

The background of the cover is a photograph of a bar tray. On the tray, there is a glass of beer with a tulip logo, a glass of purple drink with a glowing green and purple magical aura, and a vase of tulips. The text is overlaid on this image.

*Welcome
to
Jessie's*



A vampire, a ghost, and a fairy
walk into a bar...

*Book 1 of
The Witch's Bar
Chronicles*

Eli Rainwater

Chapter 1

“No one will ever love me again. I shall die alone with naught to mourn my passing.”

Jessie MacCaverty stopped wiping down the bar top to raise an eyebrow at the chestnut curls belonging to the adorable and devastatingly handsome yet extremely annoying, melodramatic vampire who flounced through the door in a swirl of early autumn air and leaves before dramatically collapsing on a stool in front of her. Her bartender and apprentice Caroline rolled her blue eyes before going back to pouring beers for the amused regulars at the other end of the bar.

“Get your head off the bar. I just wiped that spot,” Jessie tucked a long, silver-gray curl behind her ear, completely unsympathetic to her friend's plight, whatever it was *this* time.

Nicodemus shot up on the stool, outrage and wounded betrayal reflected in his honey gold almond shaped eyes. The younger of two vampiric siblings, he was as beautiful in death as he had been in life as a long dead king's military advisor and member of a noble family.

“You! You who are supposed to be the one I hold most dear, the most treasured of my bosom companions, have you no mercy on my poor soul? My wounded heart?”

“Not when you start talking like the bastard child of a Hallmark card and Harlequin romance, I don't.” Jessie was extremely unimpressed-- and unsympathetic.

“So be it,” he huffed, slumping back down to prop his elbows on the oak bar top that had been lovingly polished over the decades until it gleamed forever. “Take away my poet's soul. See if I care.”

Jessie beamed. "See, isn't that better? Now, do you want a drink while you calmly and sensibly tell me what's going on without all the histrionics?"

He scowled before relenting. "Fine. But none of those weird, fruity, sweet things the kids are drinking everywhere! Those colors should never have been put into anything consumable," he shuddered in disgust.

"Caroline, make him a Manhattan, will you?" Jessie called over her shoulder.

"Sure thing, boss," Caroline replied cheerfully, tossing her long, blonde, curly ponytail over her shoulder as she deftly flipped a martini glass over and grabbed the bottle of rye.

"You really lucked out with her," Nicky commented as Jessie poured a glass of sweet tea and came around the bar to grab the stool next to him. She had to agree.

Caroline was a brilliant and highly motivated young woman whose witching powers would probably rival Jessie's own. When she decided to seek Jessie out for training, she showed up at Jessie's bar every day for two weeks until Jessie relented.

Jessie is a witch. Not just any witch, mind you; she's the strongest, oldest, and best known in the state of Georgia and one of the most talented in the world. It had been years since she took on an apprentice. She didn't have anything against it-- she just liked the semi-retirement of being able to run her little bar and stand in for matters involving the supernatural community when they arose while helping her neighbors when they needed help without any complications.

Caroline, and then Jared after her, had not been in her ten year plan, and now she wouldn't give them up for anything.

Nicky studied Jessie as she settled down next to him. She was tiny. Long gray curls framed a slightly oval shaped face, high cheekbones, and huge, piercing blue eyes. She lived for

broken in jeans and obscure band or bar t-shirts that were so soft and well worn, they were one stitch away from falling apart. Like all witches, she stopped aging in her mid forties and was eternally in that stage of beauty when the laugh lines enhanced the late summer glow of youth.

“Now. What happened this time?” she asked, settling in for the long haul.

He heaved a melancholy sigh that sounded like it came from his toes. She resisted the urge to follow Caroline's eye-rolling example.

“I thought I met the one. He was so perfect. The gargoyle of my dreams!” Jessie choked on her tea.

“I'm sorry, the *what* of your dreams?”

He looked affronted. “Gargoyle! I told you about him last week!”

