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DEATH MAGIC, Lupi #14

# Chapter 4

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excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

Very few guests remained when Rule started making his way to the Brooks's back door. It was almost time.

The next hour or so would be difficult. He didn't fool himself about that, but it would be hardest on Lily. First she'd be hit by Ruben's news, then . . . well, his nadia hated it when he kept secrets from her. He'd learned that he hated it, too, and was more than ready to lay that particular burden down.

He'd had no choice. She knew him well enough to understand that.

As he made his way to the Brooks' back door, he felt the moon rise. He smiled.

The moon's song was always with him, but the bulk of the Earth muffled it until her orbit and the planet's slow turning brought her above the horizon once more. Tonight the song was quiet and pure, resonating inside him like a plucked harp-string. Quiet and pure and sweet. Always it was sweet. The song and the pull would mount over the next week to the wondrous, full-throated call of full moon.

The Brooks' land would be a lovely place to spend full-moon night, he thought as he smiled and shook his head, declining an invitation to stop and chat with a couple of slow-to-leave guests. He'd love to sample the scents around him with a keener nose. Changing here would be easy. The earth itself welcomed him in a way he usually felt only at Clanhome. The Change was a matter of Earth communing with moonsong . . . and someone here worked Earth magic regularly.

Not Ruben, he thought as he went in the open French doors into a large, well-lit kitchen. Mainly because Ruben was not a practitioner, but also, Rule thought the welcome he felt suggested an Earth gift, not spellwork. And Ruben's Gift was aligned with fire.

Deborah, then. Odd that Ruben had never mentioned his wife's Gift . . . or perhaps not. He seldom mentioned Deborah. Rule had wondered about that. He doubted that he'd gone half a day without speaking of Lily since he met her. But for all that he knew a good deal about human sexual customs, marriage remained a mystery to him.

It was a mystery he was growing eager to explore. Why had he thought it a good idea to wait until March for the ceremony?

He passed from the kitchen to a spacious, slightly cluttered den, then into a hall that gave access to the front of the house and to the stairs. Rule approved of Ruben's home. His own taste leaned more towards contemporary, but he had a love for old wood. Clearly, either Ruben or Deborah did, too, judging by the antiques sprinkled throughout their house.

The banister curving along the stairwell was old, too. He rested a hand on it as he climbed to the second floor. Smooth wood, polished by countless hands over the years. Had Ruben once dreamed that his children's hands would be among those polishing the wood? This was a large house for two people, yet he and Deborah had no children, either by birth or adoption. Rule wondered about that, too.

Of course, humans weren't as uniformly focused on children as lupi. There was a cultural assumption that everyone wanted children, but that wasn't always the case. Perhaps he was imagining a grief where none existed.

The stairwell opened into a hall with lovely wainscoting. Rule followed something that was not a tug, not a song, but was every bit as dear and certain to a door on the left. He knocked softly.

Lily opened it. She glanced behind him, confirming that he was alone, and sighed. "I've washed my hands, played with my hair, glossed up my lips . . . I'm running out of things to do in case someone comes up here and finds me hanging out in the bathroom. I take it Ruben asked you to wait around, too?"

"Your lips are beautifully glossy." He bent and kissed them lightly. "Apples. I like it. Almost everyone is gone. I believe we can wander downstairs now."

She started for the stairs with him. "Do you know where he wants us to wait? Deborah didn't say."

"In his study, I think. You and Deborah hit it off."

She slid him a grin. "You sent her to fetch me."

"I assure you I did not."

“Her word, not yours, maybe. But you wanted me to come meet Senator Brixton’s chief of staff.”

“Dennis Parrott. A smooth man. Like an iceberg, most of him remains hidden, and the exposed surface is cool and glossy. I’d like to hear your impression of him. Also, most people find it harder to accept killing if they know the victim.”

She stopped. “You think Parrott wants me dead?”

“Not necessarily, but he might privately use the term ‘collateral damage’ if you were killed by one of the haters he and Bixton court. Publicly, of course, he would acknowledge no responsibility for the results of the inflammatory speeches he writes for Brixton.”

“Doesn’t the senator have a speechwriter?”

