drinks and something for Pim.”

They walked to the edge of the patio heading for the bar and that’s when they spotted the Reindeer. Or Elk or whatever they were.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Pim?” Nessa asked, but he was already galloping across the lawn.

“I want to go closer,” Ravi said, taking her hand and gently pulling Nessa with him.

Her heart made a thud-thud in her chest. Ravi was holding her hand. *Her* hand. Acting like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Nessa had never held hands with a boy. Well, man. Not casually like this.

She swallowed, her throat even drier. She liked Ravi. They were friends. Once she thought they might become more. But after meeting his family a short time ago and truly understanding the difference in their positions, she told herself to stop. The Singhs were wealthy. They lived in a gorgeous house in Palos Verdes. Both parents had Ph.Ds. Ravi graduated from Pepperdine, a private university here in the L.A. area.

His mother had made it clear she did not think a junior college student working as a bounty hunter on the wrong side of the 91 Freeway was a match for her precious firstborn son.

She was probably right. But he was holding her hand and it felt nice.

‘Damn it, stop!’ she told herself. ‘You’re friends. He’s just being friendly. It doesn’t mean anything.’

He stopped as they reached the nearest animal. He still held Nessa’s hand.

Lifting his face, he inhaled deeply. “Is it just me, or do these guys smell like gingerbread?”

“Not guys,” Nessa corrected. “Girls. Only female Reindeer keep their antlers in the winter.”

Ravi executed a deep bow to the animals. “I beg your pardon, ladies.”

To their delight, the Reindeer bobbed their heads, bowing back.

Nessa took a deep breath. “And you’re right. They do smell like gingerbread.”

The two of them laughed. Somehow delighted by the giant, sweet-smelling animals.

Up close, they saw garlands of flowers had been entwined around the base of their antlers, their broad ears peeking out of the blossoms. The golden, glowing antlers were mesmerizing.

Ravi dropped her hand to pet the animal nearest them. “They’re real. Magic, too. No illusion spell that I can sense. Can you feel it?”

Nessa didn’t have to touch the Reindeer to know they were what they impossibly seemed. Soft waves of supernatural energy surrounded each animal. So strong, Nessa thought she could see a pulse of silver from head to tail.

She touched the nearest animal, unable to resist stroking the Reindeer's face. It stepped closer, blowing a puff of warm air over her, rubbing its cheek along Nessa's own. A tingle of happiness ran through her from head to toe.

The Reindeer could see Pim, as Nessa thought they would. Most animals could see him. He rubbed his cheek against the other Reindeers who stretched their heads down to him.

"Oops," Nessa said laughing again, "I hate to tell you ladies, but you have been claimed by my cat. You belong to him now."

The Reindeer tossed their heads, setting their bells jingling as if they understood her joke.

Pim popped up on his haunches, front paws reaching. Nessa picked him up and set him on of one Reindeer's back. He rubbed his cheek against the thick gray and white hair, purring contentedly.

"Yep," said Nessa. "Totally claimed by my cat."

"Where did Fionna get these?" Ravi asked, shaking his head. "This must have something to do with their ties to the Yule Spirits."

"You've got that right," said a young man walking up to the animals. He was wore a brown Steampunk-style three-piece suit covered with little gears and a felt top hat decorated with sprigs of live holly. Ornate copper-framed goggles topped his outfit.

A little buzz of magic resonated from him. Warlock, probably.

The young man threw one arm around one of the Reindeer. The animal leaned into the hug in a friendly way. "I love these guys, I mean, girls. Is this your first time at the party?"

Ravi and Nessa agreed it was.

"You're lucky. The Reindeer and the sleigh aren't here every year. It's been ages. The party is earlier than usual."

"Sleigh?" Ravi said, fastening on that word and looking around.

"Yeah. It will be over there," the young man pointed to a stand of trees at the edge of the lawn.

"Sleigh," Ravi repeated.

"Of course," said the young man enthusiastically.

"How do they get here?" Ravi asked, looking genuinely perplexed. "Do they trot through the streets of L.A. pulling a sleigh? Or maybe bus them in?"

The young man laughed loudly, "No, geez, what are you thinking. They fly. How else?"

"Fly," said Ravi. "Flying Reindeer and a sleigh. Aren't there supposed to be more? Reindeer, I mean."

"Oh, they're handling other routes," the young man said casually, as if talking about flying Reindeer was the most normal thing in the world and how could they *not* know? "Places to be, goodwill to dispense. You know. Yule Spirits and all that. Eight Reindeer is just a silly story."

“Eight, right,” Ravi echoed, his voice weak. “Sure. So silly. *Ha ha.*”

Nessa looked up at Pim on the Reindeer’s back.

Flying Reindeer? Deliveries to make? Surely not.

Ravi dropped his face in his hands, “I need a drink.”

The young man brightened, “Try the green punch, it’s amazing.”

“Nonalcoholic drink,” Ravi said firmly. “Much as I could wish otherwise at the moment.”

“Oh, no worries,” the young man said cheerfully. “The punch is virgin.”

Ravi looked at Nessa, “Would you like some green virgin punch?”

She shook her head. “I have a rule about drinking green things. A Coke would be great. Also, a dish for Pim if you can find one?”

“Got you. Do you want to get some food while I get drinks? We can grab one of the tables on the lawn.”

“Sure. My stomach is growling.”

“Great. See you over there.” He walked in the direction of the bar.

The young man followed after, singing the praises of the green punch.

“Pim, we’re going to get some food.”

A few people glanced at her, apparently taking to thin air.

“Want to come?” she asked.

The cat answered by leaping nimbly to the ground, tail high, meowing happily to himself.

Nessa squeezed by the steady stream of people walking over to pet the Reindeer. Without exception, human or supernatural, everyone who petted the deer came away smiling. Nessa noticed many of the people carried crystal goblets of the green punch.

The animals seemed to enjoy the attention as much as the guests. They tossed their big heads, pawing the ground, and thrusting their broad noses into peoples’ hands. Their antlers grew even brighter with the attention.

Christmas. Flying Reindeer. Why not?

The buffet tables were full of delicious hot and cold dishes. Nessa made an impromptu charcuterie board of meat, cheese, and small slices of French baguette for her, Ravi, and Pim. They could come back for hot dishes next.

She sat down at one of the high tables with four tall chairs. Pim jumped up on one of them. She put salami and ham on a little plate for him while she waited for Ravi. He’d been stopped by what looked like an acquaintance.

Her stomach rumbled again. She nibbled at a piece of Parmesan Reggiano and watched the other guests.

A strange figure approached. Tall and broad, wearing a thick fur coat of mixed animal skins and fur trousers. His shaggy hair hid much of his face, but Nessa saw distorted, almost demon-like features beneath the tangled mass of hair. It was hard to miss the massive ram's horns curling on each side of his head. He had strings of bells hanging down either side of his chest and they jangled jarringly as he stomped closer, his heavy boots left footprints in the soft grass. On his back was a reed basket held by thick leather straps. It was full of wooden switches.

Pim bristled, the hair along his back standing on end as he flattened his ears.

"Krampus," she breathed.

It was quite a costume. Authentic in every detail. She and her dad had seen the Krampus parade in Munich one year. Dozens and dozens of men and women unrecognizable in costumes like this.

It was a costume, wasn't it?

The creature looked their way. He had piecing yellow eyes, slitted like a reptile's. He gave an evil smile, exposing pointed incisors, and shook his bells wildly.

No one seemed surprised or appeared to even notice him as he shouldered through the crowd near the buffet tables.

Nessa heart thudded in her chest.

Glamour didn't work on her which meant either it was an extraordinarily authentic costume, or she'd just seen a Krampus demon.

"Hey," said a voice startling her and making Pim jump so high he nearly fell off the chair.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you. Brought the drinks."

Ravi was juggling two classic glass bottles of Coke, a small bowl, and a goblet of the green punch.

"Quick, look over there." She pointed. "The figure walking between the Steampunk lady with the parasol and the velvet dandy in pantaloons. What do you see?"

He followed her finger. "Yeah, I see him. The person you're pointing at is one of the servers. A guy. Tall. Black pants and white shirt. Carrying an empty tray and a silver bucket."

"*Glamour*," she said out loud.

"Really?" Ravi stared harder but the Krampus figure was gone.

"I thought or hoped it was a Krampus costume, but you've shown me he was under a *Glamour*."

A cold chill ran down her spine. "I don't like that the Gardes have dismantled their Threshold Wards. Anything could walk in. Somehow, I don't think Krampus was on the guest list. Especially not if he's disguised beneath a *Glamour* as a Server."

Ravi made a dismissive *titch* sound. "Not our circus. Not our monkeys as my dad likes to say. I'm sure the Gardes can take care of themselves. Help me with these, will you?"

Together they got the drinks set up. Pim lapped at his Coke and Nessa took a satisfying swallow of her drink.

Ravi drained his glass of green punch. “This stuff is amazing,” he said smacking his lips. “I can’t believe its alcohol free.”

A chorus of raucous laughter echoed from the patio. It was answered by more laughter at one end of the buffet tables. On the patio, a group of people began dancing to the band.

Nessa thought most of the guests had opted for alcohol.

Ravi waved a hand over the plate of goodies. “This looks great.” He picked up some salami and cheese, popping it in his mouth. “Tastes good too.”

Within minutes they’d devoured all the meat and cheese and went back to the buffet for hot food. The carving station had a mouthwatering selection: Turkey, roast ham, Prime Rib, baked Salmon. Nessa piled meat on two plates plus some salmon for Pim. She added mashed potatoes for her and Au Gratin potatoes for Pim.

Ravi had Beef Bourgeon over buttered noodles with a side of turkey and stuffing. He also went back for more green punch.

For a little while, they just ate. Nessa enjoyed every bite. Poppy flew over and Nessa made a quick trip to the buffet tables with her to pick out the fruit and vegetables the parrot preferred.

“Where are the fairies?” Nessa asked the parrot.

Poppy pointed with one wing back at the buffet.

Nessa looked. She couldn’t see any sign of the girls.

Poppy pointed again, squawking, “Down.”

Looking at the grass, Nessa saw little bare feet peeking out from under the tables.

She laughed.

When they’d finished second helpings, Ravi blinked, looking at a point behind Nessa’s shoulder.

“Oh my God. My mom and dad are here!” he choked on his punch, spluttering and coughing.

Nessa craned her head, spotting his statuesque mom on the patio. She was wearing a pink, green and white Sari and talking to Róisán, the lady from the Seelie Court.

Once Ravi could speak again, he stood, “I have to go say hello. Do you want to come?”

Nessa put both hands out, “No, thank you. I doubt your mom has any desire to have a conversation with me.”

“That’s not true,” Ravi said touching her arm.

She met his eyes evenly, “Ravi, your mom hates me. She thinks I am contaminating you with Bounty Hunter cooties.”

Ravi threw his head back and laughed. "Bounty hunting cooties..." he laughed harder. "You're so funny." On slightly unsteady legs he began walking to his mom. "Be back soon."

She wasn't that funny. And she was beginning to seriously doubt the 'virgin' quality of the green punch.

More laughter and loud conversation drifted across the yard.

The band struck up a faster tune and more people joined the dance.

A tiny jingle of bells announced two cats trotting over, making a direct line for Pim. They had their tails high and ears pricked forward, their body language curious, not aggressive. Meowing, they came to touch noses with her Familiar.

Pim didn't often get to meet other Familiars, which these must be given the party setting.

Nose touching quickly turned to cheek caresses as the three cats made friends, claiming each other.

"Oh, Bronwyn! I see them," called a voice. A tall, silver-haired woman in a sparkly silver dress the same shade as her hair came up to Nessa, smiling. "Are our cats bothering you?"

"Of course not," Nessa answered quickly.

The woman looked curiously at the cats then at Nessa, then back at the cats. "Who have you found?" she asked the two cats.

Nessa pointed at the group. "They found my cat, Pim. He's invisible."

The lady smiled more broadly, "Not to other Familiars obviously."

A younger woman joined them, also tall, but with auburn colored hair. Her features looked similar to the older woman's.

"This young woman's cat is invisible but ours can see him. Or her?" the woman asked.

"Him," affirmed Nessa. "He's a boy cat."

"I'm Miranda," said the woman. Her voice was warm. "And this," she indicated the auburn-haired woman in the green dress, "is my niece, Bronwyn."