Jessie barely managed to hide a guilty look. To be fair, when he started on the love interest *du jour*, it could get a little... repetitive. It wasn't her fault if it was easier to tune him out and concentrate on inventory. Bits and pieces of his hours-long recitations of adoration started to come back to her.

“Oh, right! *That* gargoyle!”

Jared, Jessie's other apprentice and barback, a tall, young man with impeccable style and skin the color of dark chocolate and who had lined up a promising career in role playing game production, stopped with the ice bucket in midair to stare at Nicky.

“Dude! How does that even *work*?” He demanded, fascinated. Jessie heaved an internal sigh of relief because she really wondered the same thing and couldn't figure out how to ask without exposing herself as a confidante fraud.

“Well, if you *must* know,” Nicky drew himself up haughtily, “Gargoyles are only stone by day when they revert to their... less attractive but more widely known visages.”

“So, what, at night they're hot?” Sometimes talking to Jared was like talking to the blunt side of a hammer and about as subtle.

“If you must put it that way, yes, they can be. Are. Usually are.” Nicky would have blushed if blood pumped through his veins. Jessie realized that he hadn't fed recently. He must really be enamored with this guy.

“Did he ghost you?” Caroline asked with a sympathetic glance. “No offense, Charlie!”

“None taken.” Charlie was the bar's resident ghost. When Mary Jo Sutton, who was still the town's most beautiful and seductive succubus at the age of fifty, had propositioned him in the bathroom, he had neglected to mention that he had a heart condition. He swore the resulting heart attack was worth it. She still felt guilty about the whole thing.

“Ghost me? Ghost *me*??” Nicky was stunned, floored, flabbergasted that anyone could even consider such a thing. Jessie gave in to the urge to roll her eyes. Trying to hold back was exhausting.

“Focus!” she slapped her hand on the bar harder than she planned and instantly regretted it. “Where were you supposed to meet?”

“Well, here, tonight actually. I wanted him to meet you.”
Jessie blinked at him.

“So you're telling me that you just waltzed in here and immediately went into hysterics without even bothering to see if he was here first? I mean, we're not exactly balls to the walls over here, but it's not like we're dead either! No offense, Charlie.”

“None taken,” Charlie replied with a burp. One of Jessie's neatest (in his opinion) little pieces of spellwork involved creating a mug that acted as a portal that gave whatever it contained the ability to exist on the spiritual plane. At the

moment, that happened to be beer. No one was entirely sure if the belching was necessary, but not even Jared was willing to ruin Charlie's contentment by asking and possibly ruining the experience.

Nicky looked faintly abashed. "I don't see him though! That's understandable, right? I mean, I even came late on purpose!"

Jessie dropped her head in her hand and shook it with the long suffering patience of one who realized a long time ago that their friend genuinely did not have a clue how personal relationships should go.

Caroline stared at him, flipping her ponytail over her shoulder again with a scornful little toss of her head. "So you sent someone none of us know in here, and then you came late on purpose because, let me guess, you didn't want to look like a lost puppy checking out the door every five seconds, and it never occurred to you that maybe he got tired of waiting and left?" For such a perky blonde, Caroline could turn scathing at the drop of a hat.

Nicky squirmed on his stool.

"Well... it *seemed* like a good idea at the time. But he didn't stick around, so it doesn't matter! And besides, I was only about fifteen minutes late!"

Jared shook his head as he walked toward the back to put away the ice bucket.

"Man, even I know better than that, and I can't keep a girl around to save my life. No offense, Charlie."

"None taken," Charlie replied with equanimity. He had never realized how many turns of phrase involved life or death until he himself switched from one side to the other.

"Hey, Jared, check the bathroom for trash and toilet paper on your way back, please," Jessie called before turning back to the matter at hand.

“Admittedly, I don't really remember seeing a stranger hanging around tonight. What does he look like? And what's his name? Also, have you tried calling him or do you have a picture, she asks, knowing that of course you didn't, you just immediately broke down into hysterics and started talking like you came off the cover of the best selling romance novel of the decade?”

Now Nicky rolled his eyes. Jessie felt herself get twitchy as she resisted the urge to pop him on the arm.

