



Unbinding (World of the Lupi Book 11)

By Eileen Wilks

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For now, though, Kai is glad to be home, and glad that Nathan completed his mission for his queen with surprising ease. But what seemed to be a quick conclusion turns out to be anything but. The two of them helped thwart the sidhe god of chaos—and he is not happy about that. He's got plans for them. Plans, too, for the sidhe who killed him some three millennia ago. Nor has he abandoned his plans for Earth, as they learn when chaos begins bursting out all over...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Lupi Novels of Eileen Wilks

“Eileen Wilks writes what I like to read.”—Linda Howard, *New York Times* bestselling author

“As intense as it is sophisticated, a wonderful novel of strange magic.”—Lynn Viehl, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Darkyn series

“Grabs you on the first page and never lets go...I really, really loved this book.”—Patricia Briggs, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

About the Author

Eileen Wilks is a *USA Today* bestselling author, a three-time RITA Award finalist, and the recipient of a Career Achievement Award from *Romantic Times*. One of the previous Novels of the Lupi, *Blood Challenge*, was a *New York Times* extended list bestseller.

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“I remember Eileen Wilks’s characters long after the last page is turned.”

—Kay Hooper, *New York Times* bestselling author

PROLOGUE

Aléri in Winter

KAI hadn’t had a cup of coffee in eighteen months.

That’s what she was thinking about when the Queen of Winter’s emissary came to see her—about coffee and her favorite mug, the purple-blue one with little speckles that she’d bought at a pottery shop in Oklahoma City. As she followed the emissary out into the streets of Aléri, she thought about that mug and the coffee table she’d painted turquoise and the necklace her grandfather had given her for Christmas four years ago. The Queen had arranged for her things to be put in storage while she was gone, and she appreciated that, but she missed that table. And her grandfather. And cell phones. She missed cell phones and the people she could call on one.

She missed home.

Aléri was one of the largest cities in Iath. Kai had been here several times since traveling to the sidhe realms, aka Faerie. Her mindhealing teacher lived here, in a stilted treehouse not far from the human quarter. Elves hated being crowded, and they loved trees and fields, lakes and gardens, so Aléri was more like a broad scattering of towns and villages than the kind of city Kai was used to. Incredibly lovely towns and villages, that is. Every structure, small or large, stone or wood, low to the ground or perched in the limbs of a huge tree, was meant to add to the city’s beauty.

But Aléri as she'd seen it before was nothing compared to the city when it hosted the court of the Winter Queen—which did not involve a Disneyesque snow castle or fantastical ice sculptures. Those images had lurked at the back of her mind until she arrived at court. Reality had been a real pop in the face.

Nathan suggested that she think of Winter's court as an ongoing creation, a composition in time and people, as well as space. It was certainly beautiful, an unpredictable tumble of art and artifice through what seemed to be untouched nature. But Winter's court was as hard to pin down as the elves who mostly populated it.

Parts were stable; parts were sheer illusion; and parts of it shifted with the wind, or on a whim, including its location. When Kai first arrived at court, her bedroom window had overlooked a slate-gray ocean with a slim crust of beach separating the sea from her cottage. She'd woken four days later to find the same window looking out on a forest of towering conifers. Last week, the scene had shifted yet again—this time to the top of a hill overlooking the white roofs of Aléri, the largest city on the continent of Bá, in the realm of Iath.

Iath, home to the Queens of Summer and Winter. And way too many elves.

The structures of court mostly occupied a low, craggy butte on the western edge of Aléri. Kai's guide led her even further west until they met with a beaten-earth path that wound through waist-high grass set to whispers by a steady breeze. The sound reminded her of the ocean's endless murmurs. But this was a pale ocean, sere and shallow, edged in gold where the slanted breath of sunset stroked color along the blades of grass. Kai walked smooth and easy, with no trace of a limp.

That astounded her. The first time Dell had healed her surely ought to be the real marvel, but it was the more recent healing that boggled her brain. But that first time—over a year ago now—she hadn't been paying attention, being too close to the darkest of edges to be aware of more than the easing of pain. Plus, she'd hadn't known how to pay attention that time; it had taken her months to learn how to observe her body from the inside. She still had a lot to learn, but fourteen days ago she'd been able to watch while the chameleon reknit her crushed knee . . . and today she walked painlessly on the hard ground of Iath's central plains, following a white rabbit.

That's what her guide looked like, anyway. The colors of its thoughts proclaimed it something much different. Definitely sidhe, and probably an elf. A few of the Wild Sidhe could wear other seemings, but most couldn't. It was the elves who'd mastered illusion.

She was so bloody damn sick of elves.

Elves were not human. This was both true and obvious, but it was a truth Kai sometimes tripped over. Human and elf were, she thought, like water and vodka—two clear liquids that shared many qualities, but heaven help you if you threw the wrong one on a fire. The very existence of a court and the courtiers who peopled it underlined some of the similarities. Sidhe from multiple races and realms came here to show off, to exert their power or connect with the powerful, which made it not much different from Washington, D.C., the court of Henry VIII, or Caesar's Rome. Some came as guests. Some held positions in the court.

Kai was a guest. Her partner and lover was not. Nathan was no elf, however. He was Wild Sidhe. If the other sidhe races were like planets orbiting the elves, the Wild Sidhe were comets—affected by the gravitational pull of the most powerful race in their system, but living mostly apart and on their own terms. Nathan's position was as unique as he was. He was the Queen's Hound.

That was a position of power. Nathan had his own, innate power, too, and elves respected power. Kai, on the other hand, was pretty much nobody. Sure, there was a trace of sidhe blood in her ancestry, but not enough for her to register as sidhe. Not that she wanted to, but being human in Faerie could be a pain in the ass.

The cute little bunny had stopped a few yards ahead. One ear twitched. It looked back at her.

At least it didn't pull out a pocket watch and exclaim about being late. Maybe the Queen of Winter had never read *Alice in Wonderland*? Or maybe this particular minion didn't know how to play to the joke. From what Kai could tell, most elves didn't have much of a sense of humor. A sense of amusement, maybe, but that wasn't the same thing.

"I suppose not," a silvery voice said from behind her in flawless American English.

Kai jumped and spun. Ten paces back along the path stood a luminous woman dressed in white. The Queen of Winter always wore either white or black.

Beyond the color, Kai never noticed what the Queen's clothing looked like. Who would? Her presence overwhelmed even as her beauty pierced—a stark, inhuman beauty like the translucent glory of ice or a single wolf's call in the dead of winter. Her hair was black. Her skin was white. Truly white, not merely Caucasian, but a white that changed with the light, or maybe with her mood. Sometimes it made Kai think of camellia petals, inexpressibly pure and soft. Other times it was more like pearls, hard, and hinting at rainbows.

It took Kai a moment to gather herself after her first stunned reaction. It always did. Not that they'd met often. The first time they met, Winter had decided to send her on a three-part quest instead of killing her. They'd spoken each time Kai completed the first two parts of her quest, and again just as the last segment of her quest went so horribly wrong. The Queen hadn't held her to blame. There'd been too much wrong in that realm for any two people to fix, even when one of them was Nathan. So much wrong that, for the first time in over three thousand years, the two Queens had left their home realm at the same time.

Kai had seen what Winter and Summer could do, acting together. What they would do if lords of the sidhe broke Queens' Law. She shuddered at the memory and knelt on one knee, lowering her head.

"You may rise," the Queen told her.

Kai did, and found an extraordinary pair of eyes studying her. Winter's eyes were the color of water—no color and every color. At the moment they looked ash gray. Her skin, caressed by sunset, reminded Kai of an orange-kissed moon, and today her midnight hair fell to her hips, straight as rain. Small silver bells had been braided into it. They chimed sweetly when she tilted her head. "I thought the bunny shape might amuse you, but perhaps you're too irked with us to find amusement in such a conceit."