Bronwyn smiled, extending her hand. They shook and Nessa felt the little resonance of magical recognition pass between them as she introduced herself, "Nessa Scott."

"These," said Miranda, pointing to the cats, "are Graycoat and Millie. Millie is the Calico."

Nessa's eyebrows inched up because the other cat was orange.

Miranda gave a tinkling laugh. "Graycoat was my mother's. She was colorblind. My mother. Not the cat," and she laughed again. "By the time my mother got those glasses that enable colorblind people to see colors, it was too late to change his name to Marmalade." She laughed again.

The cats began a game of tag.

"You wouldn't be Emerald Scott's niece, would you?" asked the older woman.

Nessa could feel the ‘deer in the headlights’ look as it flashed across her face.

The other women seemed to notice as well.

Miranda quickly added, “Not prying. I was just wondering if Emerald was here. I saw Ravi and his mother.” She indicated the patio. “I know Emerald has served with Aatreya Singh on several committees. We both have. Emerald is such a talented Medium. Last time Bronwyn and I saw her was at the Mid-summer festival in Palm Springs. She said her niece had come to live with her while attending school.”

Nessa pointed at herself. Emerald wasn’t keeping her a secret, apparently. “Yep. That’s me. I’m the niece.”

She was a little agog that her aunt attended the midsummer festival in Palm Springs. Any festival. She always seemed so reclusive. A force of nature complete unto herself.

Miranda waved a hand at the cats. “Maybe we can get the kitties together for a play date soon? You’d think it would be easy to find cat Familiars, but it really isn’t. Emerald has my contact number.”

“Me, too, me too!” squawked Poppy, flying from the table onto Nessa’s shoulder.

“This is Poppy.” Nessa put her hand by the Gray Parrot and the bird hopped on. “Poppy lost her Master recently.”

“Poppy daddy gone,” the bird said sadly.

“Oh, poor dear,” said Bronwyn, reaching out to gently stroke the bird’s back. “Poor, poor thing.”

“Bring her along to the play date,” Miranda said.

She lay a friendly hand on Nessa’s shoulder. “And please tell your aunt hello from Miranda and Bronwyn. We look forward to seeing her at the winter revels in Santa Barbara.”

“I...I will, of course.”

Winter revels? She needed to reassess her opinion of her aunt.

“Oh, and before I forget. Do wish her a merry and mischievous Krampus Nacht. Kittens!” called the older woman. “The dessert spell has been cast and we must answer or die.”

Bronwyn put her arms in front of her zombie-like, “Chocolate lava cake, chocolate lava cake.”

Her aunt giggled as the cats obediently trotted ahead of their mistresses.

Pim watched them go. A little wistfully, Nessa thought. He had a thing for Calicos. Which is how he got cursed in the first place.

She squatted down on the grass, running a hand along his back. “They said we could get you cats together for a play date. Would you like that?”

“Meow,” he said enthusiastically, nodding his head.

Poppy bobbed up and down, “Me too, me too.”

“Of course, Poppy. You’re always included.”

She bounced excitedly and Nessa put the bird back on her shoulder.

That was nice, Nessa thought, suddenly glad she'd come to the party. She didn't know any other witches. Covens tended to shun Elementals because of their Fae blood and her vagabond life had not led to meaningful encounters with other women.

"We'll arrange for you to meet the kitties. I promise."

Pim jumped to bump against her hand.

"What do you think they meant about Krampus Nacht?"

A pair of two-toned Chanel pumps stopped in front of her.

"There you are!"

Nessa looked up. "Hi, Fionna."

"I've been texting," she said, thrusting out her expertly tinted lower lip. Fionna had a Champagne flute in one hand and was waving a cell phone in the other.

"I'm sorry. Your party has been...distracting. In a good way," she quickly added.

Fionna was glammed up, her eyes and cheeks sparkling with gold flecks. Her shoulder-length hair fluffed out in charming waves to frame her pretty face. She was wearing a deceptively simple short black velvet dress with white piping that probably cost a thousand dollars. Maybe two. Or three. Her ears, neck, and wrists sparkled with jewelry.

"Thank you for the invitation. Your house is beautiful."

The witch gave a disinterested shrug, "Sure. Yeah. I guess. Reiko wanted to talk to you."

Nessa's stomach dropped.

"Alchemist Reiko? Secretly a Japanese Fox Kitsune Reiko? The one behind the energy drink making everyone bat-shit crazy Reiko?"

"That's the one," Fionna answered, non-plussed.

Pim hissed, arching his back, and flattening his ears.

"Come on, she's over here." Fionna grabbed Nessa's sleeve, tugging her along.

Nessa dug in her heels, refusing to move.

"No. No way. She made so much trouble and nearly got both of us killed by demons."

Which was true.

Reiko was Reiko Sömmerhauler.

The West Coast's two most powerful potion clans were the Sömmerhaulers and the Villanovas. Potion Masters for over a thousand years. They'd accumulated their modern fortunes selling products in the human marketplace: soft drinks, Kombucha, a range of green and oolong iced teas, mineral water. It was an open secret in the supernatural community that both clans spiked their drinks with spells to keep the public coming back for more.

Reiko and her unlikely friend, Kate Villanova, were the youngest in their respective alchemical families. They should also be enemies. Not mortal, but definitely economic. In a Capulet and Montague twist, they joined forces to show their elders what they could accomplish, though without the mushy Romeo and Juliet stuff. Partnering with another mutual friend, Poppy's master, Brian Samejima, they created an energy drink. A product they hoped might soften the rivalry between the two clans. Or so the innocent Reiko believed.

It had all gone to hell with betrayals, murder, a demon on the loose, Brian's death, Zombies attacking the Infernal Court, Fionna getting kidnapped by the treacherous Kate, more demons, Reiko getting her memory wiped, Kate being dragged to demon hell, and the vitamin drink still making supernaturals on the South Bay bat-shit crazy.

Fionna tugged harder at Nessa's sleeve. "She wants to apologize. Come on. Please? She's over by the bar."

Nessa wasn't going to cause a scene at Fionna's party. Swallowing her indignation, she walked with the other witch. Pim trotted by her side, protesting crossly.

Frank the Fallen Angel had appeared at the climax of the energy drink battle. Nessa only escaped with the intervention of Ravi and his mom in full Cobra Naga form.

The bar had people clustered all around either drinking or waiting to drink the green punch. They were a lively bunch, a few were singing along to one of the Christmas standards the band was playing.

Poppy spotted Reiko in the crowd first. "ReiRei, ReiRei," the bird cried, soaring over to the dark-haired girl. Poppy landed on Reiko's shoulder, tucking her little head under Reiko's jaw, rubbing back and forth in happiness.

Reiko and Brian had been good friends. Nessa originally hoped Reiko would take Poppy as her Familiar. It hadn't happened. Maybe Kitsune, being animals themselves, didn't need a Familiar.

At the bar Fionna grabbed a fresh glass of Champagne.

"Here she is," she said with a flourish, sloshing some of the liquid onto the grass and narrowly missing Pim.

He jumped away, putting some distance between himself and the other witch.

Reiko gave Nessa an uncertain smile, "Hi, Nessa."

Reiko had long, shining black hair with fringy bangs and flirty curls pulled in front of her ears. She was pretty, with delicate, almost doll-like features and large, deep brown eyes. Although her dad was White, she looked very much like her Japanese Kitsune mother.

Tonight, Reiko was dressed festively in a short, long-sleeved, deep green velvet dress belted at the waist with a sewn-in band of black. Emerald drop earrings sparkled at her ears and an emerald

pendant hung from a gold chain on her chest. Given the wealth of the Sömmerhaulers, they would be real emeralds.

“Reiko,” Nessa answered, “I wasn’t sure you’d remember me.”

Nessa had delivered Reiko to the Infernal Court for a memory wipe after a wild battle with zombies and hexed Infernal Court agents in the Court’s parking lot. The zombies had been hopped up on the alchemists’ drink, Bee Buzzed. The potion sped them up and improved their coordination.

Nobody sane wanted fast zombies or crazy supernaturals.

Trust between the supposed allies only extended so far. Reiko was the only one of the trio who knew the complete formula. The memory wipe guaranteed once current supplies ran out – of which there still seemed to be too many bottles – the dangerous buzz from Bee Buzzed would stop.

The Court didn’t know before the memory wipe, Reiko had secretly handed Nessa a petite Hello Kitty notebook. The notebook held the complete formula. Kate Villanova knew about the notebook. However, since she’d been dragged away by a demon, Nessa was moderately sure Reiko’s secret was safe. Nessa had stashed the notebook in a spellcast hidey hole at Aunt Emerald’s.

“Of course, I remember you,” Reiko exclaimed. “The memory wipe was only for my work on the formula. My friendship with Brian and Kate is a little hazy. Do you know what happened to Kate?”

“Pushin’ up daisies,” Poppy squawked.

Reiko looked horrified, “What?”

“Pushin’ up daisies, pushin up daisies,” Poppy sang gleefully.

Poppy had been the secret weapon to turn the demon back on Kate, it’s summoner. She knew Kate’s true names and had given them to the demon.

Nessa learned a valuable lesson that day. Don’t mess with the bird.

“Oh hold on a second.” Reiko hurried over to speak to a couple sipping the green punch.

Nessa couldn’t hear what she asked. The band had cranked up the amps and a line of dancers wound around the buffet tables hopping and wagging their hips to a lively rendition of *Jingle Bells*.

Reiko returned, tapping her phone screen and stealing looks at the punch bowl. It was almost empty. Snapping her fingers at the barmen, Nessa watched as they reached under the table to replace the punchbowl with a fresh one.

“Meow,” said Pim suspiciously.

Meow indeed.

“What’s going on, Reiko?”

The girl’s eyes widened, her control slipping enough Nessa saw the prick ears and long tail of the white fox hiding inside.

Fox Kitsune did not use *Glamour*. Their magic was far more esoteric. It was as if there were two creatures, much like Pim and his werecat other self.

Nessa repeated her question.

Fionna answered, "Reiko volunteered to make the punch as her contribution to the party."

Nessa's mouth fell open. "You let Reiko make the punch?"

"Sure, why not?"

Reiko backed a few steps away at Nessa's tone.

"Do not move," Nessa barked at her. "Not another step."

Reiko froze.

"Fionna, do you or do you not remember Reiko's concoction Bee Buzzed? The last drink she made had supernaturals going nuts all over the L.A. South Bay. That one Witch had a flock of ducks quacking the Blue Danube inside a convenience store. The machines shot colored slushies in time to the music. Red, green, blue, red, green blue."

Fionna giggled. "Oh my God. That was hilarious. I saw it online."

"*Fionna!*" Nessa hissed in a very good imitation of Pim, "the drink also created superfast zombies."

"I apologize for that," Reiko said earnestly. "This one's safe. I guarantee. For people and animals."

Animals?

The three of them and Pim scrambled out of the way as the line of dancers swayed past.

Nessa recognized Ravi as one of the dancers.

"Ravi?" she said, catching his eyes.

He waived.

"It is a little wild tonight," Fionna conceded. "I need more Champagne."

She thrust a glass at the barman. He dutifully filled it from a bottle in the nearest ice bucket.

Fionna took a large swallow.

Nessa had been in the middle of a conversation with Reiko before the dancers interrupted them. What was it?

"Animals," she declared so loudly Reiko jumped. "Why did you include animals in that sentence?"

"Louisa, the Elf, said the Reindeer love sweet drinks..."

Nessa held up a hand. "So many questions with that sentence. There's an Elf named *Louisa*?"

Reiko laughed, fluttering a hand in the air, "Not a Fae elf. A Santa's Elf."

"Named Louisa?"

“Uh huh,” nodded Reiko. She chuckled as though Nessa had said something funny. “No Fae is called Louisa.”

“A Santa’s Elf.”

“Of course,” Reiko affirmed.

“Fionna?” Nessa called plaintively. “What the hell is with the Reindeer and Reiko says there’s a Santa’s Elf on the loose.”

Fionna snagged a stuffed mushroom and baby quiche off the buffet table popping both in her mouth. “Yeah,” she said around the mouthful. “We’re a way station for Joy. Holiday joy. It happened to coincide with our party this year.” She coughed, choking on some crumbs.

Ravi broke away from the dancers. Running breathlessly to join them.

He swept Nessa up in his arms hugging her tightly. “Can I kiss you? I’ve been wanting to kiss you.”

