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MORTAL SINS, Lupi #10

# *Chapter 1*

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excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

Southern air holds on to scent. Scent is vapor, after all, a chemical mist freed by heat to hang, trapped, in moist air. In his other form, Rule knew this.

In this form he knew only the richness. His world was more scent than sight as he raced through silver-shadow woods, through air heavy with moisture and fragrance. Layers and layers of green overlaid the complex stew of water from a nearby stream with its notes of kudzu, rock, and fish. Rhododendron's subtle vanilla scent jumbled with moss, with dogwood and buckeye and the sugary scent of maple, punctuated by the cool tang of pine.

But it was the musk, blood, and fur scent of raccoon he chased.

A three-quarter moon hung high overhead as he leaped the stream, muscles reaching in exhilarated approximation of flight. He landed almost on top of the prey—but his hind feet skidded in slick red clay. A second later, the raccoon shot up a tree.

He shook his head. Damned raccoons always climbed if they got a chance. He didn't begrudge the animal its escape, but wished he'd had more of a chase first.

Deer do not climb trees. He decided to course for that scent.

Coursing was as much excuse as action. He'd eaten well before Changing, so hunger was distant; the real delight was simply being in motion, reading the world through nose, ears, the pads of his feet.

The human part of him remained, a familiar slice of "I" that was not-wolf. He remembered his two-legged thoughts and experiences; they simply ceased to matter as much. Not when air slid through him like hot silk, pregnant with a thousand flavors. It was probably the human part that felt a pang for the wonders of these southern woods, remembering the hotter, drier land claimed by his clan in southern California. His grandfather had made the decision to buy land there for

Nokolai's Clanhome. In that place and time, the land had been cheap.

It had been a sound decision. The clan had prospered in California. But at Nokolai Clanhome, wolves ran on rocks scattered over hard-baked ground, not on a thick bed of needles and moss through tree-shadows surprised here and there by the tumble of a stream.

Rule had run as wolf in many places, yet there was something special about this night, these woods. Something new. He'd never run here as wolf before. Not with Leidolf's clanhome so near.

The spike of worry was real, but fleeting. Wolves understand fear. Worry is too mental, too predicated on the future, to hold their attention. The slice of him that remained man wanted to hold onto that worry, gnawing it like a bone that refused to crack. The wolf was more interested in the day-old spoor of an opossum.

This was why he ran tonight: too many worries, too much gnawing at problems that refused to crack open and release their marrow. He'd learned the hard way that the man needed the wolf at least as much as the wolf needed the man. These woods were sweet. He'd find no answers in them, but tonight he wasn't seeking answers.

Lily said they hadn't come up with the right questions yet.

Rule paused, head lifted. Thought of her was sweet to both man and wolf. If only she could . . .

He twitched his ear as if a fly had bitten it. Foolishness. Both his natures agreed on that. Things were as they were, not as he might wish them to be. Females did not Change.

An hour later he'd found no deer, though he'd crossed their trails often enough, along with many others—a pack of feral dogs, a copperhead, another raccoon. Perhaps he'd been more interested in the distractions than the hunt, when there were no clanmates to join the chase. He wished Benedict was here, or Sammy, or Cullen . . . wished, though he tried not to, for Lily. Who could never share this with him.

His son would. Not yet, but in a few years. His son, who slept in a nearby town tonight--a town that would not be Toby's home much longer. In four days they would meet with the judge for the custody hearing, and as long as Toby's grandmother didn't change her mind . . .

She wouldn't. She couldn't.

Feelings thundered through him, a primal cacophony of bliss, fear, jubilation. Rule lifted his nose to the moon and joined in Her song. Then he flicked his tail and took off at a lope, tongue lolling in the heat.

At the base of a low hill he found another scent. The chemical message was old but unmistakable.

At some point in the last few months, a Leidolf wolf had marked the spot with urine. Something more visceral than recognition stirred as the portion of new mantle he carried rose, knowing the scent. Welcoming it.