“He does, but Parrott handles speeches that deal with the magical policy in all its many forms. He has ties to Humans First.”

Her expression soured. “Is he going to be at the big rally?” The Humans Firsters had planned demonstrations to take place across the country. The big one would be here in D.C. at the mall.

“Bixton’s supposed to give a speech. Parrott will attend with him.”

“Why in the world did Ruben invite him?”

“A better question might be, why did he come?”

She started down the stairs again. “I’ll bite. Why did he?”

“I’m not sure. He despises Ruben, though he hides it well. Fears him, too, and hides that even better. If I weren’t able to smell his fear, I wouldn’t know.”

“You’re sure it wasn’t you he was afraid of?”

“We’ve met before, and he’s concluded I’m safe.”

“Is he foolish about other things, too?”

Rule smiled. “Perhaps I should say that he knows I won’t attack him physically. But he’s known Ruben longer and better than he has me, and fears him more. I find that interesting.”

“I’d guess that Ruben stands between him and something he wants. You don’t.”

That’s why he’d wanted her to meet Parrott. She had a quick mind, capable of cutting to the

meat. “You may be right. Maybe Ruben can tell us what that something is.”

“Do you have any idea why Ruben wanted to talk to us privately? The two of us.” She frowned. “He said it was about the war, and that’s just weird. He’s not lupi.”

“He’s our ally.”

“Yes, but first and foremost, he’s FBI. Government. The U.S. government isn’t at war. For the most part, it doesn’t even know the Great Bitch exists.”

War did not mean the same thing to humans it did to lupi. Rule knew this. Most beings who knew anything about the Great War—and not many did--believed it had ended roughly three thousand years ago. Not lupi. To them, war ended only with the death or complete subjugation of the enemy, and their Lady’s enemy was an Old One, as incapable of dying as she was of subjugating herself. Three thousand years might be a very long lull in the action, but lupi had been at war with her for all that time.

Recently the lull had ended.

“I think I understand what you mean,” Rule said as they crossed the entry hall. The study door was almost directly opposite the staircase. It stood open. “For humans or lupi, war is a joint effort. An individual can only consider himself at war in a metaphorical sense, if his society isn’t also at war. Perhaps Ruben spoke metaphorically.”

“I don’t think so,” she said dryly. “Maybe he wanted me to know it was about her without saying so directly. Deborah was right there.”

“You think he hasn’t told his wife about our enemy?”

“I don’t know what he’s told her. He carries a lot of secrets in his head. Some of them he isn’t free to talk about. Some he may not want to talk about.”

Rule considered that as they went into a room that, by day, would be sun-flooded from the tall windows on the north wall. Tonight the drapes were closed and the only light came from a floor lamp. It was an inviting room—dark cherry desk and file cabinets, chocolate drapes, cinnamon upholstery on the two armchairs, walls the color of an old chamois. The warm colors were likely Deborah’s doing, since Ruben didn’t take an interest in such things. But those chamois-colored walls held objects Ruben did take an interest in: books, framed photos, a tribal mask, what looked like a broken walking stick, and a magnificent abstract painting.

Lily, however, was looking at the floor, not the walls. “Is that for decoration, do you think?”

The floor here was the same warm hickory as on the rest of the ground floor, with one addition:

a thin silvery inlay described a circle that included most of the room. “You can ask Ruben. I wonder if the need to keep secrets from Deborah is why . . .”

“Why what?”

“Ruben and Deborah seem to possess the kind of rapport that comes from intimacy. She’s important to him, yet he seldom speaks of her. It seemed odd to me, but perhaps that’s how he protects those secrets he holds. He doesn’t speak often of his work to his wife. He doesn’t speak often of his wife when he’s working.”

“A lot of cops do that. They want to keep the ugly shit they see from touching their families, so they don’t talk about the job at home.”

“You don’t do that.”

She snorted. “As if I’d ever had a chance to, with you.”

That pleased him, so he moved close and kissed her.

A voice spoke from the doorway. “What a lovely reason to slip away from the party.”

Lily jolted. Rule let go of her without looking away from her annoyed face. “Hello, Fagin.”

“You heard him, didn’t you?” Lily looked past him at the man who’d joined them. “You left an hour ago. I saw you leave.”