All Nessa could do for a moment was stare, babbling, “*Whaaat?*”

“Kiss you,” he repeated. “Want to kiss you.”

It was the punch talking, Nessa told herself. No matter what Reiko said.

“Ravi, you are drunk,” Nessa said as calmly as she could. “Exactly how much punch did you have?”

“Lost count,” he laughed. “It’s delicious.”

“Put me down,” she said trying to wriggle out of his grip.

“What if I don’t want to?”

Nessa saw Pim leap forward. He bit Ravi on the ankle.

“Ow! Jeez. Call off your murder cat!”

“Put me down,” she repeated.

He set her on her feet, “Ow. Now I’m going to get Murder Cat Rabies.”

Pim hissed so loudly Ravi grabbed Nessa to hold in front of him like a shield. “I didn’t mean it. Maybe. Sort of...”

“Ravi you are babbling!” Nessa pushed him away.

Reiko had her thumbs poised over her cell phone screen. “What did the punch taste like?” she asked.

“Like the best Margarita I’ve ever had,” smiled Ravi. “Right down to the salt on the rim.”

Tap, tap, tap, went Reiko’s fingers.

“In fact, I should get another,” he began to head toward the buffet.

Nessa yanked him back. “No, Ravi! No more!”

“You’re not the boss of me,” he pouted before a sly look came in his eyes. “But I like it. Order me around some more. *Ooooh*, do you still have the magical handcuffs Barracuda gave you?” He held his arms out, wrists together.

Pim bit him again.

“*Ow!*”

Fionna finally seemed to tune into the conversation. “Reiko, are you doing market research...at my party!” She spat out the last three words like bullets.

“Um, uh, well,” the girl stuttered.

“Oh my effing God. You’re testing a new recipe, aren’t you?” More of Fionna’s Champagne sloshed out of her glass as she waved her hands in agitation.

Pim jumped away, stopping to lick a damp patch of fur on his shoulder.

“Aren’t you!” Fionna said even louder.

“Maybe...”

Fionna lunged forward until she was up in Reiko’s face. “Our guests are not guinea pigs.”

Reiko flinched. “It’s perfectly safe,” she insisted.

Ravi swept Nessa into his arms once more declaring, “I will now kiss you!”

“Ravi Singh,” came a strident voice, “put that girl down immediately.”

Ravi dropped Nessa like she was made of fire.

Ravi’s mother came striding over as Nessa felt an earthshaking thunk from where she lay sprawled. It was accompanied by the jingling of bells.

She scrambled to her feet, rubbing her tailbone.

Everyone, including Ravi’s mom, looked beyond the buffet tables to the lawn.

One of the Reindeer lay on the ground, four hooves in the air.

As they watched in horrified silence, the other two animals swayed forward and back before collapsing onto their backs, feet in the air.

“You killed Santa’s Reindeer!” Fionna screeched.

CHAPTER SIX

“That’s impossible,” Reiko sounded close to tears. “I tested it on our cats, Shiro and Kuro, and Tama, our dog. No problem. Nothing. I swear.”

Nessa glared at her holding one finger up in the air. “First of all, why would you use your pets as test subjects? What if something went wrong? And second,” she held up another finger waving it in front of Reiko’s face, “maybe you should have tested it on other ungulates before giving Santa’s Reindeer poison.”

“It’s not poison. The punch is perfectly safe. One of the servers helped me give it to them. He got a bucket. After drinking some, Louisa said it would be alright.”

“Louisa. Right. Santa’s Elf and Reindeer Wrangler. Where is she.?”

Nessa looked around, even though she had no idea who she was looking for. Would the woman have a pointy green hat and bells on her elf shoes?

Another *thunk* hit the ground near them.

A woman had collapsed, feet in the air just like the Reindeer.

Nessa whipped her hand around to point at the woman. “Oh look. Let me guess. That’s Louisa. You killed Santa’s Elf.”

Reiko put her face in her hands and began to sob.

Nessa brought her attention to the more urgent matter of the Reindeer. After nodding a brief hello to Mrs. Singh, who was giving Ravi a lecture in Hindi, Nessa and Pim ran to the animals.

“Meow?” said Pim, gesturing around the fallen animals with a paw.

“Meow for sure,” said Nessa. “What the heck?”

Almost no one seemed to have noticed the Reindeers’ condition. Or if they did notice, they didn’t care.

Nessa knelt by the Reindeer, putting her hand on their chest, each one in turn. They were breathing and their hearts were beating strong and regular.

Reiko and Fionna followed Nessa over.

“They’re not dead,” she told Reiko.

“Thank God,” breathed Reiko.

Whoops of wild laughter came from the patio. People were dancing on the tables waving the tablecloths in the air. The band was shredding what sounded like a Lincoln Park version of the Christmas classic, *Sleigh Ride*.

Whatever was in the punch was rapidly removing all inhibitions from the guests. *Glamour* began sliding off them like egg from a non-stick frying pan.

Wings, horns, fangs, tails, and multiple limbs were suddenly in full view.

A harsh jangle of bells drew Nessa's eyes to the stage. Behind the band, a large person in animal skins and with ram's horns was cavorting wildly to the music, laughing and waving his hands in the air.

"My mom and dad are going to be so mad," Fionna said., joining Nessa.

"Where are they?" She began searching the crowd.

Nessa followed her gaze, she had not yet met Mr. and Mrs. Garde.

"Oh, there they are." Fionna pointed to the stage. "In back with the goat man juggling fireballs."

The Krampus figure was indeed juggling fireballs. A tall woman jangling a string of bells had joined him. She must have taken them off the Krampus figure. Or maybe she had her own set.

On the other side was a man wearing a horned Viking helmet and banging a drum for all he was worth.

Fionna gave what sounded like a sigh of relief. "Oh good. Looks like they're fine with it."

Nessa shook her head. "This is the strangest Christmas party I have ever been to."

Pim bared a claw to tug at her leggings. He gave her a sardonic meow.

"Okay. Okay. Point taken. It's the only Christmas party I have ever been to."

Fionna looked horrified. "Didn't you celebrate Christmas?"

Nessa rolled her eyes. "Of course we did. My dad loves Christmas. Pim and I love Christmas. No matter what scam he was running, we always spent Christmas Eve together and had a little Christmas tree and decorations."

Even if they were from the dollar store.

"We always went out for a nice dinner or, you know, did the local specialty thing. One year in Tokyo we got the famous KFC Christmas Bucket. It's a Holiday tradition there. They give you all sorts of treats and a commemorative china plate."

This had been when they were living the high life off the Inferni coin. Dad had a couple of buyers in Tokyo, one of whom paid for their plane tickets and hotel. Poor guy.

Nessa had treasured that plate. One of the only personal items she allowed herself to put in the escape duffel bag. Everything she owned had to be crammed in there at a moment's notice. She'd carried that plate with her for years since she was ten. Then, one frightening night just before coming to Hermosa Beach, she'd lost it in a mad scramble for safety. She missed the plate. Especially at Christmas.

"Anyway, we celebrate Christmas. Not like this, maybe," she waved her hands around to encompass the grounds, "but we celebrate. Reiko," she beckoned to the girl who hadn't joined them. "Come here."

Reiko hesitated.

“Here!” Nessa barked.

Reiko jogged over, wiping her eyes, “What have I done now?”

“Was the server who helped you with the Reindeer a beefy fellow? Long hair?” Nessa asked.

She nodded, “Yes. Yes, he was really nice.”

“Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap,” Nessa chanted under her breath as she pulled out her cell phone.

What had the witch Miranda said? ‘Wish your Aunt Emerald a mischievous Krampus Nacht?’

She urgently tapped in a sentence. As the screen opened, she began to swear, long and eloquently.

“What is it?” Fionna asked. She’d abandoned the Champagne flute and was drinking directly from a bottle now.

“You’re holding your Christmas party without any protective wards surrounding the house on *Krampus Nacht!*”

Fionna shrugged, “Yeah, so? Mom thought it would be fun to combine it. She loves the whole Gothmas thing.”

“Does she love Vengeance Demons? Real ones?” Nessa pointed emphatically at the stage.

“Because you have Krampus at your party.”

The horned figure was now shooting flames in the air. The crowd cheered and the band played on.

Fionna’s mom, at least Nessa assumed it was still her, had donned a demonic Krampus mask and was doing high kicks worthy of a Rockette.

Fionna gave her a *look*, “As you can see...”

“Okay, wrong question. Krampus Nacht is when they are at their most powerful. They could do some real damage. Maybe...” Nessa had a thought. “Maybe it wasn’t only Reiko responsible for the green punch chaos.”

“It’s not my punch, I tell you. The recipe is safe.”

Nessa gave her a skeptical look and Pim shook his head. “But it is enhanced with magic, isn’t it?”

“Ummm,” hesitated Reiko.

“I will take that as a yes. You said the burly server with the long hair helped you with the punch and serving bowls and buckets for the Reindeer.”

“Yes, yes, he did. I thought he was being nice.”

“I don’t think so,” Nessa blew out a breath.

A bright light flashed on, making them flinch, and a pop of sound echoed across the yard like cannon fire.

“What...” started Fionna.

And then the party really went to heck.

Whatever magic people were using to seem human melted away. Men turned into women.
Women turned into men.

One guy turned into a large dog.

A trio of women popped out of their ball gowns as their bodies twisted into dragon shapes the size of Raptors.

Fionna seemed momentarily speechless.

A group of glamorous guests transformed into silver-skinned beings with snowy white hair. Their clothing and bodies were encrusted with jewels until they sparkled brighter than the globes of light.

“What are they?” Nessa gasped.

“Oh,” said Fionna dismissively as she took another swig of her Champagne. “Winter court people. They sparkle more than those vampires from *Twilight*. Jeezus.”

For a moment the noise of surprised exclamations swelled to a defining level and was suddenly silent. Guest after guest collapsed to the ground. The band fell silent, their instruments clattering to the patio floor.

Only the Krampus figure was left standing on the patio. With a wild laugh, he ran into the stand of trees by the side of the house.

‘And that,’ said Nessa dramatically, “is why you do not invite Vengeance Demons to your Christmas Party.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Shit,” moaned Fionna.

Not every guest had succumbed to the spell. A few were on the lawn, talking together or attending to their friends.

Reiko was still standing.

“You didn’t drink your own punch?” Nessa demanded.

Reiko looked embarrassed. “Well, you see...”

“Oh my God, Reiko!” Nessa scolded.

“Meow, meow, meow!” growled Pim, shaking a paw at the girl.

“Yeah, Reiko!” Fionna seconded.

Nessa spun on the other Witch. “Oh, don’t you start throwing stones. You had a Christmas party with Santa’s Elves and real flying Reindeer on Krampus Nacht? *Krampus Nacht!* Krampus is a Vengeance Demon, Fionna. If he can’t find trouble, he’ll make it.”

“Not me, my parents.” She shook her head, “Put the blame where it’s due. I live with you and your aunt now.”

“Nevertheless, here we are. Krampus disguised himself as one of the servers to get at Reiko’s punch. He’s the one who hexed it.”

“See,” said Reiko triumphantly, “it wasn’t me!”

Nessa shook a finger at her. “It was sort of you! You used magic in the punch. *Abracadabra* Kitsune fox magic to make it taste like different drinks for everyone. The spell made it easier for Krampus to twist the magic.”

Reiko frowned and then screamed, pointing behind Nessa.

Spinning, Nessa saw a giant hairy spider barreling towards them, eight legs pumping, jaws gaping wide. This is the creature she saw on the roof.

Pim flipped into a backward somersault coming down in full werecat battle form. He howled a warning, rising up on his hind legs, making him as tall as Nessa.

The spider screeched, trying to come to a stop but getting tangled in its own legs, tumbling over and over to land on its back, legs flailing.

Nessa and Pim stayed in defensive positions, waiting for it to flip over. Nessa was mentally kicking herself for leaving her backpack at home. She was weaponless and couldn’t access her Elemental powers because of the stupid jinxes from the Infernal Court.

“Cuddles!” yelled a woman’s voice. “Don’t hurt my baby!”

“Baby? What baby?” said Nessa.

“Rowr?” growled werecat Pim.

A lanky woman with brown hair in long pigtails and Santa-patterned overalls threw herself at the giant furry spider.

Apparently, ‘don’t hurt my baby’ applied to the spider.