Why hadn't Kai heard those bells until this moment? Maybe the Queen had just now arrived. Maybe she'd been following Kai all along, but cloaked from any sense Kai possessed. Either was possible. "Perhaps I am," she agreed.

"You have been offered no courtesy here."

No, she'd been courtesied half to death. Sometimes barbs lay beneath the exquisite politeness of the courtiers. Sometimes curiosity. Such an oddity Winter had chosen to invite to her court! And why? No doubt it was meant as a courtesy to her Hound, but Winter seldom acted from only one cause. "I'm sure the fault lies with me. This doesn't lessen my discomfort."

"Or your annoyance." The Queen's voice was light, her lips curved in a smile. "My court is difficult for a human. There are other humans here, however. Has not Malek made you welcome, as I asked?"

“He’s been very helpful.”

Winter tipped her head. “You dislike Malek.”

She disliked most slimy little weasels, but it wouldn’t do to say that. Kai didn’t know if the Queen liked Malek, but she found him useful, mostly as a messenger. Like Kai, he was a one-off, with a Gift so rare it was thought to be unique among humans: he could cross between realms without a gate. Naturally, the sidhe believed this meant he had a trace of sidhe blood in his ancestry. The one thing she did like about the man was his quiet but firm insistence that he was human, period. “Malek is embarrassed by me. He’s trying to help me overcome my deplorably human manners so I won’t stick out so much at court. He hasn’t had much success.”

“Ah, I understand. Most humans wish to blend in when they are among us. You do not.”

Anger that Kai had been suppressing for too long burst to the surface. “Blend in? Humans can’t blend in with elves. No matter what we do, you will all remain more beautiful, more graceful, more steeped in power and art than we can ever hope to be. *Blending in* is a cheat. It blinds us to what is genuinely ours.”

“True, though you may want to consider the utility of camouflage.” She paused, her eyebrows lifting delicately. “I do have the right word? I refer to a nonmagical illusion that allows one to take on the seeming of one’s surroundings.”

Kai suspected she’d been gaping. “That’s the right word. I was surprised that you agreed with me.”

“Yes, that was obvious.” Winter turned away. “The young always believe they’ve stumbled upon concepts their elders have never dreamed of. Walk with me.”

Kai hurried to catch up. As she reached the Queen, the path obligingly widened to allow them to walk side by side. It was disconcerting.

For several minutes they simply walked. Kai wondered why she was here, what the Queen wanted . . . because she wanted something. Kai couldn’t see Winter’s colors, but she felt sure the Queen had a purpose.

A small smile touched Winter’s lips. “You think I am without whim?”

“I think even your whims have purpose.”

“It bothers you when I read your thoughts.”

“It’s a bit one-sided, isn’t it?” Not that Kai could read thoughts, but she saw them. With almost everyone else, she saw the colors and patterns of their thoughts. Not with Winter.

“It bothers you,” she repeated, “but it doesn’t frighten you. I don’t frighten you.”

Kai, too, could repeat herself. “Because even your whims have purpose. You’re unlikely to kill me or seriously harm me. You love Nathan and wouldn’t lightly bring him the pain of—of such sundered loyalties. You might turn my life upside down again, but not for a small reason. Not out of pettiness. And while I can’t hide my thoughts from you, you don’t require or expect me to be anything other than what I am.” It was oddly relaxing, in fact, to walk and talk with this queen.

“Has Nathan not told you that truth is part of my domain?”

Kai frowned. It was hard to conceive of truth as a domain, yet if it were, it would belong to Winter, wouldn't it? Truth was hard, uncompromising, even ruthless at times. It's what was left when everything else was stripped away. And it explained why Kai found it necessary—even easy—to speak candidly with a woman who'd ruled for longer than any human civilization had existed. A woman who, with her sister, could rearrange continents. "How do your courtiers manage?" she blurted. The words "candid" and "elf" normally didn't belong in the same sentence, and the courtiers she'd met had mastered the art of the oblique.

The Queen's expression didn't change, but a spark of—amusement? Glee?—lit those changeable eyes. "I am not easy to serve."

Kai surprised herself with a quick grin.

They walked on without speaking. Kai held her tongue both because she was supposed to—one didn't speak until the Queen indicated a desire for speech—and from sheer intimidation. But they walked side by side, so she wasn't looking directly at that heart-stuttering beauty. The awe factor faded, and their silence grew easy. It reminded Kai of walks she'd taken with her grandfather, who'd taught her the value of sharing silence.

At one point Winter crouched and for several minutes watched a thin string of ants cross the path, her fascination as keen as any three-year-old's. At another, their footsteps startled a flock of birds into the air, and Kai paused to watch their dark shapes rise like smoke into the sky. That time, the Queen waited for her. Eventually Kai realized that their path did have a goal—a pool, dark and still and round. An island of water in the ocean of grass. At the pool, the path transformed from earth to small, pale stones to encircle it, forming a perfect frame for the dark water. Four benches sat at the cardinal points around the pool.

Winter sat on one bench—the one at due north—and motioned for Kai to sit, too. As if there had been no break in their conversation, the Queen went on, "Because truth is my domain, I am concerned with the effect my people have on yours. The human skill at mimicry renders you more vulnerable than other races. Malek is a good example. He has grown almost elfishly subtle over the years. He would be devastated to learn that his skill failed with you. I suppose he didn't allow for your Gift . . . ?" The barest hint of a question lifted her voice at the end.

Was that a trick question? The Queen had asked that Kai not reveal to anyone at court what her Gift was. Some of them had the Sight, of course, but seeing Kai's magic wouldn't tell them much. She had it on good authority that she looked like a binder, but the Queen would have killed a binder, not invited her to court, so even those able to see her magic wouldn't understand what they saw. "As far as I know, Malek has no idea what my Gift is."

The Queen chuckled. It was a surprisingly human sound, quite unlike the wind-chime beauty of elfin laughter. "Had you not realized why I asked you not to speak of your Gift? It's been amusing, watching everyone scramble around, trying to figure you out. I would be very disappointed in Malek if he hadn't located your teacher by now."

That was a jolt. She'd known the elves were curious about her, but that they—and Malek—might have been surreptitiously investigating her—

"Nathan doesn't care for court, either," Winter said, "though he enjoys the hunts. You dislike Malek."

Mental whiplash could be a problem in conversations with elves. Kai took a moment to sort out her thoughts. "You used him as an example. I suppose he's just that for me—an example of what I fear could happen to me, if I were around your people too long."

“No, you wouldn’t become like Malek. You’re more likely to suffer a mysterious accident caused by, but not traceable to, your human passion for what you consider honesty.”

That startled a laugh from Kai. “Wouldn’t someone who claims truth as her domain value honesty?”

“The human desire to pen truth up in words makes little sense to me. Truth is vast, minute, immutable, and ever-changing. It is certainly too vast to express itself through a single race—something my people at times forget.” She leaned forward and picked up one of the smooth, pale stones and studied it—then abruptly chucked it at Kai.

Without thinking, Kai caught it.

“What would you do with that stone?”

Kai looked down at it and ran her thumb over the smooth surface. “Probably put it back where it was. It looks good here.”

The Queen nodded. “There is beauty in the stone on its own, but it is especially pleasing set with others like it. Yet if I were to set it in some places—on a mosaic floor, perhaps, or among the pillows on a divan—it would look out of place, even ugly.”

“Are you telling me that I belong with my own kind?”

“Children are often prickly and self-conscious. It leads to false assumptions.”

“I’m prickly about being called a child, too.” In sidhe eyes, humans were all children—young, boisterous, unpredictable. And sidhe law treated them as such.

“If it were in your power to change your status, would you do so?”

Kai went still. “How?”

“Malek is adept at elfish ways, yet he is not elf. As you noted, such mimicry has a cost. This cost was one reason your realm was interdicted until recently—to allow humans to develop away from our overwhelming example, that you might express your own truths.”