“I do not talk like that,” he protested.

“Well, no, not when you remember what year it is,” Jessie replied. Nicky pulled out his phone.

“His name is Warsaw, and unfortunately, I can't take a picture. Gargoyles turn into stone in front of a camera,” he showed her a picture of him kissing a stone... lion? dog? on the cheek while gazing coquettishly at what was obviously a phone camera perched at the end of a selfie stick.

“You carry a selfie stick? Of course you do. Why do I even ask?” She snorted in amusement.

Caroline snickered, grabbing the phone, “You're such an adorable couple! Do you think your kids would have your eyes or his density?”

“Ha ha!” Nicky glared as he snatched the phone out of her grasp. “You're so funny.” He tried-- and failed-- to regain some control of the conversation. By this point, Caroline was giggling uncontrollably, and Charlie laughed himself through his stool.

“Okay, okay, let's calm down,” Jessie grinned. “Try to call him. See what happens.”

“Fine, if it will get you all to stop cackling like a pack of hyenas,” Nicky huffed as he hit a button and held the phone to his ear.

“Wait, did you hear that?” Caroline switched from hilarity to alert in seconds. Jessie was way ahead of her.

She met Nicky's eyes with a growing sense of dread. Out of nowhere, a phone had begun to ring, a muffled sound that could only come from behind a closed door.

At the same time, they heard Jared's scream and the thud as he fell over backwards, scrambling away from the bathroom. Inside was a lifeless body that once belonged to a shy, love struck creature who had, for one brief, shining moment, thought he could have everything his heart, which would never be stone, had ever longed for and found in the deep, deep love of a whimsical, sometimes overly dramatic, slightly narcissistic vampire.

Chapter 2

It took the sheriff's department less than ten minutes to get there, but it felt like ten hours.

"Thank you, John. I'll have Cassie go over the security footage to see if she can get anything useful out of it," Jessie murmured to Sheriff John Rossford as he followed the shroud covered gurney out the door and to the waiting ambulance.

Nicky was in shock. For the first time in the centuries since his and Jessie's improbable friendship had formed, he was silent. He sat in the corner staring at the wall with empty eyes as if officers and techs weren't milling around marking, measuring, and painstakingly plucking unidentifiable things from the floor into small plastic bags sealed with caution tape.

Caroline came around the bar to Jessie, her blue eyes full of concern.

"What should we do? I'm worried about him," she whispered to Jessie. Jessie swallowed the urge to point out that whispering was pointless in front of a vampire since their senses were dialed up to fifteen.

"Keep an eye on him, will you? There are some blood bags in the cooler. Maybe heat up an AB negative and see if he'll drink it. I'm going to make a phone call."

Caroline nodded and hurried away. Jessie sighed as she pulled out her phone and scrolled through the contacts.

"I just hope he picks up this time," she muttered under her breath as the line started to ring on the other end.

"Hello?"

Her relief at hearing the faintly accented, urbane voice was palpable.

“Hey, Mikael, it’s Jessie. Do you have a minute?”

“Jessica! How delightful to hear from you! It’s been too long. How is my rascal of a brother?”

“It’s good to talk to you too. Nicky- I mean Nicodemus- is actually why I’m calling. Something happened, and I wanted to get your take on it”

Mikael chose to ignore the diminutive of his brother’s name (honestly, why would anyone want to shorten such a fine, upstanding name like Nicodemus? It was baffling!) and instead replied,

“Of course! Anything for our favorite witch. What’s going on?”

Jessie sighed.

“His lover turned up dead in my bathroom. He hasn’t spoken a word to anyone in over an hour.” She raised a questioning eyebrow at Caroline, who stood by Nicky, helplessly holding a steaming mug filled with red liquid. Caroline frowned and shook her head.

“He’s even refusing to drink. I’ve never seen him like this.”

The silence on the other end grew heavier before Mikael answered.

“I see. Yes, that is unlike him.”