Fionna waggled the Champagne bottle at Nessa. “Relax, girl and murder cat, it’s just Cuddles and Noel.”

Nessa shook her head choking out, “What? I say again, *what?* And don’t call Pim a murder cat!”

The pig-tailed woman glared at Nessa. “Help me turn her over. She’s stuck.” The woman positioned herself behind several of the rear legs. “Because of you.”

Nessa and Pim exchanged identical wide-eyed stares.

“Come on,” the woman said more urgently, “you scared her.”

“I scared *her?*” declared Nessa. “It...she...whatever... is the size of a Volkswagen.”

“Go on,” said Fionna waving her on. “Cuddles is a sweetheart.”

Heart in her mouth, Nessa walked forward.

Back on all fours, Pim stayed in front of her.

“Cuddles just needs a little push,” the woman urged.

“Reiko, you help too,” ordered Fionna.

Reiko looked horrified. She backed up, falling over one of the unconscious Reindeer with a yelp.

Fionna rolled her eyes. “Oh-my-gawd.”

Despite Pim’s growling objections, Nessa and Fionna joined the woman in the overalls, taking up positions around the furry spider. It was mewling pitifully in a very good imitation of a giant kitten.

Fionna was still carrying a Champagne bottle, so she used her shoulder.

“On three,” said the woman. “One, two, three!”

They shoved. Scrambling wildly, legs flailing, they managed to get the thing turned enough to right itself. The giant creature immediately buried its furry head in the pig-tailed woman’s chest, mewling pitifully.

“Nasty lady and her murder cat scared you, didn’t they. Poor baby,” she said stroking the enormous head.

“Don’t call Pim a murder cat,” Nessa said for the third or fourth time that evening. Why was everyone calling Pim a murder cat suddenly?

The woman looked at Nessa, “I am telling Santa to put you on the naughty list!”

“I was scared!” shouted Nessa. “This is a giant spider.”

“She’s a baby. My baby,” cooed the woman.

The woman was older than the Santa overalls and pigtails implied. Probably mid-thirties. She had a thick splash of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Her face was oval-shaped. Brows fashionably arched and thick. Narrow nose. Thin lips, currently turned down in a frown directed at Nessa.

The spider nestled closer.

Fionna held her Champagne bottle upside down, “Damn, I need a new bottle.” She motioned at the woman, “Noel, this is Nessa. Nessa, Noel. My cousin. An Air Elemental like you.”

“Not like you,” said the woman in a suspicious voice. “I can use my powers.”

Pim growled and stalked forward.

“Eek,” squeaked the spider backing up.

Nessa held up the glowing red Jinx bracelets. “For your information, I was protecting Los Angeles from a Soul Eater murdering people all over the South Bay. However, the Infernal Court did not see it that way.” She crossed her arms in front of her, her expression shouting, ‘I dare you to contradict me.’

They stared at each other in silence.

Fionna came back from the bar holding a fresh bottle. She expertly uncorked it with a *pop*. “Nessa is right, Noel. She is the definition of a Good Samaritan. Always running around Los Angeles saving people.” She shrugged. “What can I say?”

Noel narrowed her eyes, still looking suspicious. “Cuddles is my Familiar. She’s a Japanese Tsuchigumo, ground spider. They shapeshift. Like Reiko and her mom.”

Reiko was back on her feet, though she kept her distance from the spider. “You know about us?” She didn’t look thrilled that another person knew the family secret.

Noel flicked a finger back and forth between her and Fionna, “Cousins. We talk.”

Reiko bit her lip.

“Come on Reiko,” Fionna said. “You know the cat, or fox is out of the bag. Your dad and the entire clan know. He’s being a dick about it which is so unfair to you. You still his daughter. You didn’t betray him like your mom.”

“Fionna!” said Reiko.

“It’s true. She hid her magical heritage because of Alchemist Clan rules. He would either have to step down as CEO or leave your mom. No magical interbreeding allowed. He found out and dumped you both. Like I said. A dick.”

Pim flipped back to his feline form, no longer considering the wimpy giant spider a threat.

Noel looked back and forth. “Hey! Where did murder cat go?”

“Stop calling him that,” Nessa shouted. “And he’s right here. Pim is invisible in his true form. And why do people keep calling him murder cat?”

Noel pointed at Fionna, “That’s what she calls him.”

Pim and Nessa gave the other Witch accusing looks.

“Sorry, what?” said Fionna, feigning innocence. “I better go over to the patio to see if my parents are still alive. Later, people and creatures.” Champagne bottle in hand, she walked quickly away.

“Where’s Krampus?” Noel asked Nessa.

“Krampus? Last I saw he was running in the direction of the trees by the far side of the house.”

Noel gave a smug smile. “Looking for the sleigh. Once all the insanity started, Cuddles and I moved it.”

Puzzled, Nessa asked, “Why would Krampus want the sleigh?”

“Because that was the whole point of this,” Noel gave Nessa a look like she was slow. “He created chaos, which I admit was probably a perk for him. Then he took out the Reindeer and their handler Elf. After that, there was nothing to keep him from hijacking the sleigh and the Joy Spheres. Or so he thought.”

The spider nodded its uncanny tiger head and held up one pointy leg. Noel high-fived it.

“The joy what?” said Nessa.

“Joy Spheres, Wonder Globes, Happy Orbs, whatever appellation you choose. As long as you don’t say *balls*. There’s no way to use that without sounding nasty. Come on. I’ll show you. We’re going to have to work together on this” She jumped on the spider. It skittered off toward the far side of the lawn.

Nessa jogged after them, Pim at her heels. “Work together on what?”

Reiko stayed where she was. “I think I’ll watch the Reindeer,” she shouted.

As Nessa passed the buffet tables, she made a quick stop. Lifting up the tablecloths she found her fairies stretched out under the third one. Red fairy was cuddling Poppy, who was snoring.

Pim went close to sniff at their faces.

“Are they okay?” she asked.

Pim nodded then rocked back on his haunches to pat his stomach.

“They’re too full?”

He nodded.

“Okay, food comas. Good.” She’d seen this before after they stuffed themselves at Panda Express. If given the chance, they would eat themselves into blissful oblivion.

“Let them sleep. Poppy, too. Let’s go.”

It took a moment to find Noel and her spider. Which, given its size, you wouldn’t think would be a problem.

Nessa finally spied a big striped leg beckoning around a stand of flowering bushes.

They went over to see a large white tent. Okay. This must have been where the caterers were working from.

How had they fared, Nessa wondered.

She had her answer as soon as she walked in. At least a dozen figures were sprawled on the grass. Some wore chefs' whites, others the simple uniform of the servers. Guess they had indulged in the green stuff.

The Gardes were lucky nothing had caught on fire. The warming dishes outside had little methanol fuel canisters that soon burned out. Here in the tent, propane was being used on industrial size gas burners. Someone who was still conscious had the presence of mind to turnoff them all off.

At the other end of the tent, Noel called, "Over here."

They exited the far side. It opened onto a gated side entrance with a driveway and parking area full of cars. This must be the valet parking area.

Noel whipped off an oversized canvas cover revealing a gleaming red and gold sleigh. Nessa and Pim were temporarily speechless.

The sleigh was, in every way, exactly what one would imagine a Yule sleigh pulled by Reindeer to look like. Curved runners curled up at each corner. The body was sinuously rounded at front and back. Sumptuous warm fabrics were draped over a single bench seat. Behind the seat, the cargo bed was filled with bulky red velvet sacks tied with gold braided rope. The sleigh hummed with latent energy. It reminded Nessa of a SciFi spaceship ready to fly into the sky. And perhaps it was.

Noel tugged at one of the golden cords. It came away smooth as silk. The velvet cloth fell away revealing glowing Orbs of light.

"These are what he's after."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nessa's cell buzzed with a text.

She took it out. Fionna.

'Where are you guys?'

'Caterers tent,' she tapped.

A short time later, Fionna came striding in.

"Your mom and dad okay?" Nessa asked.

"Out cold but breathing like everybody else. Well done, Noel. You've got the sled. This contract means a lot to the family."

"Just what contract are we talking about?" Nessa said, sounding exasperated. "What exactly is going on?"

Fionna struck a pose. "My family works for Santa."

Nessa snorted.

Pim made a gagging sound.

"We do," Fionna insisted.

Nessa snorted again, loudly.

"Okay not *Santa*, Santa. That's sort of a myth but not." She threw her hands in the air. "Much easier to explain without two bottles of Champagne."

"Let me," said Noel. "This is all about the Yule Spirits and mid-sinter festivals. Christmas and what have you. These winter festivals of light and hope have existed since ancient times. I'm talking hunter-gatherer-tribal-ancient. You follow?"

Nessa made an impatient sound, "Yes, I follow. I'm not stupid."

Cuddles drummed her feet on the ground and turned her way-too-many eyes on Nessa.

Nessa stared back. Refusing to be intimidated. Pim popped up on his hind legs and did the same.

Nessa waved a hand. "Go on. What does this have to do with tonight?"

"Yule spirits are the opposite of demons if you will. They came into being, don't ask me how, in answer to the needs of human beings. Those thoughts create energy and that energy..."

Nessa sighed, "I know how prayer and energy transmutation works. Yule Spirits encouraged people in the dark mid-winter of long-ago times and vice versa. The more people believed, the stronger the spirits grew. This in turn gave rise to Santa and all those stories. How does that relate to tonight?"

“Yule Spirits gather positive energy throughout the year and store it. They always have. In mid-winter they would and still do release the energy like goodwill bombs. The goodwill transforms people and places. You’ve seen this. We all have. It’s why Christmas or whatever winter holiday you celebrate, and even if you don’t celebrate anything, is different than any other season. You can’t help but sense the change. Yule Spirits do what they can. It’s not easy these days. There’s so much hate. But if it’s this bad now, think what it would be like without them.”

Pim pointed at the sleigh with a paw, “Meow?”

Noel couldn’t see him, so Nessa asked. “And the sleigh is full of these goodwill bombs?”

“Yep. One of many around the world, of course.”

“Not toys?”

“No. No toys. Or not usually, as I understand it. There can be special exceptions.”

“And Krampus wants to derail his?”

“Yes. The less goodwill, the more opportunity for naughty behavior, which he can then pounce on as a Vengeance Demon. The Gardes gave him the perfect opportunity. The sleigh always arrives, as they do all over the world, on the night before St. Nicholas day.”

“Why Reindeer and a sleigh?” scoffed Nessa.

Pim growled his agreement.

“Can’t they just hire a U-Haul? This is not the eighteenth century.”

Noel rolled her eyes like Nessa had said something very stupid again.

“Because there are demons and even Witches and Warlocks who would like nothing better than to destroy the goodwill the Yule Spirits generate. They like anger and violence. And they’re going to use magic to get it.”

“But *Reindeer*?” Nessa insisted.

Fionna took up the story, “Not your regular Reindeer. They are immortal in the same way Yule Spirits are. Once they’re in the air, they generate a protective field nothing, and I mean nothing, can penetrate.”

“Which is why,” interrupted Noel, “it was important for Krampus to take them out. Now that they’re out of the picture, Krampus will attempt to hijack the sleigh when it makes its run.”

Nessa wagged a finger at Fionna. “Well, you didn’t do much to stop him. In fact, you invited him in. Then stupid Reiko’s punch did the rest.”

Fionna sighed, “I know, I know. Everything about tonight was stupid. I think somehow Krampus, or people ... *things*... he was working with got to my parents.”

Nessa spread her hands, “This is not nuts but kind of weird. What does it have to do with your family, Fionna? Why here?”

“It’s like this. The Gardes have an age-old contract with the Yule Spirits to hold the Joy Orbs or whatever you call them. Keep them safe until the night before St. Nicholas day. Then, the Yule Spirits send the sleigh, Reindeer, and driver to collect and transport them to the dispersion point.”

“Which happens to be on Krampus Nacht,” Nessa said.

“Yes,” both women nodded.

“Why wait for Krampus Nacht when he’s most powerful? Why not any other day?”

“It’s a rule,” Noel said. “Things have to happen on certain days. It stretches back thousands of years. Tomorrow is St. Nicholas Day. We have to deliver the Orbs so they can be released at sunrise. Otherwise, they fizzle to nothing.”

“What’s in this for your family, Fionna?” Nessa asked, sensing there was more to the story. “I can’t see them doing this out of the goodness of their hearts.”