“Um,” Kai said, that being as much as she could manage while her view of human history reshuffled itself.

“But not all humans live in your realm. There are many and many of you scattered throughout my realms as well. If we are a problem for your people, you can be a problem for mine, as well.” She turned her unearthly eyes on Kai. “I have a proposition for you, Kai Tallman Michalski.”

ONE

San Diego, Two Months Later

MURPHY’S Law cuts across barriers of class, creed, species, and realm, Kai reflected as she stepped out of the clinic. She reached up to adjust the glasses she’d brought with her to the appointment, which had light-adaptive lenses. It didn’t help.

“Over here!”

Kai squinted in the direction of the woman’s voice. The bright blue of Arjenie’s Prius was visible several yards away, but its shape was obscured by shifting blobs of pale color, as if the air were inhabited by zillions of translucent jellyfish bobbing merrily along. Kai sighed and looked down. The sidewalk was close, so there were fewer thought-remnants between it and her eyes. She could see the curb, so she aimed for it.

She made it to the end of what she was pretty sure was a white car, then had to look up again to get a bead on the Prius. And saw the man headed for her.

At least she thought it was a man. She only got glimpses of him. His thoughts were much more vivid than his physical form, clearer than the jelly-fish remnants. Almost solid, in fact—tawny gold laced with green and deep purple, with licks of wary pewter. It was that on-alert pewter that jacked up her heartbeat. The assassin who’d nearly killed her in Annabaka had thought in just that color. She dropped into a crouch and reached for Teacher.

Which, of course, wasn’t there. She was in San Diego, not Annabaka, and people here tended to notice over a foot of steel sheathed at your hip. Especially cops.

“Hey.” The man stopped. “You okay?”

She closed her eyes briefly in embarrassment. She knew that voice. Doug was one of Arjenie’s guards. One of Kai’s first patients here, too. She should have recognized his thought patterns. She’d worked on them.

“Doug. Right. I’m, uh, not seeing properly.”

“You said you might not. Need a hand?”

Want and need sometimes lived in different neighborhoods entirely. “Probably.” She sounded surly. Try again. “Yes, thank you.”

Doug took her arm and steered her to Arjenie’s car. She climbed in. He left, no doubt headed for the car he and the other guard had used. Kai grabbed the seatbelt and pulled it around her.

“No stopping for coffee, I’m guessing,” Arjenie said.

All Kai could see of the other woman was a dim shape topped by the red blur of her hair. Arjenie’s colors were lovely, though—lots of shifting yellow, blue, and lavender at the moment, with a few disappointed or worried gray tendrils. Lovely and intricate and . . . engrossing.

Kai made herself look away. “Better not. Dammit, I hate having my eyes dilated. I was really looking forward to the best mocha in the city, too.”

“We’ll do it another time. Maybe after you get back from that visit to your grandfather?”

“Sure. If I’m still in the same realm, that is.”

“There is that.”

Finding a day when she and Arjenie could both get away hadn’t been easy. Arjenie worked from home, which made flex-time possible, but a lot of her work was urgent. When someone in the FBI’s Magical Crimes Division needed something researched, they usually needed the information thirty minutes ago. And for a while after she arrived, Kai had been flooded with patients.

Nathan's job had been over the moment he killed the artifact linked to the god of chaos. Kai's had begun that same moment. The knife had been used to force obedience on a lot of people, and that kind of compulsion damaged minds. Not everyone affected by the knife had wanted Kai's help, but enough had. She hadn't been able to leave to see her grandfather.

But she would, she reminded herself as Arjenie backed out of her parking spot. The most immediate healing was done. Several of her patients needed another session or two, and all of them should have follow-ups, but no one needed her right now. In three days, she and Nathan would head for Arizona to see the old man who was her only living relative.

Arjenie gave her a quick glance. "That dial-it-down technique of yours isn't working, I take it."

"Obviously I'm not as far along in my training as I thought." It had been over two years since the last time she'd had her eyes dilated at an exam. A lot had happened since then. She'd been sure this time would be different—sure, but not cocksure, which was why she'd asked for a ride.

"Or maybe it isn't you. Maybe the drops affect your Gift directly."

"I'm told that isn't likely."

"Oh, yes. By that woman who holds her nose oh-so-politely while she's teaching you."

Kai grinned. The phrase she'd used was, "the most polite disdain possible," when she told Arjenie about her teacher. "By Eharin, yes."

Arjenie snorted. "If she—shoot, I need to get that." She tapped the steering wheel to answer her phone. It was Doug, wanting an update on where they were going.

Much as Eharin made Kai grit her teeth, she was glad to have a teacher. Finding someone to help her learn how to manage her Gift hadn't been easy. Fact was, there simply weren't many mindhealers, and Kai had two knocks against her: she was human and she wasn't willing to apprentice. The top mindhealers hadn't been interested. Oh, a couple of them might have done it as a favor to Nathan, but she did not want him going into favor-debt on her behalf.

Price had been a factor, too, with the least important part of the cost being counted in currency. Information was the true coin of the Queens' realms. Nathan had handled that negotiation, of course. Under sidhe law, Kai was a minor, so the contract had to be between her teacher and Nathan. Kai didn't mind. No one unused to the Machiavellian nature of elves should try to cut a deal with one of them. Kai's form of the mindhealing Gift had complicated matters. As far as they'd been able to determine, she was the only mindhealer ever who actually saw thoughts. In sidhe terms, that made her a one-off, someone of mixed blood with a rare or unique Gift that was unlikely to breed true.

Finding out she had a bit of elf blood in her veins had been almost as much of a shock as learning she wasn't some kind of weird telepath the way she'd thought all her life. Kai didn't read thoughts. She saw them. She could change them. For twenty-seven years she'd tried her damnedest not to dabble around in other people's heads, and mostly she'd succeeded.

Now, though, she was supposed to dabble. Carefully. Very carefully.

Arjenie tapped the wheel again to disconnect. "I should've let Doug know our plans changed. I keep forgetting I have guards now. But what I was about to say is, how would Eharin know if those drops affect

your Gift? Her mindhealing doesn't work like yours and she's never been to Earth, much less experienced tropicamide."

"Tropical who?"

"Tropicamide. It's the most commonly used mydriatic for eye exams." Arjenie stopped at the parking lot's exit. Traffic was heavy, and she'd need a big enough gap for her guards to follow in their white Toyota. At least Kai assumed that's what the blurry white shape behind them was. She couldn't see much of the car for the colors . . . fascinating colors.

Dammit. Having her eyes dilated had never been this bad before. Kai made herself focus on what Arjenie was saying.

". . . though it's possible they used phenylephrine today. You should probably find out, because if you get the surgery you'll be using drops for several days, and you don't want to use whatever they gave you today. Probably the surgeon will prescribe something that lasts longer than tropicamide, but still. You'll want to be sure. Assuming you got a green light for the surgery?"

Kai had to grin. Arjenie insisted she wasn't a genius, but she came close enough for most purposes. "You knew all that right off the top of your head."

"I looked into Lasik surgery for myself at one point." At last a large enough gap in the traffic flow appeared and Arjenie pulled out. "That was mostly wishful thinking. My peculiar healing would just put my eyes back the way they are now. It might take a couple years, but that's likely what would happen."

"Because changing the setting for a part of the body takes body magic, not healing."

"Right, and I've got zero body magic. So did the surgeon consider you a good candidate for the surgery?"

"It's a go if I decide to do it." The pretty blue of Arjenie's thoughts had sharpened to an eye-popping turquoise that danced with the yellow and green in such an intricate way, it was hard not to watch. Hard not to . . . hell. If she wasn't careful, she was going to fall into fugue. She hadn't had that problem in a long time.

"If?" Arjenie said. "I thought you'd made up your mind."

"I thought I had, too." Kai sighed and closed her eyes and leaned her head against the headrest.