It’s not that Nicky’s lovers had a tendency to turn up dead, although when you fall for a vampire, there are some inherent risks. While he genuinely cared about and mourned every ended relationship, regardless of whether or not the other party was still alive-- or whatever passed for alive, he could shift through the phases of a broken heart with enviable speed. The standing pool around the bar put him between forty-eight and seventy-three hours of recovery time. But with those phases came a good amount of crying, moping, declarations that he simply could not go on; there was almost a script.

“Do you need me to come there?”

Jessie felt some tension go out of her shoulders at the idea that maybe she wouldn't have to circumnavigate this strange, new Nicky alone.

“If you have time. I know you're pretty busy with the FCWH alliance talks.”

The Fae, Cryptid, Witch, and Human Alliance (or “fickwah”, as Jessie and Nicky liked to call it behind Mikael's back) was instrumental in creating the Cohabitation Act designed to ensure equal rights for all groups and outlaw hunting and persecution. As one of the oldest vampires in the world, Mikael took his responsibilities as ambassador very seriously and sought to help the emissaries from each group broker peace among the various races, species, and alignments that populated the continent.

Jessie, who was glad she and her best friend Greta had long ago shunted the roles of representative and head of the Witch Council for the witching community off on their close friend Isabel, sometimes let the Alliance hold informal get-togethers at her bar whenever emissaries visited Atlanta. Usually only the fae and cryptid representatives showed up. The humans were trying, but it was hard to overcome centuries of distrust and persecution on all sides.

Before Mikael could reply, Jessie's phone beeped. She was surprised to see the sheriff's office on the caller ID.

“Hold on a sec. The sheriff is calling. I'll be right back,” she didn't wait for a reply before switching over.

“Hey, what's up?” She asked, trying not to sound too worried. Maybe he just forgot something, but when the sheriff is a werewolf with a damn good nose and eye for detail, that's not likely.

“Hey, Jessie. I got something to run by you,” he said, trying to sound nonchalant and failing miserably.

“Sure, what is it?”

“Well, I picked up a scent I couldn’t place around the body, and it kept niggling at the back of my mind, so I rushed the prints when we got back to the station.”

“Okay, and?” she asked.

“I just got them back.”

Jessie waited while the silence grew and strongly resisted the urge to see if she had the power to come through a phone line and shake the person on the other end.

“Sheriff, what--”

“I don’t know where Nicky found this kid, but this is big, Jessie. Your boy is the head secretary for the Western European cryptid representative, Madame Blanche.”

Jessie sat down with a thud. Luckily she managed not to miss the bar stool and wind up on the floor.

“What did you smell?” she asked.

“What?” he sounded puzzled.

“You said you smelled something that made you rush his fingerprints. What was it?”

His voice turned grim. “Acid. Our tech is pretty sure it’s either hydrochloric or nitric, but either way, they’re both used to dissolve rock. I gotta do some more digging, but I can’t imagine many other ways to kill a gargoyle.”

“Okay, keep me posted if you find anything else. I’ll take a look around and see if I can figure out what the killer might have used or when and where this happened.”

“Thanks. We don’t know a lot about gargoyles, so it’s hard to tell if he was killed somewhere else and dumped there or if he was attacked in your building. And Jessie-- be careful,” he warned. “Anything that can kill a stone is going to be extra lethal against flesh, no matter who or what you are.”

“Understood. Thanks, John.” Jessie switched back to Mikael who patiently waited on the other end.

“We have a problem. You need to come here now,” she said without preamble.

“What is it?”

“Nicodemus’ lover was Madame Blanche’s head secretary.”

She heard the sharp inhale of breath on the other end, her mind pausing to marvel that a creature that did not have to breathe could still make such a gesture.

Madame Blanche, an affectation to try to help people forget that she was the *de facto* ruler of the *Dames Blanches*, or the White Ladies native to France, had been the target of splinter cells among the cryptid community ever since she assumed her position among the Alliance and fought to bring cryptids into the open.