Fiona’s mouth twisted up at one side, “You’re right. In exchange for storage in our underground bunker...”

“Meow?” piped up Pim.

“Bunker?” said Nessa.

“Yeah, Bunker. It’s not a big deal. Anyway, my family receives small Orbs of Goodwill in exchange.” She held up a hand before Nessa could ask. “You have no idea how far a little goodwill goes in business negotiations. Especially in Asia where trust is a big issue. Pop one of these goodwill babies and everything goes your way.”

“And to get these baby Orbs,” Nessa continued, figuring it out, “you need to ensure the sleigh makes its run.”

Fionna took a long drink from her Champagne. Swallowing, she said, “Not only that. We’re not as selfish as you think, Nessa. The sleigh needs to make it to the dispersal point tonight or there will be an alarming lack of good will and joy here on the West Coast. It’s an important delivery.”

“And why we are going to make it,” said Noel, staring straight at Nessa.

Pim’s ears shot forward. He stuttered out a meow that sounded like “*We?*”

Nessa met Noel’s stare. “Why are me and my cat involved?”

“Because you’re an Air Elemental. I’m an Air Elemental. With my help, Cuddles can fly the sleigh. I need you to ride shotgun. Krampus is going to come after us and I’m guessing you can fight. That’s why you’ve got those Infernal Court Jinxes around your wrists.”

Nessa held up her arms, showing the bands glowing red. “And precisely why I can’t help. These keep me from accessing my power.”

“Not on the sleigh they won’t.” Noel sounded confident.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You can use your powers in Faerie, I’m betting,” Noel said.

Nessa glared at Fionna. “Do you talk about me and Pim to *everyone*?”

“Maybe...” said Fionna in a small voice.

“God damn it, Fionna.”

Noel stepped closer. “Nessa, the sleigh is, how can I put this, sort of...not of this Earth. Once you step inside, I believe the Jinxes won’t work.”

Nessa felt a sinking sensation in her stomach. “And what if I don’t want to help? What if I say to heck with joy and goodwill?”

“Would you?” asked Noel. “Could you? Because despite your youth, I am getting the vibe you are one of the most responsible Witches at this party.”

Looking at the still forms of the supernaturals fallen around her she could see the woman’s point. And it would be nice to access her powers. Plus, it was the Christmas Season, dang it all. She couldn’t ruin the Holiday Spirit for who knows how many people.

She looked at Pim. “Do you think I have to help?”

Pim sighed, nodding reluctantly it seemed to Nessa.

“What does your Familiar say?” asked Noel.

“He thinks we should help.”

“Good. Then let’s get Cuddles hooked up to the sleigh and start spinning some spells. Oh, and you better take out your contacts. I think it’s going to be a rough ride.”

The blue contacts hid the fact that her eyes were black as ink from side to side. Only Fallen Angels and Demons had eyes as black as hers.

“Fionna,” Nessa growled. “Stop telling people my secrets.”

But Fionna didn’t answer. She’d pulled a chair up to the prep table and was snoring softly, her head pillowed on her hands.

Nessa picked up Pim and walked toward the giant tiger-striped spider. “Why couldn’t I have been born an amoral psychopath like I should have been given my parents? Why did I have to have a moral compass?”

“Meow,” groaned Pim.

CHAPTER NINE

“By dawn,” sighed Nessa as the sleigh soared into the sky, quickly leaving the Gardes’ mansion far behind.

“Yes,” agreed Noel. She was staring straight ahead, holding a set of reins attached incongruously to a giant spider.

Nessa threw her hands up. “Who makes these rules?”

Noel shrugged. “Don’t know. But we gotta’ play by them.”

The sleigh and spider glowed with silver energy as Noel mastered the winds to carry them forward.

Nessa was protected from her summonings by an invisible barrier. Tornadoes would maneuver around her; lightning would never strike her. For this spell, Noel had to surround all of them with air energy.

It was an amazing display of skill and Nessa couldn’t help but admire the woman’s mastery of her Elemental power. How could she support this much weight in the air *and* push it forward? Nessa had no idea how to fine-tune her control for that level of summoning.

“Where are we heading?” she asked.

“Up the coast. The dispersal point is just beyond Santa Barbara.”

They’d barely cleared Ventura when they heard it. Howls echoing through the clouds. Chills of terror ran down Nessa’s spine, instinctively recognizing those sounds.

A wolf pack on the hunt.

Nessa searched the skies, spotting a team of gray wolves as they emerged from a bank of clouds to their right. Galloping through the air, they pulled a black sled made of...were those bones?

Animal? Human?

Nessa couldn’t tell.

Cracking a whip over the pack, Krampus laughed manically. His strings of bells rattling and clanging in riotous disharmony.

Good thing she went to the bathroom before they left Fionna’s house.

“Krampus is going to try to stop us,” Noel shouted.

“No shit, Sherlock,” Nessa yelled back.

Pim flipped into his werecat form, screaming a challenge of his own.

Switching the reins to one hand, Noel wove an intricate symbol in the air. The glowing web of symbols momentarily hung suspended before she threw it forward. The sled jerked ahead, throwing Nessa off her feet.

Eight legs churning, Cuddles galloped faster, straining at the harness as they gained speed.

Nessa put a finger on her summoning belt, finding the tiny silver charm for the whirlwind.

They were lucky tonight was overcast. High clouds covering the coast. Air currents ebbed and flowed in every direction. Air is naturally chaotic. It answered Nessa's summons joyfully.

And a good thing, too. In less than a minute, the huge wolves had returned. They swiftly pulled abreast of the sleigh.

Nessa spoke the true name of the whirlwind. It took her breath away and she fought to breathe as a black funnel cloud dropped between the two sleighs. She sent the funnel cloud directly into Krampus's path with a whispered word.

The maelstrom swept up him and the wolves. They spun. Somersaulting and cartwheeling within the vortex. Controlling the maelstrom with both hands, she forced the whirlwind down, hoping to crash the bone sled on the ground far below.

She could feel Krampus fighting her. Pushing back. The wolves fought the chaotic drop with their own magic. Too soon, the sled's wild tumble slowed. Straining, one by one the wolves broke free of the wind. Legs churning, they freed the sled and with howls of triumph, began to climb. Krampus's bells clanged riotously as the bone sled rode the air currents.

Grinning maniacally, Krampus guided his wolves abreast of the sleigh.

Noel swerved, guiding Cuddles to pull the sleigh back and forth, up and down.

Krampus matched them move for move until the sides of their sleds scraped against each other. Too close.

Reaching across, he tried to yank one of the velvet bags out of the back of the sleigh.

Apparently, the bag did not wish to be yanked. A pulse of energy boomed through the night.

Krampus, his sled, and the wolves went spinning.

"Warded," Noel explained to Nessa's wondering look.

The wolves recovered their balance. Straining at their harnesses, they pulled the sled back.

Krampus shook a fist at Ness and Noel. "You will not have my victory over Saint Nicholas tonight."

"It's not a contest," Noel shouted back. "What's wrong with you? Go chase some naughty children."

His only answer was to snap the whip at them. Nessa felt a terrible sting of pain across her shoulders and then another as the whip ripped through her down jacket, cutting through the fabric to the skin.

Pim yowled in rage.

To Nessa's horror, she saw him leap from their sleigh onto Krampus. He landed on the Vengeance Demon's shoulders, clawing and biting. Ripping the furs and leather. Blood spurted from the demon's chest and neck.

Krampus roared in pain and anger. He reached for the werecat. Pim was slippery as an eel, evading the monster's talons as he ripped more tears in Krampus's animal skins with his scythe-like claws.

Krampus brought his whip up and around, trying to snare the werecat. Quicker than the eye could see, Pim had the handle between his teeth. Twisting his body into an impossible knot and somersaulting around, Pim ripped the whip from Krampus's grasp. He was back on the small red sleigh in a flash of gray fur,

Noel took the whip from him and threw it over the side.

"Hey," Nessa protested, "we could have used that."

"How? I'm not Indiana Jones. Cuddles," she called. "Battle mode!"

Nessa had only time for a strangled, "What?" before the sleigh shot up, only to plunge down a moment later on top of the bone sled.

Cuddles bared her tiger-sized incisors and fell upon the wolves. Krampus shouted orders at the pack. They tried to pull the sled up in a steep turn, probably hoping to shake off the spider. Surefooted with eight legs, Cuddles scrambled and clamped onto the neck of the lead wolf. It yelped in pain. With the sharp points of her forelegs, Cuddles sliced through the harness and the wolf slipped out. Yelping, it fell behind.

The wolves lost control and both the sled and the sleigh rocked wildly from side to side.

Nessa called the lightning but dared not let it loose while they were practically on top of the demon. It would be too easy to hit Cuddles or the sleigh.

"Maneuver us away so I can use lightning," Nessa shouted, straining to be heard above the howls of the wolves and Cuddles' own roar.

Another wolf fell from its harness, disappearing into the clouds.

A bolt of energy shot out and struck the spider. It squealed in pain, rocking back on its hind four legs.

"Cuddles!" howled Noel.

Nessa saw Krampus held a long wooden staff. Energy glowed from a crystal in the tip. The crystal turned from white to red, charging for another strike.

“Cuddles come back! Now!” Nessa shouted.

The spider leaped up and back, hanging onto the front of the sleigh with one set of legs. A hot bolt of energy sizzled through the air missing her by only a hair’s breadth.

Nessa seized her chance and called the lightning.

It rained down, blinding zig zags of light. Krampus pulled the sled back, the wolf team lurching crazily to avoid being hit. With a command from Krampus, the wolves turned earthward. The sled plunged down to disappear in the clouds.

“He’ll be back,” said Noel.

“No kidding!”

In a gravity-defying loop-the-loop, he came from above and behind.

As he drew near, Pim leaped once again onto the demon. Raking with his back claws and biting into the demon’s shoulder. This time the demon didn’t try to pull the werecat away or even defend himself. Instead, he bared his own claws, raking them along Pim’s side. A stream of blood flew in the air.

“The staff!” Nessa shouted.

But it was too late. The staff had been hidden between Krampus’s legs. With a word, he discharged the energy directly into Pim. Pim lit up as brightly as the lightning strikes from moments before. He fell back, limp. With a gleeful cry, Krampus pushed him off the sled.

“Pim!” Nessa screamed. She threw a cushion of air around him to slow his descent. Noel called out words of power that hit Nessa like a slap in the face.

Cuddles dropped into a nosedive.

The sleigh plummeted so fast it took Nessa breath away. Her eyes blurred in the burst of frigid wind. In only seconds, they were below Pim. Nessa caught him as he fell. He knocked her to the floor of the sleigh. He was the size of a lynx when he transformed and no lightweight.

Noel steadied the sleigh, urging Cuddles to climb again.

Pim had three long, deep ribs along his side, but he was breathing. His heart was beating.

“You’re going to pay for this!” Nessa shouted, waving a fist as the bone sled pulled abreast of them again.

Krampus howled with laughter. Reaching down he pulled out a large cloth bag, similar to the ones holding the Orbs in the back of the sleigh.

With an evil grin, he dropped it over the side.

“Taco, taco!” came a faint voice.

The fairies.

Nessa dove over the side of the sleigh, arms against her side, legs straight back, like a missile. As she fell, she unlocked the cage holding her cursed powers. Unlocked it more swiftly than she could have ever imagined. Mentally flinging it wide, she let the energy of the Fallen flood her body. Magic flowed through her in joyous release. Her wings opened and she sped faster than a diving kestrel.

Cries of “Taco, taco, panda!” floated through the air.

Reaching out with both hands she grabbed the bag just before it hit the water. So close that the breaking waves splashed her face and chest. Beating her wings, she soared back into the air.

There was the sound of material tearing and a hand was thrust from the bag. More tearing and the Red Fairy emerged. Fluttering her wings, she held herself aloft as the Green and Blue Fairies scrambled out.

They fluttered around Nessa, their dragonfly wings beating so swiftly they were nearly invisible.

“Taco, taco, taco!” they screeched as a battle cry.

These were the fierce fairies she had first met in the meadow. Ready to rip and tear.

They took up position behind Nessa as she beat her black wings.

“Krampus!” she shrieked. “You’re mine.”

The bone sled was hidden in the clouds, but his bells jangling gave him away.

Pumping her wings, she sped into the cloud bank.

There.

Krampus was coming up under the red sleigh, intending to up-end it.