These days she could dial her Gift up or down, depending on the needs of the moment. Mostly she left it dialed down enough that thought-remnants weren't visible and current thoughts were the merest watercolor overlay. That sure wasn't working now. Having her eyes dilated had always sharpened her Gift to a distracting intensity, but it had never been this bad before.

Eharin was wrong, dammit. The problem wasn't with Kai's perception of how her Gift worked. The problem was with the drops themselves. They'd screwed with her Gift.

There *was* another option . . .

"What happened? You were pretty keen on getting your eyes fixed."

"It's the timing. Dr. Piresh won't be able to schedule me for another month."

"And you don't know if you'll be here that long."

Kai nodded. "I could go ahead and set it up, I suppose, and cancel if Nathan gets sent somewhere." Or she could just stay here while he did his Queen's bidding. The idea of waving goodbye as he went off to who-knows-where to do God-knew-what did not sit well, which was just silly. Nathan had managed to keep himself alive for a few hundred years before they met. He'd be fine without her.

She wasn't sure she'd be fine without him. Unhappy with herself, she sought a distraction. "Coffee. I want some. We should go in search of mochas like we'd planned."

"You think that's a good idea?" Arjenie clearly didn't.

"I know a way to shut my Gift off."

"Oh?" Her voice brightened with curiosity. "Is it hard to do?"

"Not really. I'll need Dell's help to turn it back on, so I won't be able to do that until we get back to Clanhome." Kai's familiar could have come into San Diego with her, but it was easier if she didn't. Cities were hard on Dell. "But that shouldn't matter."

"If it's easy, why didn't you already do it?"

"Well . . . being without my Gift is weird. And, uh, Eharin told me not to."

"If it's dangerous—"

"She didn't say that. She taught me how to turn it off, how to turn it back on, then told me not to do it until I'd had more advanced training that was not included in our deal. Then wouldn't explain why."

"She's an intellectual tease."

"Yeah." That was typical of Eharin's approach to teaching. She didn't object to Kai asking questions. She just ignored them. "Um. I should explain. This technique doesn't literally shut my Gift off. It sets up a loop so my Gift doesn't reach my awareness. If there is any danger, I'd guess that it lies in leaving the loop running too long."

"That makes sense. Some spells use loops to build up power. I've never heard of doing that with a Gift, but theoretically you might build up more power than you can handle and damage your channels."

"That's pretty much what I've been thinking." And it pleased her to have her guess seconded. "Eharin wouldn't confirm my theory, but she didn't say it was wrong. Though the sidhe talk about *kish*, not channels. *Kish* means matrix—an innate, unalterable ground that determines the form our magic takes—what kind of a Gift we have, what elements we've an affinity for, all kinds of things."

"Oh, I like that! *Kish* is not so much a pattern as the ground for a pattern?"

Arjenie had grasped the concept about ten times faster than Kai had. "That's right. It's the essence from which a pattern grows."

"That's a better model than channels. We tend to think of channels as mostly two-dimensional, like the patterns water makes as it gathers in rivulets and streams. Even if we see them as three-dimensional, like blood vessels, it's not all that helpful a model when magic is really more multidimensional and antidiimensional."

“You just zoomed way past me.”

“Sorry. What I mean is that the unquantifiable nature of spatial references inherent in true chaos combined with the inversion of—”

Kai laughed. That startled her eyes open. She squeezed them shut again. The colors were now so bright they hurt. It had never been this bad before, not even during a big thunderstorm. “You’re not helping, though you did provide me with a new fantasy. I’d love to see you go up against Eharin.”

“I wish I could talk to her, even if she is a pain in the butt.” Arjenie sounded wistful. “I could learn so much. But maybe looping your Gift isn’t a great idea, given the potential risk.”

“I’ve done it before, and left it looped for hours with no problem. We’ll have plenty of time for coffee.”

“If we’re right about the problem. It seems like Eharin would have at least nodded when you suggested that, even if she didn’t want to take the time to explain.”

Kai snorted. “What, and admit the pathetic little human is right about something? Aside from how much she’d dislike that, I don’t think she ignores my questions to save herself the bother of explaining. I think her plan is to honor our deal to the letter while leaving me so frustrated I’ll agree to renegotiate. Probably she wants something she didn’t get in our initial deal. Probably something from Nathan.” They all wanted something from Nathan, and were happy to use Kai to try and get it.

All except one, that is. The Queen of Winter already had Nathan’s service. Now she wanted Kai’s.

“Devious,” Arjenie commented. “But elves dote on devious, don’t they?”

“Oh, yeah. Give them a choice between straight and twisty and they’ll take twisty every time.”

“Are the other sidhe like that?”

“Some. The elves are sort of the United States of the sidhe realms. They aren’t the only ones with power, but they’ve got more of it than anyone else, and their culture pervades the realms. Not everyone adopts it, but no one is untouched by it.” Kai frowned at the darkness behind her closed lids . . . which wasn’t entirely dark anymore. “Arjenie, my eyes are closed.”

“Um, yes.”

“I’m seeing colors anyway.” Colors that brightened even as she spoke. Sharpened. And *pulled*.

“Did that ever happen before?”

“No. It’s not supposed to. I’m going to loop my Gift.”

“Are you sure—”

“I’m sure that being pulled into fugue is a bad idea.” The fugue state was almost identical to the one she entered to heal—the same kind of “almost” that separated flying from falling.

“Oh.” A beat of silence. “Do you need me to pull over?”

“Nope. I just have to focus.” While she still could.

Until Kai was catapulted into Faerie eighteen months ago, all her training had come from her grandfather. Joseph Tallman was a Navajo shaman, and his techniques were very different from those of the sidhe. Eharin considered Kai's method of centering slow and inelegant, but she'd admitted that it worked. So first Kai prayed silently, asking the Powers for their aid and blessing. When she felt centered, she touched her lower belly, her chest, and her lips, whispering a word with each touch, feathering power into the touch through the word. She did that three times.

Kai opened her eyes. And grinned at the crisp, clear world around her. "Better call Doug and tell him we changed our minds again."

TWO

FAGIOLI—which meant “beans” in Italian, according to Arjenie—was noisy, crowded, and charming, with a large patio to catch the overflow. The stone walls enclosing the patio were mostly hidden by an enthusiastic vine smothered in bright pink flowers. Kai and Arjenie sat on that patio in air soft with spring and heady with the mixed scents of flowers and brewing coffee.

Also chocolate. Kai inhaled deeply before sipping on the best knock-off mocha Frappuccino in the world, which made it the best in all the worlds. Coming home had been wonderful, but kind of weird, too. Not what she'd expected. She'd changed on her journey, of course, but she hadn't expected those changes to make everything here look so . . . different.

But her mocha coffee drink was everything it was supposed to be.

Across from her, her new friend was sipping her own mocha. Aside from her hair, Arjenie Fox looked like the geek she was. Her eyes were an unusual aquamarine color, but hidden as they were behind her glasses, they didn't draw attention. Her face was narrow, her skin pale with a scatter of freckles. She was short and thin and had a small limp when she walked, due to a long-ago injury.

But that hair! It wasn't just red. It was RED. That shout of color burst into curls the way birds burst into song or fireworks erupt in temporary stars. Today Arjenie had set a dam in place—a headband that held back that wild froth of curls.

Kai sipped again. "And you claim this is only the third-best coffee shop in the city?"

Arjenie grinned. "According to the coffee snobs I hang out with these days, anyway. You should hear a bunch of lupi arguing about coffee. Is the subtle balance of Ethiopian beans superior to the aromatic acidity of Kenyan, or is it a tad bland? Or maybe it's Costa Rican beans with the subtle balance. Whatever. They can't agree on who grows the best coffee, who roasts the best coffee, or who brews the best coffee, but they have reached consensus on the third-best place in San Diego to buy a cup, and this is it."

"But with the very best mochas."

"Amen. I guess they don't have mochas in the sidhe realms?"