The older man beamed at them. “It does my heart good to think I tricked such a clever and watchful woman.”

“You didn’t want anyone to know you’d stayed here.”

“No more than you did, my dear.” He lumbered into the room carrying a paper plate with goodies from the dessert bar. “If you have any electronics on you—phone or whatever—you need to put them on that table in the hall.”

“Why?”

Fagin waggled his eyebrows at her. “Because you won’t learn why you’re here if you don’t.”

Rule retrieved his phone and held out his hand for Lily’s phone. He could see the questions jostling around in her by the way her lips thinned with the effort of holding them back.

Funny. With the time rapidly shifting from “soon” to “now,” he didn’t feel so philosophical. His

stomach was tight with worry. No, call it by its true name: fear. Taking their phones into the hall gave him a moment to get his face and body back under control. He saw Ruben coming from the kitchen as he deposited the phones on a console table. Their eyes met.

Ruben's voice was as relaxed as Rule wished to be. "Ah, you're placing your phones elsewhere. Good."

Rule followed him into the study.

"Ruben," Lily said, "what in the world is going on?"

"Paranoia is a common occupational hazard. I'm afraid mine has increased recently, since someone really is out to get me." Ruben glanced at Fagin. "I'll set the circle." He closed the study door, then crouched and put his hand flat on the floor, covering a section of the silvery inlay. After a moment he nodded. "It's up."

Lily's eyebrows lifted. "Learning some new tricks?"

"I can't set a circle, but I can activate one. It's best if we aren't overheard."

"Which this will make sure of." Fagin dug into his shorts pocket and pulled out a small, silk-wrapped object. He unrolled the cloth to reveal a quartz crystal the size of Rule's thumb and held it up. "Quite a clever invention, this. The circle blocks magical eavesdropping. This will take care of the technical variety." He set the crystal on the leather-bound blotter on the desk, then patted his pockets. "I don't seem to have . . ."

Ruben moved to the other side of the desk, opened a drawer, and took out a hammer that he handed to Fagin.

"Ah, thank you." And he smashed the crystal.

Lily blinked. "That felt like node energy. A pretty good shot of it, too. I thought quartz didn't store power well."

Fagin handed Ruben the hammer and began dusting the smashed crystal into one large and chubby palm. "Not as well as gemstones, no, but that's what makes it work so well for this. A quartz matrix is a bit unstable, magically speaking. Overfill it too suddenly, or smash the crystal, and it releases the stored power all at once. Makes a nice little magic bomb for scrambling tech, even if one isn't a practitioner." Fagin looked at the bits in his palm. "Trash?" he said to Ruben.

Ruben gestured behind the desk and Fagin went to deposit the shards.

Lily watched. "You did that that to disable any bugs?"

“That’s right.”

“What about directional mics? Or lasers? Will the glass and drapes keep those from working?”

Fagin’s eyebrows slid up. “I have no idea.”

Ruben moved behind his desk. “A directional mic won’t work. The glass in the windows is too thick and the drapes are heavy. A laser device—”

“Lasers?” Fagin said, eyebrows bobbing again.

“A laser beam is bounced off a window. The vibrations in the glass caused by sound in the room cause equivalent variations in the laser beam. Sophisticated equipment picks up and decodes the reflected beam to render any conversation in the room. With such thick glass, however, that’s unlikely to work. Also, I believe Friar is biased towards magical means.”

“Friar.” Lily’s voice was flat.

“He is a Listener.”

Who couldn’t eavesdrop magically on conversations near Rule. Ruben knew that, though he didn’t know why. And Lily didn’t know Ruben knew. And Rule would be glad when he didn’t have to make quite so many who-knows-what calculations.

“Just in case, however, Deborah is going to . . . ah, there it is.”

The thrum of bass from a sound system started up outside. Rule nodded, appreciating the trick. The others might not hear it, but the windows were vibrating to the bass. “That should do it.”

Ruben sat and gestured. “Please be seated, and I’ll explain.” He waited while they did that—Rule took the wooden chair nearest the door—then lobbed his first bombshell. “I wanted you to know that I will be resigning from the Bureau due to my health.”



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