Nessa dove directly at him. He had time for one astonished look before she barreled into his chest, dragging him out of the sled and into the air. She let him drop. He cursed and shouted. Calling for his wolves.

They dropped out of the cloud cover, galloping toward them.

Nessa beat her wings, getting to the demon first. She grabbed him by his ram’s horns. Holding tight, she barrel-rolled, across the sky. Her momentum building with each roll.

Krampus twisted and turned trying to reach Nessa. Hanging by his horns, swinging wildly, he couldn’t get a grip. He still held his staff. Much good it did him. He tried firing off volleys of stunning spells. They flew wildly in every direction, not coming near Nessa. When his spells didn’t work, he tried to hit her with it.

She kicked it aside, laughing.

Nearby she saw the platform of one of the old oil rigs dotting this part of the coast. They must be by Santa Barbara.

That would do nicely.

Wings back, she dove to the oil platform, dropping the demon when they were still twenty feet up. He fell like a brick and landed about as gracefully.

Nessa pulled the shadow magic into her hands. Landing near, she waited as he jumped to his feet. His face was purple with anger. He had his staff. Aiming at her, he readied a charge.

Laughing, Nessa let loose the black hexes she held.

They hit him like battering rams, driving the burly demon right through the wall of a nearby shed leaving a Krampus-shaped hole.

Bloodied and limping, he crawled out of the wreckage.

Nessa laughed harder. The dark energy coursing through her body was enjoying the demon's pain.

He raised the staff again.

Nessa put her hands on her hips, shaking her head and snorting derisively.

Krampus released a barrage of energy from the staff, firing volley after volley like a cannon.

Nessa casually closed her wings around her.

The energy bounced off as if it was made of rubber.

Her wings were Angelic. So much more than they appeared. Much like Nessa. Especially when she was angry.

Frightened, Nessa was a threat. Angry, Nessa was a promise.

And she was very angry with Krampus.

She walked closer, heedless of his hexes. When they stopped at last, she said, "My turn."

Spreading one wing, she pirouetted into him, slashing at his chest.

Her wings were feathers, until they were not.

The edge of one was a weapon. Sharp as a sword. They sliced through Krampus clothing and skin. She felt them scrape bone. Turning she hit him with the other wing. Slicing deeply into his shoulder and down his arm. Lifting the other wing she smashed it down on his arm. The bone cracked.

She heard the wolves land. The bone sled falling with a jarring crack. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw them shake free of their harnesses. Howling, they tried to circle her.

The fairies got there first.

"Doggee, doggee, doggee!" they chanted and fell upon the animals with their knives and teeth.

Krampus tried to rise. One arm hung limply at his side.

Nessa shook a finger at him. "Not yet," she said. "You've been a very naughty boy. It's Krampus Nacht. Time for naughty boys to be punished."

"I will have my vengeance," he shouted.

“Don’t think so,” said Nessa. “I’ve spent my life fighting a Fallen Angel. The power of Hell courses through my veins. Do you really think you, a mere demon, can best me?”

He seemed to finally realize what he was up against. He lifted his good hand to shield himself.

Nessa saw the red sleigh land near the ruined shed. Good. Let Noel and Pim witness the demon’s punishment.

Darkness surrounded her. She said a *word*. A terrible word no mortal lips could utter without bursting into flame. A word she should never have known, yet she did. The word slammed into the demon. He screamed as the spell coiled around him like a constrictor, squeezing, squeezing.

Nessa laughed.

“Stop! Nessa, stop! Don’t kill him.” Noel ran to her but wisely kept her distance. “You mustn’t kill him. He’s beaten. It’s enough.”

“Is it?” said Nessa, turning her black eyes on the woman.

Noel cringed, drawing back. As well she should.

“Mercy,” croaked Krampus. “Mercy.”

“You tried to kill my fairies,” Nessa hissed. “You hurt my Familiar. Do you deserve my mercy?”

“Yes, Mistress. Yes, he does,” said a deep voice in a British accent. He spoke inside her head.

Pim. “It is enough. He is punished. Let the darkness go and come back to me. Come back, Nessa. My Witch. My Mistress.”

The darkness knew those words. It raged inside her. Beating to be set completely free.

“No, no, no,” it shouted in her head. “More pain! More punishment!”

“Dearest Nessa,” said Pim’s voice in her head. “Stop. It is Christmas. Be merciful.”

And that was enough to bring her back. It’s Christmas. A time for mercy.

She pulled the dark magic, the legacy of her mother’s curse back. Forcing it down, even as it fought her. Back to the cage where it slept.

“Noooo!” the darkness howled. “No mercy!”

“Enough,” said Nessa as she turned the mental key, locking it inside.

Her wings disappeared and the dark around her lifted, revealing the helipad platform and the sky above. She heard the crash of the waves against the pillars far below.

“Cuddles,” Nessa called.

The spider scuttled over, dragging its harness. Noel must have unhooked it when she landed.

Nessa pointed at Krampus. “Bind him. Tightly.”

Cuddles didn’t look to her Mistress for permission. Nessa had put the fear of God, or rather the Fallen, into the spider. She would do whatever Nessa asked.

Cuddles immediately grabbed the demon with several legs, spinning him around and around as she coated his body with her thick webbing.

Nessa looked over to see how her fairies had done.

The wolves were on their bellies, bloodied but alive. They whimpered and cringed before the trio.

“Taco, taco, taco!” shouted Nessa, raising her fists.

“Taco, taco, taco!” they answered holding their daggers high.

Nessa let out a long deep breath and looked at Noel.

“Damn girl,” Noel said shaking her head in admiration, “you are one scary mothertrucker.”

“You were right about taking out my contacts,” said Nessa. “Good advice.”

Cuddles reared up, mewing a call in her funny cat-like voice.

Nessa came over to inspect. Krampus was thoroughly cocooned, only his eyes remained free of the webbing.

The fairies danced over. They were holding long switches. They must have found them in the demon’s sled. They began lashing Krampus, laughing wildly.

Nessa didn’t tell them to stop.

She went to the sleigh to check on Pim.

He was still his werecat self. She ran a hand over his side. The lacerations didn’t go too deeply. The bleeding had stopped. None of the injuries were dangerous despite the blood matting his thick gray fur. He would need time to recover before he could transform back to his feline self. Werecats, like many supernatural creatures, had preternaturally fast healing powers.

He’d never contacted her telepathically when he was in this form.

She stroked his head. “You were really worried I wouldn’t come back, weren’t you buddy?”

He gave a tired “Meow-yow.” His werecat voice low and husky.

Only Pim could bring her back from the precipice when she released her Fallen Angel energy. They were both afraid one day she wouldn’t listen.

CHAPTER TEN

Nessa leaned over, her hands on her thighs as the tremendous amount of energy she'd used caught up with her. Her calves were shaking, her arms trembling. She ran a hand across her shoulders, it came away wet with blood from where Krampus's whip had scored several hits before she transformed. Dang it. She liked this down jacket. It was the warmest thing in her skimpy closet.

Noel gently pulled Nessa close to look at her back. "Let's have a look. You might need stitches."

Nessa moaned. "Gawd, I hope not. Stitches hurt."

A growl rumbled through Pim's chest. A warning growl.

Nessa looked at Krampus. No. He was still bound by spider thread. Wriggling but going nowhere.

The wolves hadn't moved. The fairies were keeping an eye on them in between swatting Krampus with his own switches.

Pim looked up at the sky and Nessa followed. Distant bursts of flame appeared to be coming closer.

Within seconds, she saw a massive black horse with a flaming mane and tail, fire shooting from his nostrils galloping across the sky targeting them like a sniper's rifle. A figure sat upon the flaming horse's back. Too far still for Nessa to see clearly. But large and broad.

Another Vengeance Demon?

"Noel!" she shouted, pointing at the sky.

Noel looked up.

Nessa pulled herself together, shaky legs and all. She walked over to grab Krampus's staff.

Pim struggled to his feet, growling low and loud.

The wolves whined pitifully. Whatever it was, they were scared of it.

The fairies came over to stand with Nessa. Teeth bared; daggers high.

Cuddles took her place behind them.

Together, the companions faced the flaming horse and its rider.

Nessa could see now see the man who rode the beast. He was dressed in black robes with white trim. He held a war hammer in one hand and bellowed a battle cry that lifted all the hair on the back of Nessa's neck.

Mentally, she readied her fingers on the lock to her dark energy. If she released it, she wasn't sure she had the strength to pull it back if it tried to take control. She'd have to jump in the sleigh if she wanted to use her Elemental powers.

The horse swooped low, flames trailing behind like the tail of a comet. She could see its eyes now. Glowing red embers.

Nessa moved forward, singing her own battle cry in her head. Just as she was about to release her magic, Noel grabbed her arm with one hand and tried to restrain the three fairies with the other.

“No. Nessa, fairies. No. Don’t attack. He’s not one of Krampus’s demons.”

Nessa’s expression must have betrayed her doubt. How could this flaming black horse and rider be anything but a threat?

Pim growled and the fairies growled right along with him. They did not look convinced either.

Nessa took a step closer, shaking off Noel.

“He’s a Yule Spirit,” Noel said. “Listen to me. Please. He’s on our side.”

The warrior leaped from the back of the horse before all four hooves had touched the ground. He stood nearly seven feet tall. His shaggy gray beard and long hair hid most of his features. What she thought was a black robe she now realized was armor, battered and worn. A breastplate and arm guards over the white fur. The hammer in his hand sparked with magic.

Nessa did not think he looked like he was on their side.

The fairies hissed, waiting only for their Mistress to send them into battle.

Pim yowled a war cry and tensed his muscles.

Cuddles rocked back, waving her front legs in defiance.

Nessa raised Krampus’s staff, feeling the lightning energy burn her fingers as it came to life in her hands.

The giant horse stamped and snorted fire from its nostrils, rearing back on its hind legs and pawing the air. Its eyes were no longer red embers but burning firebrands.

Werecat Pim fearlessly answered the horse’s challenge with his own bloodcurdling battle cry.

Noel ran to the enormous man, “Elding, tell her you’re a good guy. They think you’re here to steal the sleigh.”

The man paused but did not lower his hammer. Slowly, he stalked over to where Krampus lay. Each booted foot landed with an audible thud on the concrete platform.

Nessa stood ready, a hair’s breadth away from summoning her power.

The fairies’ wings fluttered faster. They were already off the ground, clenching and unclenching their fingers around the daggers.

Cuddles hissed a warning, scuttling to get between the towering warrior and Krampus.

The warrior began to laugh. Stepping forward, he grabbed the giant spider in a bear hug, slapping her on the back.

Nessa wasn't sure how to react. She stood blinking at the scene trying to decide what would happen next.

The horse blew out a fiery breath, startling her.

The warrior faced Nessa. "This was your work?" he demanded, his voice commanding.

Nessa did not flinch. "Yes, though I had help from my werecat and Cuddles."

He began to laugh, loud and long until he was wiping his eyes. "Krampus..." he choked out at last, "the demon Krampus bested by a slip of a Witch girl and her cat. Oh stars. Oh comets. I will dine out on this story for years. Come, come, valiant Witch," he beckoned to Nessa. "Tell me of the battle so I may regale all the Yule Spirits with the tale of your valor!"

The black horse reared back, raking the air again with its hooves, his mane and tail flaring even brighter.

Nessa felt the adrenaline draining out of her like someone had turned on the tap. Briefly, she swayed but would not let herself fall. She refused to show any weakness in front of this unknown entity. Pim backed up until he was side by side with her. She felt a glow of strength as he tried to give her what little energy he had left.

"I've got it Pim, don't drain yourself." She gave a quick caress to his ears.

Motioning for the fairies to stay where they were, she walked over to the warrior, back straight and head high.

"Who are you?" she demanded and was relieved to hear her voice steady, a little raspy but steady. "Who are you that I should tell my story to?"

The warrior threw his head back again and laughed even louder, but not in a derisive way. Nessa felt an outpouring of comradery. An almost physical warmth that washed over her.

"As is your right," he declared, his voice booming. "I am Elding, Yule Spirit of the Northwest. And this is my companion, Thoren."

The horse tossed his head, neighing so loudly Nessa wanted to cover her ears.

Nessa narrowed her eyes at the man, frowning. "If you're the spirit of the Northwest, shouldn't you be riding a bear?"