Not everyone was happy with the change. Humans were inherently distrustful of what they couldn’t understand, a large number of cryptid and fae feared humans and witches and wanted to stay invisible, and the witches never forgot the not so long ago witch hunts. Jessie and Greta themselves had been leery of coming out of the shadows and never really stopped looking over their shoulders for the pitchfork and torch laden mobs.

“I’ll be there within the hour,” Mikael’s tone was sharp. “Meanwhile, try to get Nicodemus to eat something. Call me if anything changes.”

“You got it,” Jessie replied before ending the call and absentmindedly shoving the phone in a pocket.

For a prominent cryptid leader’s secretary— who was romantically involved with the brother of one of the leaders of the alliance— to wind up dead in a witch’s bar that was frequented by local humans, the fae, and other cryptids was

sure to raise a few eyebrows and point even more fingers, regardless of Jessie's reputation. She needed to get to the bottom of it and fast.

Chapter 3

Jessie sighed, wincing as she tried to massage a knot out of her shoulders. It had been a long night. Mikael had finally convinced Nicky to go home with him, and she had started the arduous task of cleaning up behind the investigators and looking around on her own. The sheriff's CSI crew had been pretty thorough, including taking all of her trash and going over the entire bar with a fine tooth comb.

Her best efforts to scroll through social media turned up very little, probably due to the fact that gargoyles don't photograph well, so she had turned to news searches, which weren't much better.

Her own security cameras were no help. They showed Warsaw walking in the bar and going straight into the bathroom (the fact that gargoyles turn to stone on camera made for an interesting display) and then nothing until Jared passed down the hallway to get ice about twenty minutes later. So either someone had the power to turn invisible, or someone had tampered with her cameras. Unfortunately, either option was possible.

"Hello, hello!" a cheery voice called out along with tinkling from the bell over her front door.

"Oh, hey, Cassie," Jessie waved to the young human woman headed her way.

Best known for her sharp mind, Cassandra Rodriguez's skills with technology made her an invaluable asset. She had worked tirelessly to insulate and rewire cell phones, cameras, everything Jessie needed short of building an actual computer, hence the old fashioned cash register still in use behind the bar. Being able to work with technology without shorting out everything with an electromagnetic field was

one of humanity's greatest advantages, and Cassie chose to use her talents to help the local magical community.

“So... anything new?” Cassie asked in what was probably the least subtle fishing attempt ever as she played with her long, thick, black braid. As if everyone in a town this small didn't already know that something bad went down last night. Jessie shot her an exasperated glance.

“Whatever would make you think there's anything new?” Jessie deadpanned.

“Oh, come on! What happened? We saw the sheriff's department and ambulance lights. Did the succubus get someone else?”

Jessie took a deep breath to get her temper under control.

“That's enough, young lady!” Charlie popped up out of nowhere, a faint reddish tint coloring his normally translucent incorporeal form. “That was an accident, and you know it! Mary Jo didn't do anything I didn't ask for, and if you can't handle that then maybe this isn't the place you should be.”

Jessie winced. On the one hand, it was great hearing someone else say what she thought. On the other, business wasn't booming to the point that she could afford to pay some outside firm even more money to modify and maintain her equipment.

At the same time, Jessie felt a twinge of sympathy. It was no secret that Cassie had a thing for Jared. It also wasn't a secret that Jared and Mary Jo's daughter, Ruth Ann, had hooked up ever since Ruth Ann began to come into her own powers.

“Sorry, Charlie,” Cassie said, abashed. “You're right. That was uncalled for.”

“Hey, while you’re here can you take a look at something for me?” Jessie asked, in a very obvious attempt to change the subject.

“I guess,” Cassie’s voice was subdued.

“You’re right, something did happen last night. You’ll find out eventually, so you might as well hear about it now. Someone was killed in the bathroom. The weird part is we can see the victim go into the bathroom but then there’s nothing until Jared walks by about twenty minutes later. I can’t tell if someone messed with the camera or not. Can you take a look?”

Cassie couldn’t pass up the opportunity. Her insane curiosity was legendary.

“I suppose, since I’m already here,” she said, trying to sound offhand, as she followed Jessie to the office.