"There is no coffee in the sidhe realms," Kai said gloomily.

Arjenie's eyebrows shot up. "None?"

"Not in any of the realms I was in. Mostly people hadn't ever heard of it."

“That’s so sad. How many realms did you visit, anyway? Unless that’s one of the things you can’t talk about—”

“Oh, that’s no secret. Four. Well, five if you count Edge. Some don’t consider it a true realm, since it’s so small—more of a between-place. Though I wonder if that’s the real reason it gets demoted. Edge is more about gnomes, not so much about elves.”

“Count Edge,” Arjenie said firmly, then paused to lick whipped cream off her upper lip. “Just in case it bothers a snooty elf or two.”

Kai grinned. “I like the way you think.”

Arjenie cocked her head. “Which was your favorite realm? Not Iath, I’m guessing.”

“Definitely not.” The Queens’ realm was all about elves.

“But you didn’t dislike them all.”

“No . . . I do have some good memories.” Absently Kai’s hand went to the silver cuff on her left wrist and the cabochon jewels set there. She thought of an old man and a most uncanny child and smiled. “I liked Deredon. It’s more rugged than most—more primitive, I guess, if you consider wilderness primitive. A lot of Wild Sidhe live there. A fair number of humans, too. It’s a chancy place, but all the realms are chancy.”

“Isn’t that where you got your amulet, the one Cullen’s so eager to study?”

Kai nodded. “He wanted me to leave it with him, but the amulet’s tuned to me. If I take it off, it starts losing that tuning right away. I’ve let him look at it while I’m wearing it a couple times. That gets pretty boring, just sitting there while he stares and scribbles notes in the air, but—”

Frenzied yapping broke into their conversation. Kai twisted around to see.

A few tables away, a small dog was trying desperately to attack Doug and his partner. The dog’s flustered owner tugged on the leash attached to his harness. She finally picked him up. “I am so sorry. He’s usually such a friendly thing.”

“Smells my dogs on me, I bet,” Doug said easily. “I’ve got three.”

“Terriers,” Arjenie whispered, “do not like the way lupi smell. Most dogs react to them, but terriers tend to consider their smell a challenge. My aunt has a Jack Russell named Havoc, which is the perfect name for him. When Havoc and Benedict first met—did I tell you about that already?”

“No, and I want to hear.”

“It was soon after Benedict and I became a couple. We drove back to Virginia to spend Christmas with my family. Now, this was the first time for him to meet them, and vice versa. Poor baby. He was so anxious, and things didn’t go at all the way he’d hoped.”

Arjenie’s “poor baby” was over six feet of pure warrior. “And you can tell Benedict is anxious . . . how?”

Arjenie grinned. “He looks even more grimly determined than usual. Anyway, we pulled up out front . . .”

She went on to tell a story involving Havoc, a skinwalker, at least two native Powers and several members of

her family. Kai wouldn't have believed it coming from someone else—not with her Gift shut down, anyway—but Arjenie was painfully honest. It was one of the things Kai liked best about her.

“You think it was really Coyote?” she said when Arjenie finished.

“Oh, yes. Benedict was sure of it.”

“And if he’s sure, you are.” And that, Kai thought, was the other thing the two of them had in common. They were both in love with someone they trusted all the way down—

“Hey, it’s not like he’s never wrong. But he was wearing his knowing face, not the stubborn one. I saw the stubborn face this morning when he insisted that I bring guards with me today. He might be right, he might not, but he was surely stubborn.”

Someone who could be unbelievably pigheaded—

“His knowing face, though—that’s how he looks when he talks about running four-footed. He *knows* what that’s like. Stubborn doesn’t come into the picture.”

—someone who wasn’t human. Nathan couldn’t turn furry the way Arjenie’s lover did. He had only one shape, and that was very much a man’s shape, but he’d been born a hellhound. “What do you do when he’s being stubborn?”

“Depends on if it’s stubborn-reasonable or stubborn-idiotic. The guards, now, I have to admit that’s reasonable. Someone could try to grab me to use against Benedict. I’m not much of a threat to the Enemy, but he is.”

Kai’s lupi hosts were at war. So were the humans around them, but mostly they didn’t know it. Their enemy was an Old One they usually referred to as the Great Bitch or the Great Enemy. Battling an Old One would have made for a short and lopsided war if *she* had been able to conduct her battles in person. But *she* had been locked out of the realms when the Great War ended over three thousand years ago, so she had to fight through proxies—like the one whose possession of a forbidden artifact had brought Kai and Nathan back to Earth a few weeks ago.

Kai wondered if Arjenie felt as matter-of-fact about the possibility of being kidnapped as she sounded. She couldn’t, could she? Without her Gift, Kai couldn’t tell. It was disconcerting. “And if he’s being stubborn and unreasonable?”

Arjenie’s eyebrows lifted. “You might as well tell me, you know.”

“Ah . . .”

“Nathan seems like a reasonable guy, but no one is reasonable about everything all the time.”

Reluctantly Kai smiled. “I’m being obvious, huh?”

“Oh, yes.”

“It’s this business about getting my eyes fixed. Nathan thinks surgery is barbaric. He . . . I told you why Dell can’t help me, didn’t I?”

“She doesn’t know how to change just one part of a body.”

“Pretty much, yeah. But there are people who could fix my eyes in a blink. No surgery, no pain, no problems. I’d go from 20/200 to 20/20.” Kai paused. Nathan expected her to keep this secret. But the offer had been made to her, not him, right? So it was up to her to decide how much of a secret it should be. “People like the Winter Queen.”

“I’m sure she could, but—wait. You mean she’d do that?”

“For a price. She wants me to take service with her.”

“Well, that bitch.”

Kai laughed. Arjenie never cursed, not even the occasional “damn,” which made it even funnier. “It’s not like she’s being evil to make the offer, but I don’t like the idea of putting myself in her hands. I’d have to vow to her, you see. And she to me,” Kai added, wanting to be fair. “And there are some strong benefits to that. I’d get the very best training, for one. I’d also become a legal adult, which—”

“Wait, you aren’t one now?”

“Not in sidhe eyes. I’m human. The trace of sidhe blood in my makeup may be the reason for my Gift—they certainly think so—but it’s not enough to make me sidhe, so I’m not one of the grownups. Not in the realms.” Kai paused. And blinked. The flowers on the vine behind Arjenie were moving. Fluttering. But there wasn’t any wind. “That is so weird.”

The flowers burst up into the air.

Not flowers. Butterflies. Hundreds of bright pink butterflies exploded silently from the leaves of the vine where, a moment ago, they’d been growing. They blossomed up into the air in a cloud of frothing pink.

People exclaimed. Four tables away, two chairs scraped. “Arjenie—wink out!” Doug called.

Kai didn’t remember standing, but she was on her feet when Arjenie vanished. One second the redhead was sitting in her chair, looking up at butterflies that shouldn’t exist. The next, that chair was empty.

A lone butterfly landed on Kai’s arm.

“Ouch!” Without thinking, she slapped it—then stared at her arm. Pink dust from the slaughtered butterfly smeared her skin. A bright bead of blood glistened amid the pink. The pretty little butterfly had *bit* her.

The pink cloud descended.

* * *

NATHAN moved to the free throw line, having been thoroughly fouled by a wiry fellow named Carl who could jump like a bullfrog.

Nathan hadn’t played basketball until three weeks ago, but he’d watched the game often and thought he was catching on pretty well. For a very long time he’d avoided playing any sport because of the difficulty in holding himself to a human level of competence, but he no longer had to hide what he was. Since they arrived at Nokolai Clanhome he’d played pickup with his hosts several times. He liked it. Werewolves were as fast as he was and almost as strong.

They were also highly competitive. Nathan grinned as the ball sailed smoothly through the hoop. So was he.

Cheers and jeers rang out from both teams and from those who'd gathered to watch. There were several women among the watchers. None of them were werewolves, of course, that being a sex-linked inheritance.