He laughed even longer, wiping his eyes again. "Oh stars, you have mettle. A worthy opponent for the likes of Krampus." He held up a hand, "But as you know, your animal chooses you. Not the other way around."

The horse pawed the ground, sending up sparks.

Nessa conceded that was true.

"I am late to the battle," he continued. "My apologies. Yet seems the glory belonged rightfully to you and yours," he swept his hammer around to include Nessa and Pim and Cuddles. "I was far from here

when the station sent their alert. Now, tell me, if you will, why the Reindeer are not here and how you came to battle this demon.”

Working hard to keep her feet, Nessa described what had happened and as much of the battle as she felt necessary. When she'd finished, he went to the saddlebags on the horse and withdrew what looked like a handful of cookies.

“You are fatigued after such a fight. For your fairies.” He held out the cookies.

The fairies, never ones to refuse a meal, dashed over to take them without a second thought. They crammed the morsels into their mouths smiling around the crumbs that tumbled from their lips. The warrior reached back into the saddlebag, pulling out at least a dozen more. He handed them to the fairies.

They squealed with delight.

“Now, allow me to provide refreshment for you and the fearsome battle cat. A restorative for your wounds.” He pulled out a large flask and a cup from another compartment on the bag.

He filled the cup from the flask. “Drink deeply.”

She looked at Noel who had been very quiet during the entire encounter. The other Witch made go-ahead motions.

Nessa took the cup and kneeling, held it first to Pim.

He sniffed at the contents then began to lap eagerly. When the cup was dry, she stood, not easy in her condition. There was some straining involved and maybe a groan.

The warrior held out the bottle. “You are an admirable warrior indeed, to offer it first to your battle companion.”

“What about Cuddles?” Nessa asked.

Cuddles held up a foot and shook her head.

“She’s good,” Noel said.

He poured more of the liquid. “Now drink.”

Nessa took the cup, handing it instead to Noel. “Wait. Noel needs some. We still have to get the sleigh to wherever we’re going. She helped Cuddles fly. She flew it all the way here.”

Noel smiled, a genuine smile, no smirk lurking at the corners. “Thanks.”

She quickly drained the cup.

“Is there enough left for me?” she asked the warrior.

“Always,” he grinned, topping up the cup.

Nessa took a cautious sip. It tasted like honey but not cloyingly sweet. Light, almost bubbly. She drained it in moments, sighing softly as she felt warmth spread throughout her body. The terrible fatigue of the battle drained away, she felt stronger, steadier.

“Thank you,” she handed the cup back. “I feel better.”

The warrior turned his piercing eyes on her. It was only then she noticed they were black. As black as her own.

After what felt like an uncomfortably long silence, he said, "There is still much magic lingering on you. Dark and fearsome."

Nessa shivered, unnerved that he could sense her power.

He held up a hand as if sensing her unease. "Power used wisely in defense of the innocent." He leaned closer, speaking so only she would hear. "You may fear the dark, young Witch. Believe me when I say, it is the dark that should fear you."

With those words he stood, clapping his hands together.

Startled, the fairies shot up into the air, hovering about twenty feet up.

Elding gave a rueful grin. "My apologies." He waved at the fairies, "Come down little ones. Come. All is well."

The fairies descended keeping a now wary eye on the warrior.

"Come," he said. "Let us get young Cuddles harnessed to the sleigh and you Witches back in the air. Dawn draws close. Joy must finish its journey."

Nessa stood to the side to wait. The giant horse stepped nimbly over, stretching his nose to the ground to sniff Pim. Thankfully with no flames shooting out.

Pim had shifted back to his feline form after the restorative drink. His wounds gone as if they'd never been. Ever curious, Pim sniffed the horse back. After much snuffling by both animals, Pim jumped up to rub his head along the horse's jaws. The horse knickered gently. Dropping its head even lower.

Pim had made another conquest.

The warrior and Noel got Cuddles reharnessed. Cuddles spun her webbing, making sure she was firmly attached to the sleigh. The fairies tried to help but ended up getting tangled in the strands of web and having to be rescued by Elding and Noel.

When Cuddles was securely fastened to the sleigh, Elding remounted.

"Wait," Nessa said. "Give me a second."

She walked to where Krampus lay squirming. He could squirm all he wanted. Cuddles web was as strong as steel.

The wolves had slunk away out of sight.

Nessa knelt next to Krampus, looking into his yellow eyes.

"Come after me or mine again, Demon, and I will ignore my kindly Familiar's advice. There will be no mercy. I will chew you up and spit you out for your wolves' dinner."

She stood then and walked away without a backward glance.

“We will ride with you and your sleigh in case this Krampus has minions waiting nearby to attack.” Elding raised his hammer, thundering, “I hope they try!”

The horse flamed into fiery brilliance. He galloped across the landing pad, each hoof echoing like a hammer blow, sending up showers of sparks. With a magnificent leap, he soared into the air.

Nessa felt Noel’s power surge in tandem to the enormous horse. Cuddles ran, eight legs churning so fast they were only a blur of motion. Over the side of the oil rig they went. After a heart stopping moment hanging suspended above the sea far below, they followed the pair, flying high and fast.

Noel knew where they were going. Nessa watched the horizon in case the wolves reappeared, but they did not. Less than half an hour later, Noel told Cuddles to descend.

Elding and Thoren flew in wide circles around them, vigilant for any attackers, as the sleigh slowly lost altitude.

Nessa saw they were closing in on a nondescript warehouse atop a small commercial pier. Lights from larger piers and cranes nearby illuminated the area.

The sleigh made a bumpy landing that had Pim digging his claws into the shoulder of Nessa’s coat to hang on until they finally came to a stop.

Even as they breathed a well-earned sigh of relief, a door burst open on the side of the warehouse spilling out a dozen men and women and two Polar Bears.

Nessa rubbed her eyes.

No. She was not seeing things.

They were bears.

Monstrous white ones.

Pim growled, tensing his muscles, ready to transform.

Since Nessa was still in the sleigh, she put a hand on her summoning belt, calling a tempest. Wind swirled around them.

The humans holding axes and metal baseball bats converged on the sleigh.

“Prepare to repel boarders,” someone yelled.

The bears stood on their hind legs, dwarfing everyone.

Thoren galloped between the onrushing group and the sleigh spewing fire, his long flaming tail whiplashing through the air sending sparks everywhere. Elding raised his hammer.

The group slid almost comically to a stop. Even the bears paused.

“It is I,” thundered the warrior, “Elding, Yule Spirit of the Northwest. Do you not know me?”

Clearly no one in the group did. Also clear he expected them to. The bears sort of shuffled their feet in embarrassment.

A woman ran out of the warehouse shouting, “Hail Elding, Yule Spirit, and courageous Thoren. Welcome. *Welcome them you idiots,*” she hissed at the others.

A half-hearted cheer went up from the group.

“My companions have braved the perils of Krampus,” boomed the warrior. “Bested him and his wolf pack to bring you the sleigh. What say you?”

“Hooray!” said the woman, fist-pumping the air.

“Hooray,” said the others, taking their cue from her.

The bears said nothing.

Elding swept his hammer in a semi-circle, “Behold Vanessa Chevalier Scott, Warrior and Air Witch, her companion, the invisible cat Pim’s Cup Whiskers Rampant.”

Shock shot through Nessa’s already frayed nerves that he knew her and Pim’s common names.

“And Noel Champion Garde, Air Witch,” he continued. “Who, together with Cuddles, the fearsome Tsuchigumo Shifter, safely piloted this sleigh through the perils of the night.”

Cuddles meow-hissed a greeting, showing her teeth in what Nessa thought the beast must think of as a friendly grin.

“Eep!” chorused the group, backing away.

The woman who’d come running gave an elegant bow. “We thank you all for your efforts on behalf of the Mid-Winter festival,” adding in a more conversational tone, “And our apologies for the welcome. We thought you were coming in hot. We came prepared.”

Several people hid their axes behind them, looking sheepish.

Noel climbed out of the sleigh to speak with them.

Declaring, “I will patrol,” in his booming voice, Elding and Thoren took off into the sky, leaving fire in their wake.

One of the workers grabbed a fire extinguisher mounted on the outside wall of the warehouse, quickly covering the flames with white foam.

“That man’s a hazard,” Nessa said to Pim.

“Meow, meow,” he agreed, nodding.

Freed from the sleigh, Cuddles whipped around suddenly looming over Nessa. She nearly slid off the seat.

The spider leaned down, nuzzling against Nessa in a purely feline way.

“Eep,” Nessa said, echoing the others.

Pim, understanding, stood and returned the caresses with his little head.

The two Polar Bears, with Noel walking between them, approached Nessa’s little group.

Pim and Nessa were instantly alert. Nessa didn't dislike bears. However, she recognized them as predators. She was always wary near predators – human, animal, or otherwise.

Noel recognized her posture. Cuddles sensed it as well. The spider stepped delicately over to the animals holding out her forelegs and hugging each in turn.

Nessa and Pim relaxed slightly. Cuddles wouldn't put them in danger. Not after all they'd been through tonight.

Noel stepped forward. "Nessa, this is Monroe." She gestured at one bear. "And his husband, Bill." She waved at the other.

'How could she tell them apart?' Nessa wondered. They looked identical.

The bears ducked their big heads before lifting one paw each and holding it out.

Was she supposed to shake? Looked like it.

Nessa placed her hand, dwarfed by their enormous paws and claws, in each.

"How do you do," she said politely.

They leaned down further so Pim could touch a paw to each as well.

They were certainly well-mannered bears.

"Monroe and Bill come down every year for the month of December to protect the facility," Noel explained, resting a hand on one of the bear's shoulders.

"Not only on Krampus Nacht?" Nessa asked.

"The facility has to be guarded all year round. Certain undesirables would revel in destroying the facility."

"Are you Yule Spirits, too?" Nessa asked the bears.

They made bear noises Nessa could not decipher. Pim, though, nodded like he understood.

"Protectors," supplied Noel. "Ancient ones who gave their loyalty to the Yule Spirits way back when. Usually, they are up near the Arctic Circle."

"Is that where Elding and his horse are from?"

"No, the bears live farther north. A different spirit's jurisdiction."

Pim hopped up on his hind legs, his paws beckoning the great beasts. They leaned close and to Pim's obvious delight, the sniffing began. Pim was always ready to make a new animal friend.

Men and women from the warehouse brought out a couple of pallet trolleys. They started unlash the red bags holding the energy Orbs and loading them on the vehicle.

"Come here," Noel motioned for Nessa to follow.

Feeling bone tired, Nessa slowly walked after her. The effects of the restorative drink were wearing off.

Noel pulled Nessa to the trolley now holding dozens of red velvet bags.

“Give me your hand,” Noel said.

Nessa did, wondering what this was all about.

Guiding Nessa’s hand forward, she said, “Touch the bag.”

There didn’t seem to be any reason not to. Though she hesitated a little, remembering how the Wards on the bag had sent Krampus flying across the sky when he attempted to grab it.

“Go ahead,” Noel urged. “Touch it.”

Swallowing her fears, Nessa ran her fingertips across the soft material. Almost instantly a wave of what could only be described joy surged through her. Her lingering fear and panic were washed away in a soft, warm wave of happiness. She sighed, unable to remember when she’d felt like this. It had been a long time.

After a few breaths, she called Pim over. She lifted Pim to the bag, holding him close enough to reach the bag with his paws.

He placed both paws against the material. A sigh of satisfaction slipped from him as deep purrs of delight rumbled in his chest.

Nessa felt the joy resonating through his body back into her.

Noel nodded, “This is the best medicine there is.”

It took Nessa a few moments to pull her mind and body away from the sensation of bliss. She realized Noel was now talking with several members of the group.

“...he may be back...” she finally heard Noel say.

“We’ll be on alert. Morris and Bill won’t let anyone interfere.”

The bears reared up on their hind legs letting out deafening roars.

“I believe that!” Noel said with feeling.

One of the workers came over holding a navy-blue down jacket. “Yours is ripped to pieces,” he said to Nessa. “Take this one. You need to stay warm.”

Nessa gratefully slipped it on. It came to mid-thigh and was a little oversized, exactly how Nessa liked her coats. Pulling it close, she snuggled into the warmth. She hadn’t realized how cold she was. Embroidered patches of Saint Nicholas carrying a staff and wearing his traditional long winter robes decorated the chest and one arm.