Briefly, he was confused. Always before that scent had meant Enemy. But the message of the power curled within him was clear: this wolf was his.

The man understood this change, had expected it, and memory supplied the reasons, so the wolf acknowledged the change and moved on. He wound up the little hill, bathed in the aural ocean of cricket song, anticipating grass. His nose informed him of a grassy place nearby, a spot where some alteration in soil had discouraged trees.

He liked grass. Perhaps it would be tall and home to mice. Mice were small and tricky, but they crunched nicely.

A thought sifted through him, arising from both ways of being: a few months ago he wouldn't have noticed a scent-trace as old as that left by the Leidolf wolf. Had the new mantle coiled in his belly made it possible to sort that scent? Or was it because there were two mantles now? Perhaps this night, these woods were unusually magic because he carried more magic within him.

He would consider that in his other form, which was better suited to thinking. For now . . . at the crest of the hill he checked with the moon, aware of time passing and a woman who waited in the small town nearby . . . asleep? Probably. He'd told her he would be gone most of the night.

Part of him thought this was a poor way to spend the night when he could have been in her bed, but there was grass ahead, the chance of a mouse or three. He was here, not there, and it was impossible to regret the night.

It was growing late, though. The fireflies had turned off their glow-sticks and the moon was descending. He would investigate the tall grass, he decided. Then he'd return to the place he'd left his clothing and to the shape that fit those clothes.

The grass was indeed tall and the pungent smell of mice greeted him as he approached the tiny meadow. Rabbits, too, but rabbits were for days, since they seldom venture out of their burrows in the dark.

A breeze rose, whispering in the grass and carrying a host of smells. He paused, curious, and tested the air.

Was that . . . ? Corruption, yes, the stench of rot was unmistakable, though faint and distant. It meant little. Animals died in the woods. Besides, the smell came from the general direction of the highway. Animals were hit by cars even more often than they died naturally. But was it an animal?

The mantles might help him find out

They slept now. He wouldn't call them up, not even just the one he considered truly his--that portion of the Nokolai mantle his father had given him years ago. To call one meant both answered, and he'd been warned. Drawing strongly on the portion he held of the other clan's mantle could kill the mantle's true holder, who clung so narrowly to life.

Not that Rule objected to Victor Frey's death. In other circumstances he'd celebrate it, but he didn't want the clan that would come to him with Victor's dying. And neither he nor Nokolai needed the ruckus that would follow.

Could he use the mantles without actually calling them up?

The wolf thought so. The man, troubled by instinct or too much thinking, wanting to try.

With a wisp of attention, Rule woke the twin powers in his gut. He focused again on the trace of scent carried by the breeze, not so much using the mantles as including them in his intention.

That scent sharpened in his nostrils immediately. Not a dog hit by a car, no. Nor a deer brought down by disease. Though the rot-stench overpowered the rest, he was almost sure the body he smelled had never walked four-footed.

Go. The breeze might die, or this new acuity fade. Go. Find out.

He launched himself into a run.

Wolves are largely indifferent to death as long as it doesn't threaten them or theirs. The body he chased was certainly dead, so the wolf felt no urgency. But the man did. Rule ran for over a mile--not full-out, not over unfamiliar terrain with no immediate danger or prey. But he was fast in this form, faster than a born-wolf.

By the time he slowed, he knew he'd been right about the highway. He heard cars cruising perhaps half a mile ahead . . . not many. It wasn't a major highway.

But what he sought lay within the woods. The rankness made his lip curl back from his teeth as he approached. Some other scent hid beneath the stench, but even with the mantles' help he couldn't sort it clearly, smothered as it was by putrefaction. Whatever it was, it brought up his hackles and started a growl in his throat.

Unlike some predators, wolves don't sideline as scavengers; only one on the brink of starvation would consider eating meat this rotten. And Rule was too much man even now to feel anything but a sad sort of horror at what lay in a shallow ditch between a pair of oaks.

Not all beasts are so picky, however. And he hadn't been the first to find them.



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