
BLOOD MAGIC, Lupi #12

Chapter 1

excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

On a blistering noon at the tag-end of July, Balboa Park in San Diego offered plenty of green to sun-weary eyes. The paths in the Palm Canyon section were some of the park's prettiest byways, though shade was scant now. With the sun directly overhead, it was reduced to furtive puddles at the feet of the palms' arcing trunks.

A tall man walked one of those paths alone, dressed head-to-toe in black.

His hair was dark, his skin lightly tanned. His eyes were hidden by expensive sunglasses. From a distance he looked like a clump of shadow visiting its more dappled cousins along the bone-colored path.

Rule Turner touched his sunglasses lightly. They didn't need adjusting. He just liked the tactile reminder. They'd been a gift, a surprise present from Lily when the two of them returned from North Carolina with his son yesterday. She'd even found a smaller, identical pair for Toby which the boy wore constantly. So Rule touched the shades and thought of Toby, and of Lily, and why he was here.

Two men rounded a curve in the path, heading towards Rule. Neither wore sunglasses. The older one looked like a blacksmith or some primordial earth deity—bearded and burly and as if he might burst out of his slacks and shirt at any moment. His beard and hair were rusty brown shot with gray; his eyes were the color of roasted nuts. Tanned skin creased around craggy features in a way that suggested smiles came easily and often.

He wasn't smiling now.

The other man looked younger and more dangerous . . . which was true in a sense. Benedict could kill faster and more surely than anyone Rule knew. He shared his companion's muscular build, but fitted over an additional five inches of height. His features reflected his mother's heritage, the cheekbones flat and high, the mouth wide, and his black hair was long enough to

club back in a short tail.

No smile lines around those dark eyes. He moved with the economy of an athlete or martial artist, which he was; he wore athletic shoes with jeans and an oversize, untucked khaki shirt.

The shirt did nothing for his build or the bronze of his skin, but Benedict wouldn't have thought of that. Clothes, like most things, were tactical tools to him. The shirt was appropriate for the setting and hid whatever weapons he'd deemed appropriate. Knives, certainly. Probably a handgun.

Neither of them looked like Rule. Nor did they much resemble each other. A stranger wouldn't have guessed the three of them were a father and his two living sons.

The older man stopped some fifteen feet away. Benedict dropped back a few feet, guarding his rear. Rule continued walking until he was only three feet away, then stopped, too. Waiting.

“Do you not kneel?” Rule's father demanded.

“I'm waiting to see who greets me.”

Now there was a smile. A small one, but it reached the nut-brown eyes. “Your Rho.”

Immediately Rule dropped to one knee, bending his head to bare his nape. He felt his father's fingers brush his nape, and in Rule's gut the portion of mantle that belonged to Nokolai leaped in response.

The other mantle—the complete one—remained quiet. Leidolf didn't answer to Nokolai.

“Rise.”

Rule did. And still he waited. Isen Turner might be wolf in his other form, but his son thought of him as more like a fox—canny, tricky, highly maneuverable. Isen could trip Machiavelli on his assumptions, so Rule did his best not to possess any.

For once, Isen was blunt. “Why did you assume the Leidolf mantle?”

Rule had already told him how it happened, though over the phone. For some months he'd carried the heir's portion of the Leidolf clan's mantle, due to trickery of the man who had been Leidolf's Rho. Then Lily had been possessed by the wraith of one who, in life, had been Leidolf. Rule had needed the authority of the full mantle to command the wraith and save Lily. He'd taken it, killing the former Rho--and becoming leader of his clan's enemies.

But if anyone understood the difference between a chronology of events and a revelation of

motive, it was Isen Turner. Rule kept his answer brief. “To save Lily.”

“Was that the only reason?”

“No.”

Isen hmphed. “Taught you too well, haven’t I? Very well. You don’t speak of your other reasons. Is that because they are Leidolf business?”

“In part. Mostly, however, I am bound by a promise I gave.”

Isen’s bushy eyebrows climbed in surprise that might have been real. “A promise! Obviously I can’t ask what you promised, but who . . . that is my affair, as your Rho. Who did you promise?”

Rule had considered what to say on this score already. He’d hew to the words of his promise, but give his father some meat to chew on. Cullen wouldn’t mind. “I can’t in honor give you the name, but he’s Nokolai, and you already possess the information he gave me, if not the conclusions he drew from that information.”

“Do I, now?” The bushy eyebrows drew down, but in thought, not anger.

One of the tactics Rule had learned from his father was when to shift the subject. “Benedict is angry with me.”

Isen brushed that aside. “That’s a matter between brothers, not clan business. How can you be both Rho to Leidolf and Lu Nuncio to Nokolai?”

With great difficulty. “If we speak of status, I’d suggest some default settings. When I’m at our Clanhome, I’m your Lu Nuncio. When I’m away from it, I’m Leidolf Rho.”

“You assume you will remain my Lu Nuncio?”