“What am I looking at-- is that a moving *stone*?” her jaw dropped. Jessie sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose against the headache she felt coming on.

“Yeah, apparently Nicky’s been dating a gargoyle, he sent the poor guy in here alone to meet everyone and then showed up late on purpose so he wouldn’t look— I don’t know, I guess he didn’t want to look like he was waiting for someone, but Warsaw-- that’s the gargoyle-- tried to go into the bathroom, and the moving stone is what happens when a gargoyle is caught on camera.”

Cassie stared.

“Okay, so skipping past whatever made Nicky decide *that* was a good idea, what happened next?”

“Well, nothing. Jared comes by a little later to grab ice, then I send him to make sure the bathroom’s stocked, and that’s when he found Warsaw who was already dead.”

“Poor thing,” Cassie murmured. “Let me see the rest of the footage between when he goes in the bathroom and when Jared finds him.”

“Knock yourself out,” Jessie replied, turning the mouse over to the other girl.

Charlie disappeared back to wherever he stayed these days, which was probably a good thing. He was still fond of Mary Jo, and what’s a little death between friends with occasional benefits? Still, she made a mental note to see if he could detect any residual... something from Warsaw’s death after Cassie left. It occurred to her that she had a golden opportunity to learn what ghosts could and could not do for posterity and had not taken advantage of it.

“Hey, Jessie! Take a look at this!”

“What’d you find?” Jessie turned back to the screen.

“Well, we can rule out someone messing with the camera,” Cassie told her. “The pseudo magnetic field you generate as a witch guarantees that anyone who tried to mess with my work would have shorted everything out since it’s all tuned to your magic signature. It could have been a shapeshifter, but even something as small as a bug would have triggered the motion sensor,” she pointed to the green bar at the bottom of the screen that remained serenely still, showing no movement.

“So that leaves invisibility. But there’s no such thing as true invisibility by disappearing. You become invisible by bending the light. So if I do this,” she tweaked a dial, and the screen suddenly shifted into shades of white, orange, and red, “we have ourselves an infrared heat signature! Someone slipped into the bathroom ahead of Warsaw-- probably so he wouldn’t suspect anything when he tried to shut the door-- and then came out again when Jared opened the door.”

“Can you see what they did next?” Jessie asked.

“They walked to the front door and slipped out in all the commotion.”

“Damn! So we can’t see who it is at all.”

“No, *you* can’t,” Cassie sounded smug.

Jessie raised an eyebrow and waited for Cassie to finish delighting in her own cleverness. Cassie caught the look on Jessie’s face and cleared her throat before continuing.

“Sorry! You know the QuikTrip next door? I did their security system. George Dunn, the owner, comes in here all the time. I bet he’d let us look at his cameras and see if anyone shows up.”

“Great, let’s go!” Jessie took off down the hall, Cassie on her heels.

Unfortunately for their investigation, they were stopped short at the front door when a vampire came through followed by a fairy, a very pale woman, and a giant cat, and who, from their appearances and the looks on their faces, were clearly members of the supernatural community, very important, and very unhappy.

“Well, fuck,” Jessie said, coming to a dead stop.

Jessie and Cassie were face to face with a strikingly handsome, gray eyed vampire whose long, raven black hair was pulled back in a top knot.

He hated the term man bun. Jessie and Nicky used it often.

Mikael was impeccably dressed in a slate gray bespoke suit over a royal blue button up shirt open at the neck that complimented his slim, athletic build. Everything he wore complimented his build. Vampires focused on the more materialistic aspects of life, but the brothers took it to a whole different level.

Next to him stood a tall, slender, extremely pale woman wearing a simple but elegant pale green sleeveless sheath dress, suitable for an afternoon at a place much nicer than

Jessie's small town bar, and cream colored kitten heeled pumps with only a fire opal on a delicate gold chain around her slender throat for jewelry. Her long, silver blonde hair hung loose except for some intricate braiding at the temples.