Lupi, not werewolves, he corrected himself, using his T-shirt to mop his face. They preferred to be called lupi, and any people should be allowed to name themselves. But the habits of years are hard to break, and he'd thought of them as werewolves for roughly four centuries now. Avoided them for that long, too, since they could sniff out what he was—or at least that he wasn't human—and passing for human had been important during his long stranding here. Plus his scent was inherently challenging to a lupus, which could cause trouble.

But now he was here openly, no longer pretending to a humanity he didn't possess, and the Nokolai leader—their Rho—had named him *ospi*. That meant clan-guest. These particular lupi seemed to be dealing well with the provocation of his scent.

Turned out he really liked playing with werewolves.

Over on the sidelines, his phone trilled. "It's Kai," he explained, and headed that way.

"Hey, what about our game?" someone on the other team called. Another one jeered, "She calls, you come running?"

Since that was self-evidently true, Nathan didn't bother to answer. If the man didn't understand that Kai was more important, words wouldn't convince him.

"Shut up, Harris," a big man said.

The big man was watching the game, not playing in it, mainly because no one wanted to be on the team that played against him. So Nathan had been told, and he believed it. Benedict Jones—whose Native American features didn't go with the surname—was in charge of security and training at Nokolai Clanhome, and he was more than simply good at his job.

The first time Nathan sparred with Benedict, he'd lost.

That had gotten his attention. This form wasn't as deadly as his original body, but he hadn't been defeated in unarmed combat in nearly three hundred years. Then it had been a pair of Chinese monks, and he'd promptly joined their order so he could learn from them. He hadn't had the opportunity to train with anyone who posed a challenge in a very long time, but hadn't thought it mattered. One of his Gifts was what might be called perfect muscle memory. Once he learned how to do something, his body *knew* that move.

He saw now that he'd been wrong. His body remembered everything he'd taught it, but training was about the mind as well as the body. His speed had suffered, too, from the lack of a real challenge.

When Nathan and Benedict fought their second match, they'd used knives. Nathan won that one. It would have been amazing if he hadn't. The long knife was his weapon, and he was very good with smaller knives, too. He knew of one person, a crotchety old elf named Samision, who could defeat him with a sword and might be his equal with a knife, but there was only one being who could definitely best him, knife-to-knife. The Huntsman could not be defeated by any weapon.

For their third bout, he and Benedict had returned to unarmed fighting. That match had lasted over two hours before they decided to call it a draw. Nathan was confident he could kill Benedict if he had to. That was his Gift, after all. He wasn't sure he could defeat the man short of killing him. It was really very intriguing.

As Nathan reached the place he'd left his phone, Benedict's phone rang. The back of Nathan's neck prickled with alarm. Benedict's Arjenie was with Kai. If they were both calling at the same time . . . he answered his phone. "What's wrong?"

"Now, don't freak out. I'm fine. Arjenie's fine, too—she's busy telling Benedict that right now. She wasn't even bitten."

Nathan's heartbeat didn't pick up. It settled as his senses sharpened. He spoke very evenly. "But you were."

"I've got a lot of little bitty owies, that's all. There's no real damage, but I did bleed, and you know how Dell is about my blood being anywhere but inside my body. She's determined to come to me, no matter how much reassurance I send. I think I managed to persuade her to wait for you by the gate, so could you pick her up on your way?"

"What bit you?"

Kai sighed. "Carnivorous butterflies."

THREE

"DOESN'T bloody make sense," the man in the passenger seat muttered . . . not for the first time.

"Not yet," Nathan said, slowing as he approached the gate. Lupi lived in clans; each clan claimed some amount of land which they called a clanhome. Nokolai Clanhome, where he and Kai were guests, lay forty minutes from San Diego. Its boundaries were marked by both a fence and an immaterial claiming bearing some resemblance to a sidhe lord's land-tie. Guards patrolled the fence, with one pair always near the gate. "It will."

Several of those playing basketball had been guards, so Benedict hadn't had to wait to collect a squad to take with him. He would have had to wait for the clan's sorcerer, however, if Nathan hadn't offered to. Nathan had several reasons to make that offer.

First, time wasn't a major factor. Kai wasn't really damaged, and the guards who'd been with Arjenie had killed all of the butterflies. At least they thought they had. It wouldn't have been easy. Small prey like that could be hard to catch, but apparently the butterflies had been so intent on biting people that they hadn't tried to get away.

Second, a sorcerer was apt to be useful. Nathan might know more than most in this realm about magic, but he lacked the Sight. That was an uncommon Gift among his people, and even more rare in humans.

Not that Cullen Seabourne was human. He went beyond rare to unique, being the only Gifted lupus on Earth, and therefore the only one in existence. Cullen was also a consultant for the FBI, though the Unit agent he usually worked with was currently on her honeymoon. Still, Cullen had worked with the local office several times, and that should help them gain access to the scene.

Third, and most important, Nathan had offered to wait for Cullen because of Dell. He needed to pick her up, which meant he needed to take his own vehicle. While the chameleon had excellent control for a relatively new sentient, it was best not to trap her in a small space with half a dozen lupi. She didn't like the way they smelled.

Yet she did like Cullen Seabourne.

It had taken Nathan months to work his way from toleration to real trust with Kai's familiar. Within thirty minutes of meeting Cullen, Dell had allowed the sorcerer to pet her. When Nathan asked Kai about it, she'd shrugged. "She thinks he's funny."

Nathan stopped a few yards short of the gate. The two guards wore matching stony expressions. They were clearly very conscious of the smoke-colored feline stretched out on the sandy ground twenty feet away, her tail twitching. In this, her true form, Dell was over eight feet long, nose to tail-tip. Her oversize pads hid claws that would do a grizzly proud. She needed those claws; the teeth in her oddly shaped muzzle weren't made for biting. Chameleons consumed blood and magic, not flesh.

The blood part of her diet had been provided for by a small herd of sheep. The magic part was augmented now by the Winter Queen's gift: a dusky purple gem set into a band around one ankle, a gem capable of storing a vast amount of magic and disgorging it at whatever rate Dell required. Such a talisman, made by Winter herself, was literally priceless in Faerie. Here on Earth, no one had any idea what it was, although Cullen Seabourne had asked. Three times.

Nathan put the vehicle in park and got out. Dell flowed to her feet and started for him. He shook his head at her. "Kai is in the city."

Dell stopped. Her ears flattened. Her lips lifted in a snarl.

Nathan waited. Dell knew very well she couldn't go into a crowded human city looking like that.

"She understands you?" one of the guards asked.

"Dell understands a fair amount of English, but language doesn't come easily for her. She's a gestalt thinker."

"Gestalt?"

From the car came Cullen's voice. "Like a new wolf. She doesn't think in words."

The chameleon cast a snarling glance at the guards.

"I'm here," Nathan told her. Meaning that he would guard her during her transformation, when she was vulnerable. He thought a moment and added, "Not Cynna. She would stand out too much."

Dell gave him a haughty look meant to say that *of course* she wouldn't choose such a distinctive form, but Nathan suspected she might have. Dell loved what she thought of as Cynna's markings—the tattoos that covered most of her skin. A couple times now she'd disconcerted people at Clanhome by wearing Cynna's form when she came down from the node to see Kai.

Dell huffed out a breath and began her change.

The chameleon's transformation looked nothing like those of the lupi. Took longer, too. Her fur went first, soaked up into skin the same shade of gray. Then muscle, flesh, bone, and sinew melted into a thick gray ooze that briefly held Dell's original shape before flowing into a new one.

One of those stoic lupi guards made an "ewww" sound.

It was probably the eyeballs, Nathan thought. They'd disconcerted him at first, too. Dell always left them for last, so they bobbed around on the viscous gray surface of her transforming body until she had the shape she wanted. Then they wandered to the front of the reshaped head.