For the first time Rule smiled—small and wry, perhaps, but a genuine smile. “I assume only that your decision will not be based on anger or affection, but on what you think best for Nokolai. You asked how I could be both. That’s what I answered.”

“True, true—though that’s a tiny dab of an answer, compared to the size of the problem. Do you see any advantage to Nokolai in having my heir be Rho to another clan?”

“Certainly. Leidolf won’t be trying to kill you anymore.”

Isen chuckled. “A refreshing change, yes, and one I’ll appreciate. But I think that with you as Rho, Leidolf will stop its assassination attempts whether you remain my heir or not. What else?”

Rule stepped out on shaky ground then, but he stepped surely. Hesitation, doubt—both were reasonable, but revealing them was seldom useful. “No lupus has held two mantles in over three thousand years. Our oldest enemy has been stirring. Times are changing. I believe this is our Lady’s will. That it’s part of her plan to defeat the one we do not name.”

This time Isen’s surprise was unmistakably real. Both eyebrows shot up—then descended in a scowl. “You think you’re privy to the Lady’s plans now?”

“I’m guessing, of course. If the Lady has spoken to any of the Rhejes, they haven’t told us. But it’s a guess based on my gut, on . . .” Rule hesitated, then did his best to put words to what didn’t fit into words. “The mantles I carry are pleased by the situation. They . . . help. They make it easy for me to separate my roles.”

“Hmm.” For a long moment Isen didn’t say anything. Then he asked, “And can you carry both full mantles? If I dropped dead right now, could you assume Nokolai’s complete mantle?”

“If I thought I couldn’t, I’d ask you to remove the Nokolai portion from me immediately. I will not risk the clan.”

“A good answer, but a simple ‘yes’ would have been even better.”

“A simple ‘yes’ would mean I was confusing fact with opinion.”

“Your opinion.”

“Yes. It’s based on unique experience, however. Assuming the full Leidolf mantle was . . .” He paused to fit words around what he meant as best as possible. “Simple. Not easy, no, but much simpler than when I was first forced to carry portions of two mantles. There’s . . . room now. They’re both already here. I’ve no reason to think assuming the full Nokolai mantle would be beyond me.”

Isen nodded slowly. “Very well. I trust your judgment. I’ll make no definite decision yet, but for the time being you will remain my Lu Nuncio. We will use the protocol you suggested, but the parameters must be different. On this side of the country, you are my Lu Nuncio. On Leidolf’s side, you are their Rho.”

“No.”

This time only one eyebrow shot up. “No?”

“If you and I meet on the street and I submit to you, the other clans won’t see your Lu Nuncio submitting. They’ll see Leidolf’s Rho submitting. I can’t agree to that.”

“Who am I speaking to now—my Lu Nuncio, or Leidolf’s Rho?”

“Both. The other clans are uneasy about what they see as Nokolai’s growing power. We don’t want to feed that.”

A grin broke out on Isen’s face, folding up the creases in the way they were meant to go. “You’re good,” he said happily. “You’re damned good. I’ve done well with you. Yes, I agree, with some stipulations to be worked out—but that discussion will take place between the Leidolf Rho and the Nokolai Rho.” His eyes twinkled. “You can put me in touch with him later. Right now I want to embrace my son.”

Isen was a world-class hugger. However much he held himself apart when he was being Rho to Rule’s Lu Nuncio, when he dropped that role and was a father, he brimmed with love, support, and hugs.

When they broke apart Rule was grinning as widely as his father. He braced his feet—and sure enough, here came the clap on the back, hearty enough to stagger the unprepared. “Lily’s good, right?” Isen said. “And Toby. I can’t wait to see that boy. You’ll bring him to Clanhome soon. Today.”

Isen could have come to Toby, but Rule didn’t suggest it. Today’s meeting was very much the exception. His father seldom left Clanhome—though that might change, with Leidolf no longer a threat. “I will. He’s eager to see you and his Uncle Benedict.” Rule glanced at the silent man still standing guard behind their father. “Speaking of whom--”

Isen squeezed Rule’s arm. “Leave him be. He’s brooding. Always been a hell of a one for a good brood, my Benedict. Leave him be for now.”

Rule looked at his brother’s unrevealing face. “I didn’t expect him to object so strongly to my becoming Leidolf Rho.”

“No, no. He considers that good strategy. It’s getting yourself engaged he has problems with. Now, when do I get to see my grandson? He’ll stay at Clanhome for the rest of the summer,” Isen announced. “Once school starts, well, we’ll see how that works out. But it’s summer still.”

That was all he said about Rule’s upcoming marriage. They walked and talked for another half hour as father and son, arranging for Toby to spend time at Clanhome, if not quite as much as Isen wanted. And Rule’s father didn’t again refer to Rule’s intention to break one of the strongest taboos of his people. When Rule tried to raise the subject, Isen dodged it neatly.

It would have been nice, Rule thought as he headed for his car, if he could trust that silence meant support, or at least a lack of opposition. But this was Isen Turner. By definition, he was

up to something.



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