Behind her was a fae puck who hovered slightly off the ground and dripped dust everywhere. He wore a wrinkled black suit with an untucked shirt and looked like he had rolled out of bed and into the first thing he could find on the floor.

A very large black cat, probably the size of a wolfhound, brought up the rear. He looked her up and down, clearly passed some sort of judgment on her faded t-shirt and ancient but perfectly broken-in jeans, and offered her an extravagant yawn that practically reeked of amusement.

"Um, Jess, I'm just gonna go do that thing we talked about," Cassie nervously edged past the group and flat out ran out the door, leaving Jessie to face them alone.

"Jessica! So wonderful to see you!" Mikael came forward and offered her his hands.

She plastered a very fake smile on her face as she met his eyes and glared daggers. He winced.

"Please accept my apologies for not calling ahead. We were in the neighborhood and decided to drop in for a quick drink."

Which was Mikael for "these are very important people, please don't start an international incident."

"No, no! What a simply *delightful* surprise! I'm thrilled! I can't *wait* to share my joy at this moment later!"

Mikael winced harder. The puck looked like he had just walked into the most disgusting pig sty ever created. The woman looked almost as amused as the cat. The cat jumped on the bar, found the sunspot coming from the old cut glass windows that lined the walls, and promptly passed out.

Jessie swallowed a sigh and pulled away, walking to the bar to greet her guests.

“Welcome! It’s a delight to host such esteemed guests. Please enjoy my hospitality freely under no obligation or compulsion.”

The puck looked like he wanted to be anywhere but there.

“We’ll see,” he sniffed, his accent placing him somewhere around Wales.

“Jessica, this is Robin the Puck, Oberon’s ambassador to the United States,” Mikael gestured with a slight bow. Jessie inclined her head. As a witch, particularly one as old and powerful as she was, she was not under any obligation to bow or otherwise indicate that she owed fealty to any member of the magical, cryptid, or human communities, but it didn’t hurt to play nice.

“And this is Madame Blanche, emissary of the cryptid community to France,” Mikael’s tone took on a guarded note. Ah. So Madame Blanche must already know about Warsaw.

“*Merci pour votre hospitalité, mademoiselle,*” Madame Blanche inclined her head in return. “I welcome the opportunity to speak with you further.”

“And this,” Mikael now sounded annoyed. He did not like things that didn’t fit into neat, little packages. Sometimes Jessie wondered how he ever became such close friends with a pair of witches, arguably the messiest and least predictable of the magical tribes.

“Is Rupert, Madame Blanche’s companion.” He gestured to the cat who flopped over onto his back and dozed off while taking up half the bar for sunbathing.

Jessie stared, unable to keep the surprise out of her voice. “Forgive my curiosity, but is he a *Matagot*? I’ve never heard of them traveling outside of France or had the pleasure of meeting one.”

A Matagot could probably be best described as chaotic neutral. Spirits that preferred the shape of a black cat, although they weren't opposed to being a raven, fox, dog, or whatever else struck their fancy, they could bring evil or good depending on how they were treated in return.

"Why, yes!" Madame Blanche sounded pleased. "He is very helpful in my travels and is an excellent companion. I understand that you helped with the effort that saved them from near extinction."

Rupert twitched an ear in acknowledgement of the praise.

"Yes, I did along with our dear friend Greta," Jessie nodded to Mikael. "Okay then! Can I offer any of you some refreshment? Food and drink may be freely enjoyed in my establishment with no obligation, trickery, or attempt on your person or life be it physical or otherwise."

"I doubt that," Robin muttered, squinting at the nearest stool, running his finger along the seat, and squinting at it in disapproval.

Jessie chose to ignore the blatant rudeness. It was not normal, of that she was certain. The local faery population had its ups and downs, and some could be as snobbish as the next person, but an emissary representing the king of all Fairy was expected to behave with aplomb. That he chose not to verged on insupportable. To call him out without more information certainly would be. Madame Blanche did not share Jessie's reservations.