That head was rapidly sprouting hair now. The rest of the details shaped themselves, and a few moments later an apparently human woman stood there, holding out one hand imperatively. She wore the Queen's gift around her right wrist and nothing else.

Dell had chosen one of her favorite "hiding" forms, a blended-race woman with features that managed to be unremarkable rather than exotic. Here she'd probably be taken for Mexican with a trace of Asian ancestry. "Pass me the dress, will you?" Nathan said to Cullen.

A cotton dress came sailing out the window. Nathan caught it and tossed it to Dell. Dell preferred dresses or robes to pants and refused to wear underwear. After they arrived, Kai had bought her a few loose dresses so the omission wouldn't be too noticeable.

A moment later, the chameleon slid into the backseat wearing a demure brown dress with tiny blue flowers. Nathan closed the door and got back behind the wheel.

Dell looked at Cullen. Her nostrils flared. "Smell Cynna."

Cullen heaved a sigh. "Ryder's napping. Cynna and I were taking advantage of that, but we hadn't gotten very far. You look nice, Dell, but I like your other form better."

"So does she," Nathan said, putting the SUV in gear and accelerating through the open gate. "Human forms feel weak to her."

"She loses strength when she changes?"

That would seem odd to a lupus. "It's a matter of innate abilities versus learned skills. Shifting her coloring, now, that's innate, like those colorful lizards you have here. The ability to change her entire form is innate, too, but she has to have a pattern to copy, and she can't edit those patterns. She has to use all or nothing."

"So if the person she copies has a mole, she will, too?"

Nathan nodded. "This form isn't as fully human as it looks, which is why her sense of smell remains good. That's one reason she likes this form even if it does feel weak to her. She retains a few things regardless of her form. Her blood stays the same, as does her cells' ability to hold magic. Kai thinks she must retain her brain structure, too. She thinks the same way no matter how she's shaped."

"Huh." Cullen thought that over briefly, then shook his head. "Her brain must transform to some degree. The skull's a different shape."

Nathan shrugged. Cullen wanted details he didn't have.

"Go fast," Dell said suddenly. "Heal Kai."

"Wait a minute," Cullen said, looking at Nathan. "You can heal? Someone other than yourself, I mean."

"Not me," Nathan explained. "Dell. She can do it with Kai because of their bond, and it's really body magic, not healing. The result is the same, but it takes a lot more power." Which Dell had now, thanks to the Queen's gift, though she still stayed near the node much of the time, saving the gem's power for an

emergency.

Nathan used to think that the mage who'd originally created the familiar bond in Dell had been a touch crazy. A chameleon seemed a peculiar choice. But the obvious drawback—Dell's need for magic—turned out to also be a plus. That need had caused her species to develop the ability to store an enormous amount of power, which could be drawn upon through the familiar bond.

The other plus was her body magic . . . and what that meant.

Most mages didn't take familiars because the risk outweighed the benefits. The death of a familiar would, at best, magically cripple the mage for days or weeks. At worst, it killed. The reverse was true, too. Dell had survived the breaking of the familiar bond with her mage when she was hurled to Earth when the realms collided at the Turning, but she'd been in bad shape by the time Kai found her. She'd used up her vast reserves of magic, and her hunger had been deep and terrible—and not just for magic. She'd been so alone. So very alone.

Until Kai. When the familiar bond broke, it didn't go away. Some combination of Dell's knowledge, Kai's Gift, and the mystery of affinity had made it possible for Kai and Dell to anchor the raw, bleeding end of that bond in Kai. Later, that bond and Dell's frantic need to keep Kai alive had made it possible for the chameleon to use her body magic to save Kai's life . . . body magic that operated instinctively, rebuilding according to whatever pattern Dell had. The pattern she had for Kai was of a thirty-year-old human woman in excellent health.

No one knew exactly how long chameleons lived, but Dell's lifespan would likely be counted in centuries, not decades. Which meant, Nathan thought smugly, that Kai's likely would be, too. *If she didn't get herself killed in some mundane or uncanny fashion that Dell couldn't fix in time. "Dell, has something else happened to Kai?"*

"Bug bites. Blood. Go fast."

"Can't go very fast on this road. I'll speed up when we hit the highway." Dell hated it when Kai bled. Blood was food and life to the chameleon. Still, her level of anxiety bothered Nathan. Kai might downplay an injury to keep him from worrying, but she wouldn't outright lie about it. Could she be hurt worse than she realized?

"Bug bites," Cullen muttered. "How does that make sense? The Great Bitch has tried assassination, hellgates, demon-possessed doppelgangers, explosives, dworg, destroying the U.S. through mob rule, and destabilizing the entire realm. Those didn't work, so now she's using butterflies? I don't get it. Unless they're infected in some way—"

Nathan broke in as a thought occurred to him. "Dell, do the bug bites have poison? *Eriahu*," he added, using the most general term for poison in the elfin tongue. Dell had known elfin longer than she had English, but her connection with Kai usually made English easier for her.

Dell growled.

"What does that mean?" Cullen said. "No, yes, maybe, shut up?"

"That's frustration. Either she doesn't know or she isn't sure what I mean." Gestalt thinkers sometimes showed amazing insight, but they processed information so differently that communication was difficult.

Nathan thought about the context of the last time he and Kai had discussed poison around Dell. Dell would understand that when he said “poison” just now, he hadn’t meant “colorless, odorless liquid added to the Devrai ambassador’s wine at an equinox celebration by an agent of the Osiga which killed him in thirty seconds,” but she’d be puzzled by which attributes of that event he wanted her to apply to the current situation. Was he talking about a substance consumed at a particular time? One administered at a celebration, or one used by Osiga agents? Something that killed, something that lacked odor, something added to wine, or something frequently given to Devrai ambassadors?

Or maybe she was trying to sort through elements of that event he’d never noticed. Dell’s process was *different*. “Eh. Yes, I’ve confused her. I phrased my question badly. Dell, will the bug bites make Kai sick?”

A growl. Then, “Not now sick.”

“Later sick?”

Silence.

“*Dei’re het ahm Kai insit?*”

More silence. Then: “Dots, dots, dots!” She hissed, sounding very much as she did in her other form. “*Jisen dá, oran-ahmni!* Go fast.”

“Dots?” Cullen repeated.

“Dots are what she calls words,” Nathan explained.

“And the rest of it?”

“Roughly translated, ‘shut up, dot-eater.’ I think I’ve exhausted her patience with language.”

None of them spoke again until they left the gravel road for the highway, where Nathan could, as promised, speed up. Eighty wouldn’t be conspicuous along this stretch, he decided. “Arjenie has some skill with magic.”

Cullen shook his head. “If you’re wondering if she could check out Kai, the answer is no. She and I have talked spellcraft enough for me to be sure she doesn’t have anything that would help.”

“Arjenie wasn’t bitten.” Arjenie’s Gift was far more useful than invisibility, as it extended to all the senses except touch and made her impossible to notice, but . . . “Normally, mind magic doesn’t work on insects.”

Cullen snorted. “And you think there’s something normal about carnivorous butterflies?”

“Not,” Dell said.

Cullen twisted to look at her. “They’re not normal? Or they’re not carnivorous?”

“Like Dell.”

“Blood drinkers,” Nathan said. “They drank Kai’s blood?”

“Go fast,” she said.

Maybe a hundred would be better.

* * *

“NO one is being admitted to the scene. Move away now to keep our access clear.”

Nathan had nothing against cops. He’d been one himself for a time. But the officer stationed at the police cordon near the coffee shop was beginning to annoy him. “If you lack the authority to admit us, you need to contact your superior.”

“No, sir, I do not. Orders are clear. The three of you need to move away.”

“Look,” Cullen said, “you’ve seen my ID. If the FBI is here—”

“I can’t give you that information, but if they were here and if they wanted you to join them, they’d have let me know, wouldn’t they?” There was a definite touch of smirk to his mouth.