“Thank you so much,” she said, running a hand over the embroidered chest patch. “But how will I get it back to you?”

The man smiled. “Oh my gosh! Keep it of course! You’ve earned this and much more for bringing the Holiday Spirit to us in time for St. Nicholas Day.”

The man returned to the group unloading the sled.

“What happens now?” Nessa asked Noel around a yawn.

“The team will distribute the spheres to the crystal accelerators. They’ll switch on and begin dispersing the positive spirit into the air.”

“And that’s it?” Nessa said.

“Yes. Once the joyful energy is dispersed,” she shrugged, “the rest is up to people. Be nicer. Help their neighbors and strangers. Contribute to toy and food drives. Spread the Christmas cheer or whatever holiday they celebrate. Be a little kinder. Without it, life would be even bleaker.”

“Why can’t they Yule Spirits spread joy all year?”

Noel shook her head. “Too many people. The world is wide and wild and overcrowded. Gathering and compressing the goodwill into the Orbs takes time. Yet even the limited amount we have counts. It helps someone somewhere. Ask them if it matters. I think you know what they will say. And there’s the ripple effect from the goodwill flowing through the months and years.”

Cuddles scuttled over, thrusting her head into their little group, demanding to be petted.

“You were so much better than Rudolph,” Nessa said, scratching the enormous beast behind the ears.

Pim nodded in agreement.

“Would you like to see us launch some of the Orbs,” the woman who had greeted them asked. “It’s almost dawn.”

“Sure,” said Nessa. “Why not. We fought for the dang things. Might as well see them work.”

Their entire group, including the fairies, followed the woman into the warehouse. The interior was filled floor to ceiling by some kind of machine. If you could call it a machine. Maybe it was all magic? Shiny metal looped around, over, and under itself passing through enormous glass balls and winding around crystals as big as Cuddles. The machine hummed with what Nessa would describe as a happy little mechanical tune. Almost like it was singing to itself. Overhead, lights passed through crystals casting prisms that danced across the walls.

The roof was partially rolled back at the far end and a cannon-like pipe extended through it.

The woman walked them to what Nessa guessed were the machine’s controls. Two men and two women adjusted levers and wound dials. A container nearby was filled with glowing Orbs from the bags on the sleigh.

The men and women turned to face Nessa and her group. Each one said, “Thank you for bringing the Orbs.”

“Ten seconds to launch,” came a voice from somewhere above them.

The group pressed and pulled their levers. One after the other, the Orbs rolled forward beginning a fantastic tumbling journey through the maze of twisting and turning tubes. Faster and faster, they rolled

through, dropping into glass balls that spun them around and around before shooting them up and over the crystal towers. Each Orb now sparkled and popped with incandescent energy.

“Three, two, one. Launch!” said the voice.

One of the women pressed a button. A glowing Orb shot from the cannon’s mouth in an explosion of light into the sky.

“It’s on its way,” said the voice.

A cheer went up from everyone inside. Nessa could hear people outside cheering and the echoing roar of the Polar Bears.

One after another, Orb followed Orb.

“Where are they going?” Nessa asked the woman who’d brought them.

“Not up to me. The Yule Spirits have placed directions on each one. They know where they’re going. Up and down the Western States is the closest I can say.”

Nessa looked skeptically at the number of Orbs. “That’s a lot of territory. Do you have enough?”

The woman smiled enigmatically, “They are, shall we say, very potent. And, you understand, these are not all. We have dispersal facilities in many parts of the world. They will all be firing tonight depending on their time zone.”

The group walked back outside. They could see the glowing Orbs shooting out into the night sky. All the clouds had cleared away and the stars twinkled high above.

Nessa looked around the warehouse. They were beyond Santa Barbara, she thought. At least a hundred miles from home.

“Um...Noel?” Nessa asked, “How do we get back to L.A.?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In the end, one of the staff from the warehouse volunteered to drive them back down the coast. There really was no other way home.

Noel was exhausted from the flight and keeping Cuddles aloft, so the sleigh was out of the equation.

Elding took off in a literal blaze of glory on his flaming horse. Besides they couldn't all fit on the animal anyway, large as it was.

Nessa's Infernal Court Jinxes were firmly back in place, so she was no help. She kicked herself for leaving her Faerie Crown at home. She could have opened a Portal into Faerie and from there, back to the Garde's garden. She'd never even thought of bringing it. Who knew a Christmas party could descend into total Holiday chaos climaxing in a fight with Krampus? Krampus for God's sake!

The Faeries got themselves home. Yawning and waving, they vanished in a burst of silver dust. Nessa didn't know how they navigated the Portals between the worlds. Faeries had their own kind of magic.

Cuddles, to everyone's amazement besides Noel, transformed from a giant furry spider into a gorgeous striped, long-haired cat. Pim stared, his mouth hanging open. This was one heck of a transformation even for a shifter like himself,

Mewing daintily, she pranced over to Nessa to rub against her legs, demanding to be petted.

Nessa fell asleep in the back of the driver's SUV before they'd even gotten on the 101 Freeway. With Pim curled at her side she didn't wake up until Noel shook her.

"We're back," she said.

It was well into the morning and clean-up had begun in the garden. No more bodies remained sprawled on the lawn so that was a good thing.

Nessa went in search of Fionna. Finding her at last in the mansion's kitchen, hands wrapped around a mug of coffee.

"Mission accomplished?" she asked.

Nessa gave a mock salute. "Yes, and don't ever invite me to a party again."

Fionna had the decency to look contrite, "Was it bad?"

Nessa blew out a long breath. "Yeah. Pretty bad but no one died." She gave a thumb's up.

"Thank you, Nessa. My family thanks you, too. Mom and Dad are busy throwing up in the bathroom. Closer to Christmas, we'll give you a proper thank you from all of us."

“The fairies helped,” Nessa added.

“Panda Express gift cards work for them?” Fionna asked.

Nessa nodded enthusiastically. Panda Express was the trio’s extra special favorite.

Nessa looked around the kitchen. “Where’s Poppy? Is she okay.”

“Here, have some coffee.” Fionna slipped a pod in the brewer and flipped the switch. “Poppy is fine. Reiko wrapped her in a blanket and took her home. She texted me. Poppy is awake and chatting away.”

She handed Nessa the demitasse of espresso, then slipped another cup under the spout and put in a fresh pod.

“For the cat,” she said making a face. “Wherever he is.”

Pim meowed next to Fionna making her jump.

“*Don’t do that.* Gawd. My nerves are completely shot plus I have a hangover.” She shook a finger in Pim’s general direction. “And no cats on the counter.”

Nessa took the cup and a grateful sip of the wonderfully bitter brew.

Pim’s was soon ready.

“Where do I put it?” Fiona asked.

Nessa indicated to set it in front of her. Pim jumped to her lap and began to drink with a sigh of contentment.

“Do you think Poppy might bond with Reiko, Fionna?”

Fionna scrunched up her face. “No. No, I don’t think so. Kitsune, as far as I know, don’t have Familiars like Witches. Poppy needs a proper bond with a practicing Witch or Warlock. She’s still missing her Warlock, Brian. It will take time. Though she seems to like your aunt a lot. Hey, are you hungry? There are almond and butter croissants over there. Also, sliced ham and cheese.”

Nessa eyed the spread on the side counter. Her stomach gurgled hungrily.

“Yes, please.”

“Go,” Fionna waved her on. “Eat. Want another coffee?”

Nessa said she did.

In short order she and Pim were breakfasting on croissants, ham, and cheese. It tasted heavenly. Magic takes a physical toll. Nessa would not be counting calories today or tomorrow.

“Oh, Ravi!” Nessa said, remembering the scene from last night. “Is he okay?”

Fionna rolled her eyes. “Mama snake got him home with his dad’s help. He did not snake out, thankfully. I can’t imagine how you transport a Naga. All that tail?” She rolled her eyes. “He was still out when they left. I’m sure he’s fine.”

“I bet his mom blames me for his condition.”

“Probably,” said Fionna. “She doesn’t like you.”

Nessa made a face. “Thanks, like I didn’t know. I’ll text him later but shoot. He was my ride home.”

“I’ll drive you. Finish your food, then we can take my car.”

Nessa and Pim had another helping of breakfast treats. The espresso eased the brain fog a little, nevertheless, Nessa would be happy to go home and crawl into bed. Barracuda Bail Bonds would have to get along without her today. She didn’t have the energy to catch a cold much less chase down bail jumpers, human or otherwise.

The ride to Hermosa Beach was slow. The 405 Freeway was jammed as usual. Both of them were content to stay quiet as Fionna played her favorite Taylor Swift playlist.

Eventually, they pulled up outside Aunt Emerald’s. Nessa and Pim let themselves out of the Audi.

“Are you coming in?” she asked.

“Nope. I need to go home and oversee the clean-up. And Nessa?”

Nessa met the other Witch’s eyes. “Yeah?”

“Thank you. I mean that sincerely. This connection with the Yule Spirits is important to my family. We won’t forget what we owe you.”

For once Fionna’s voice was completely serious.

“You’re welcome,” Nessa said. “Christmas is coming. We all have to do our part to make the world a tiny bit better because of it.”

“And that’s the truth,” agreed Fionna not sounding snarky at all.

Nessa shut the door and Fionna sped off.

She and Pim went through the side gate, slowly climbing the stairs to their apartment over the garage. Nessa’s legs felt as if she had weights in her shoes.

A small package wrapped in green and red paper lay propped beside the door. A white envelope was tucked into the ribbon.

“Meow?” said Pim looking up at Nessa.

“Meow for sure,” echoed Nessa.

Was it from Aunt Emerald? The house was thoroughly warded, nothing with evil intent could have left this.

It was too early for a Christmas present from her aunt.

Maybe Ravi?

Sitting on the top step, Pim’s front paws on her thighs, she opened the card first.

‘Thank you for your help. You are a valiant witch and a mighty warrior for joy. We will not forget you,’ was written in florid script. It was signed with an ornate ‘S.’

Nessa unwrapped the package. She swallowed a lump in her throat as she saw what it held. Her eyes filled with tears.

It was her KFC Christmas Plate from Tokyo. Hers. The one she'd carried since she was ten, only to lose it that one chaotic night two years ago. Turning it over she knew it was the same one because she'd written 'N' for Nessa and 'P' for Pim on the back in red marker. And there the letters were.

Pim rubbed his cheek lovingly against her face, mewing.

"Thank you," said Nessa, looking at the morning sky.

There really is Christmas magic.

FROM THE AUTHOR

Hi, Eden Crowne here. I hope you *enjoyed Jingle Spells*. There are references to the series throughout the story and I thought I would let you know which books they come from.

Jingle Spells Chapter One:

Fionna and Ravi are introduced in *Book One, The Fast and the Furriest*. Fionna becomes Nessa's roommate at the end of the book.

We also first learn about Nessa's curse passed down through her mother in *Book One*.

The Fairies, Red, Blue, and Green: They fly into Nessa life in *Book Two: Shifty Business* when she enters a Portal to Faerie in pursuit of a bail-jumping Warlock. The Warlock is running from a murderous Elf who wants his Portal Key back. No matter who he has to kill to get it. The fairies' signature 'taco, taco,' phrasing comes in *Book Three: Royal Pain* where they begin to make regular appearances.

Poppy: Poppy the African Gray Parent debuted in *Book Five: High Jinx*.

Jingle Spells Chapter Four:

The Seelie Court. Nessa meets a lady of the Seelie Court of Faerie. In *Book Three: Royal Pain*, Nessa is forced to pledge allegiance to Alim, Queen of the Air Court. Nessa is crowned a Princess of the Court. Whether she likes it or not. She is presented with a crown that works as a Portal Key in and out of Faerie.

Nessa has not been to the Seelie Court, though she is forced to make an official visit to the Elemental Queen of Water's kingdom in *Book Six: Styx and Stones*.

Ravi and Family: Nessa learns of Ravi's Naga heritage in *Book Three: Royal Pain*. She doesn't meet his mother until *Book Five: High Jinx*. Let's say Ravi's mom is not thrilled with their friendship. The dinner party Nessa refers to is from *Book Six: Styx and Stones*.

Reiko Sömmerhauler: The young alchemist in *Book Five: High Jinx*, is one of the main problems for Nessa throughout the story. She and her partners have invented an energy drink with unexpected side effects especially on zombies. The drink wreaks havoc among the supernaturals of L.A.'s South Bay.