"Unlike others in my party, I accept your offer in all the grace with which it was given and am grateful for your undoubtedly delightful hospitality," she said before sliding onto a stool in front of Rupert. Rupert granted his approval by opening one eye and purring, a deep, rusty thing that made the bar vibrate. Robin scowled but didn't say anything. He dropped onto a different, presumably less offensive stool and glared.

“I don’t suppose you have any decent white wine,” he sniffed, clearly without any high expectations.

“Italian or French? There’s a lovely Vernaccia I picked up in Tuscany which is delightful for a fall afternoon, and this White Bordeaux from the Pessac-Léognan region is a bit rich but quite nice.”

Robin scowled. Mikael hid a smile, and Madame Blanche openly grinned.

“Robin, stop being such a little pest,” she said before turning back to Jessie. “I would love the Bordeaux, *s’il vous plaît*. My rather grumpy companion will have the Vernaccia.”

“My pleasure,” Jessie replied, pouring the wine and passing the glasses over the bar. Robin, of course, inspected his glass minutely, looking for something wrong. She wondered how much longer she would have to put up with this.

Madame Blanche rolled her glass between her fingertips before taking a sip.

“Quite lovely, my dear,” she approved. Robin scowled but didn’t say anything before draining his glass in one swallow. Jessie stared at him blandly without offering a refill. She had fulfilled her obligations as host and wasn’t going to cater to this little prick any longer than she had to. Picking up on her mood, Mikael (finally!) spoke up.

“Well, this has been lovely,” he beamed as if they had met for a stroll through the park instead of the murder scene of one delegate’s secretary while enduring the rotten attitude of the other.

“We still have many more fascinating people to meet. Robin, perhaps you would like to be introduced to the leader of the local fairy Court?”

“I highly doubt it,” Robin muttered under his breath but stomped out the door anyway. Jessie let out a huffy breath.

Madame Blanche shook her head. “Honestly, I don’t know what’s going on with him. He’s never been like this before. It’s as if he’s a completely different puck.”

Jessie frowned. “Is that normal? I must admit I’ve never heard of pucks or any of the fae going through personality changes like that. I kind of wanted to hit him over the head with a bottle.”

“You wouldn’t be the first on this trip,” said Rupert in a gravelly, rusty voice, making Jessie jump in surprise.

Madame Blanche chuckled and took another sip of wine before sobering.

“I apologize for our unexpected visit. You must know why it was necessary,” she said, looking up at Jessie with grief-stricken eyes.

“I do, and I’m so sorry,” Jessie replied. “All we know so far is that he came to meet Nicky- that’s Nicodemus, Mikael’s brother- and was... killed,” she winced as she said the word, “in the bathroom. The sheriff, who is an excellent werewolf,” here Rupert sniffed in disgust but didn’t offer any comments after Madame Blanche shot a glare in his direction, “found traces of acid on the body. They sent them to a lab, but they’re pretty sure it’s either hydrochloric or nitric-- something used to dissolve rock.”

She put Robin’s glass in the sink and wiped down the bar, a gesture that came more from habit than necessity.

“We can’t see anyone else in the hallway when he went into the bathroom on our cameras, but Cassie-- that’s the girl who was with me when you came in and handles all of my tech support-- used a special setting on the camera to pick up a heat signature. I was about to go next door to see if their cameras had anything from the parking lot and then send it

to the sheriff when you got here. That's all we know right now. I'm sorry."

Madame Blanche was silent for a moment.

"I see," she said as she reached for the fire opal pendant at her throat and rubbed it between her fingers as if the stone somehow gave her comfort. "And where is my dear Warsaw now?"

"At the coroner's office. I can take you to him if you like," Jessie offered.

"Yes, I would like that. Thank you for your hospitality. Rupert? Are you coming?"

It hadn't occurred to Jessie that the giant cat would just hang out and sleep on the bar.

"I suppose I must, to make sure nothing has been bungled," he yawned, showing off razor sharp teeth and a raspy pink tongue.

"You're too kind," Madame Blanche said dryly. "Shall we then?"

"After you," Jessie gestured toward the door, grabbing her phone and keys and hoping they would all fit in her little ancient Prelude.

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