Cullen’s scowl should have melted the officious young officer into a puddle of cooperation. Instead the man stood even stiffer. “I’ve told you twice now to move on.”

“It’s a public goddamn sidewalk, asshole.”

A sidewalk currently crowded with curiosity seekers and a couple reporters, one of whom was eyeing Cullen. He was certainly photogenic, but it was also possible the woman recognized him. Nathan touched Cullen’s arm to get his attention and jerked his head to the left, where Benedict waited. For a moment he thought Cullen was going to stay and argue himself into getting arrested, but Benedict said his name. Cullen huffed out an impatient breath and obeyed.

Benedict and his men had arrived a bare five minutes ahead of Nathan. They’d been told to move along, too, and Benedict had chosen to seem to obey. Though he’d deployed his squad, only two of them were visible, and Benedict himself was waiting about twenty feet away. It was a good decision. This young cop was the type to react to intimidation by doubling down, and all Benedict had to do to look intimidating was breathe.

“I’m going to call Kai,” Nathan said as they headed for Benedict. “Cullen, maybe you should call Ruben.”

“Damn straight I will. I’m betting the FBI hasn’t been called in at all. Whatever idiot is in charge decided to shut them out for some stupid reason, though this is clearly a Unit 12 matter. If—”

Dell spoke suddenly. “Kai pissed. Wants us come in.”

Nathan glanced at her. “I imagine so. But she doesn’t want you to do anything, does she?” Such as break the young officer’s neck so she could get inside.

Dell growled softly. Nathan took that for an affirmative.

They’d reached Benedict. Cullen pulled his phone out. “Dell, you going to be okay waiting a little longer? Ruben can get us in, but it may take—”

“No need,” Benedict said. “Arjenie already called him.” He nodded at the barricade, where a dirty white Ford was pulling up. “Guess he sent us this guy, since Lily’s in France.”

Cullen stopped and shook his head. “Huh. Who’d have thought I’d ever be glad to see the Big A?”

“He’ll admit us?” Nathan asked.

“Yeah. He’s an asshole, but he’s not stupid.”

The four of them headed back toward the barricade, where three people were getting out of the car—two men and a woman. It was obvious which one was in charge, but not because he looked the part. Derwin Ackleford, the special agent in charge of the FBI’s local office, was a middle-aged Anglo, neither short nor tall, fat nor thin. He wore a suit the color of bland and a grade-A scowl.

Nathan had met Ackleford during the legal sort-out of the events that brought him and Kai back to Earth. The man was regular FBI, not part of their Magical Crimes Division, much less the special unit that investigated the most serious magical problems. While he had a smidgeon of a Gift, he preferred to think of himself as a null. He didn’t like magic, didn’t trust it, and knew damn little about it. Still, if he was reasonable about using the resources at hand—i.e., Nathan and Cullen—his ignorance didn’t have to be a major problem.

“Ackleford,” Cullen called as they drew near. “We need to get in there, and Dickhead over there isn’t listening.”

Ackleford, as usual, stank of cigarette smoke. He aimed his scowl at Cullen. “I know why you’re here. But you two—” He pointed at Benedict, then at Nathan. “You two can go away. Believe it or not, I’m not here to reunite everyone with their girlfriends.”

Benedict said, “You might find my nose helpful.”

Ackleford considered that. The idea didn’t make him any happier, but he said, “All right. But it’s my turf, so my rules. As for you.” He turned the scowl on Nathan. “Your girlfriend doesn’t need you to hold her hand while someone sticks on a bandage or two. If she even needs bandages. Didn’t sound like it. You can wait out here with—”

“Now, that’s short-sighted,” Nathan said. “I know a lot about magic.”

“I’ve got Seabourne for the woo-woo stuff.”

“I have knowledge that Cullen doesn’t.”

Ackleford knew that Nathan was sidhe and that he served the Queen of Winter. Not that he understood who and what Winter was, no more than he knew what exactly Nathan was. But he had at least been told about her. “This have something to do with your elf queen?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“You get your visa problem straightened out?”

“I’m all official now.” Nathan had a passport issued by the Queen of Winter, but getting an entry stamp had been a bit of a problem. He hadn’t come into the U.S. in the usual way, for one thing. For another, other realms had been myth to the people here for a long time. That had changed, but while the U.S. had recently altered the legal definition of “country” to include nation-states not part of Earth, the rest of the legal apparatus hadn’t caught up yet. In the end, the secretary of state had had to issue a special allowance.

“That helps, but—” Ackleford looked at Cullen. “Seabourne? You want him underfoot?”

“Hell, yes. Were you really considering not using him?”

“Hell, yes. But if you want him, I can live with it. You.” He jabbed a finger at Dell. “Who are you, and why are you here?”

She didn’t answer, though she studied Ackleford intently. Nathan spoke for her. “She’s called Dell. She needs to see Kai, too. It’s important.”

“Dell. That your first name or last?”

“Just Dell,” Nathan said.

“She can answer for herself, Hunter.”

“Actually, she can’t,” Cullen said. “Not easily. She doesn’t use language well. And no, I won’t explain here—see the reporter headed our way?—but you need to let her see Kai.”

Dell must have figured out that this man was the key to getting to Kai. She spoke to him. “Kai pissed. Needs me.”

“So you do talk. What does she need you for?”

“Bug bites. Needs me fast.” She looked at Nathan. “Fast, fast, fast!”

“Special Agent,” Nathan said, “I need to get Dell to Kai. Dell hasn’t been able to tell me why, but if she says ‘fast,’ I believe her.”

Behind Ackleford’s abrasive manner lay a sharp mind. The man looked sour enough to curdle milk, but he said, “All right. Don’t make me regret this. I probably will, but you can at least try not to turn this into a complete clusterfuck. Come on.”

At the barricade he treated the young cop to his scowl. “Where the hell’s your sign-in sheet? You letting people on-scene without them signing in? Burns, stay here and show the dickhead how to set up a sign-in sheet. See if he’s got any clue who has already entered. Probably not, but—”

“Sir,” the cop interrupted desperately, “a sign-in sheet isn’t needed because no one is allowed to enter the scene at this time. We’re treating it as a biohazard zone, so—”

“Yeah?” Ackleford pulled out his ID case. “Well, I’m Special Agent Derwin Ackleford. This is now my fucking scene, and I want a fucking sign-in sheet.”

FOUR

A police lieutenant with coarse gray hair, sixty extra pounds, and breasts lay in wait for Ackleford just inside Fagioli. Battle was joined immediately. Nathan didn’t wait to watch Ackleford dispose of his opponent. His ability to go unnoticed was minor, but it worked a treat in situations like this. People would see him just fine as he edged past the combatants. They just wouldn’t pay any attention.

Once inside, he stopped and looked for Kai.

The long, narrow room was mobbed with dazed, excited, angry, and frightened people talking at each other. Add in EMTs, paramedics, and a handful of cops and you had a standing-room-only crowd. He glimpsed a bright red head moving their way through the crowd—Arjenie Fox, no doubt heading for Benedict. No Kai.

On his left, the wall was punctuated by two arches that gave access to the patio. Or would have, had the cast iron doors been open. Looked like the patio had been evacuated, save for a couple cops who seemed to be sweeping the flagstones. That's why the place was so crowded.

“Gods!” Seabourne groaned. “Those idiots! Sweeping up the—you!” He grabbed one of the silent agents. The man, as it turned out. The woman had been left behind to explain about sign-in sheets. “Come with me and get rid of those clowns!”

“Uh—I don’t know if—”

“Do it,” Ackleford snapped.

“Don’t you be telling my people—” the lieutenant began. “Hey, you! Stop!”

Dell had waited as long as she was going to. The chameleon darted past the lieutenant, who tried to grab her. Fortunately for everyone, he missed.

Nathan followed Dell. That was the easiest way to find Kai.

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