
RITUAL MAGIC, Lupi #17

Chapter 1

excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

She blinked and swayed, so dizzy she had to reach for the wall to prop herself up. Could you pass out without falling down? That was what it felt like—like she'd blacked out. Which she'd never done, not in her whole life, but all of a sudden she was Sleeping Beauty and years and years had passed. Except she was still on her feet, so obviously years hadn't passed. The ladies' room was right behind her. She was still in the narrow little hallway of . . .

Of where?

Fear struck, quick and hot and dark, flapping its wings in her throat like a trapped bird. Where was she?

She didn't know. She didn't have any idea. She'd been . . . what? She couldn't remember. She remembered going to bed but not to sleep, not right away. She always had trouble falling asleep the night before her birthday. She'd sat up past bedtime—a sin overlooked on special nights—writing in her diary, with the light from her lamp warm and yellow on its lined pages and her lavender bedspread pulled up to her waist. She'd told her diary what she couldn't tell anyone, not even Kathy, and for sure not her sisters. Everyone was so "I can't wait" about being a teenager, but she'd been glad this birthday was twelve, not thirteen. She wasn't ready for thirteen, but that was okay because she had a whole year of being twelve ahead of her. That gave her lots of time.

But that was all she remembered. She didn't remember waking up or eating breakfast or lunch or supper. Was it suppertime? Had they come here instead of going to the roller rink like they were supposed to?

Had she somehow missed her whole birthday?

A burst of indignation burned through some of the fear. That wasn't fair. That wasn't fair at all, and she didn't understand, but here she was in some kind of restaurant. The air was thick with good smells—ginger and onions and fryer fat—and she could see a smidge of the room the hall

led to. A man sat at a small, cloth-draped table, leaning forward and stabbing his finger at the air the way men did when they thought they were important and people should listen. The woman with him looked bored. They were both Caucasian, but this was a Chinese restaurant. She could tell from the smells and the crimson walls. Out of sight from her vantage point, someone was laughing a quick, barking sort of laugh: ha! ha! ha! Which made her think of Uncle Wu, who laughed in syllables like that, only quieter, huffing it out: Ha. Ha. Ha.

She was breathing really fast. Huffing like Uncle Wu. She clenched her fists and tried to make herself breathe normal. She needed something to be normal.

She felt tired. Tired and kind of heavy, the way she did when she had a cold. She sniffed experimentally. She wasn't stuffed up or anything. Had she been sick? Maybe she'd had a real high fever. A brain fever. Could brain fevers make you forget stuff? Maybe she'd had a terrible brain fever and got over it, but just now she'd had a relapse—that was why she'd been so dizzy—and—

“Excuse us, please,” someone said behind her.

She whirled.

Two women had come out of the restroom. They were kind of old—maybe thirty—and they were dressed funny. Both wore jeans, which was weird. Who wore jeans to a nice restaurant? One had on a big, sloppy sweater, but the other one wore a tight, stretchy shirt that showed everything, like she was a hooker or something. That woman had great big earrings and super-short hair like Mia Farrow and . . . good grief. She had a little gem in her nose, like it was pierced there.

Her mother wouldn't let her pierce her ears, and this woman had pierced her nose!

The two women were looking at her funny. She flushed. She was standing around like an idiot, blocking the hall. She stepped aside. As she did, her foot bumped something. She glanced down.

Someone had left her purse right there in the hall. It was a nice purse, too—black leather, the kind that's so soft you want to pet it. She should tell someone.

She'd taken one uncertain step when someone else came into the hall. A man. He was tall and probably as old as the two women and he was gorgeous. He looked like a movie star—kind of like Clint Eastwood, in fact, who was still her favorite, and she hated that *Rawhide* had gone off the air. Only this man's hair was all dark and shaggy and he had really dramatic eyebrows that weren't like Clint's at all.

The man looked right at her and tipped his head like he was puzzled. She felt a little flutter in her stomach. Then he spoke to her.

“Julia? Are you okay?”

Lily pushed the remains of her Kung Pao chicken around on her plate and tried to look like she was paying attention to her cousin Freddie, who was all excited about implied rates and parity and agio. What the hell was agio? Was that even a word?

She didn't ask. He'd tell her, and God knew how long that would take. It was some kind of broker-speak, though. Probably currency trading, which was his specialty. That was a large part of what he did for Rule these days. Rule's second clan wasn't affluent the way Nokolai was.

“. . . not convinced the baht is on the rise, but . . .” Freddie broke off and chuckled. “Your eyes have glazed over.”

“Sorry.” She and Freddie got along better now that he'd stopped asking her to marry him. She'd even forgiven him for doing so repeatedly without mentioning that he was gay. Turned out he'd been in major denial about that and had only come out of the closet with himself recently. He wasn't ready for the family to know . . . by which he meant his mother.

Lily could understand that. Aunt Jei—who was technically Lily's second cousin, but Lily and her sisters called all their mother's first cousins “aunt” or “uncle”—put the passive in passive-aggressive. She was limp, needy, and full of sighs, a widow with only one child, whom she doted on, clung to, and controlled ruthlessly.

Poor Freddie.

Aunt Jei was probably the reason Rule had excused himself to go to the restroom. He'd been seated next to her, and even Rule could only take so much.

“That's all right,” Freddie said kindly and patted her hand. “You're probably daydreaming about the big day. Only two weeks away now, isn't it?” He beamed at her.

“Two weeks and five days.” After which, she thought with a smile, Rule would be officially related to Aunt Jei, Freddie, and everyone else at this table. Poor man.

They were in the larger of the two private dining rooms at the Golden Dragon, where the family held most such celebrations since it was owned by Uncle Chen—another “uncle” who was really a cousin. The party was smaller than usual this year. None of the children were here, and Grandmother's companion, Li Qin, had broken her foot two days before. It was still too swollen to cast. She was supposed to keep the foot elevated as much as possible, so Grandmother had insisted she stay home. Plus, Lily's younger sister wasn't here, though for a very different reason.

“I attended the wedding of a colleague's daughter recently,” Freddie was saying. “Beautiful girl. It was a very modern sort of ceremony. They wrote their own vows, and when it was time for

toasts . . .”

Lily nodded and let her mind drift. Her mother had told them firmly they were not to make a fuss: “With your wedding so close, it’s too much to ask. Everyone is very busy.” By “everyone,” she meant herself. She and Rule were shouldering the bulk of the work involved in planning a major event, for which Lily was duly grateful. Perhaps a bit more grateful to Rule, true, because it was so obvious that her mother was having a blast.

Lily’s father had wisely ignored his wife’s instructions. Julia Yu loved being fussed over on her birthday.

That fuss had damn well better include presents, too. Lily’s gaze slid to the table behind Freddie. The table held over a dozen gaily wrapped packages. She grinned. Freddie took her grin as tribute to his story about the groom’s toast and chuckled and launched into a tale about someone else she’d never met.

Every year Julia Yu insisted she didn’t need a thing, not a thing, but they knew better. She adored presents—the bright paper and bows, the whole unwrapping ritual. Lily would miss it herself if they ever did skip the gifts. Her mother might be picky and perfectionistic about all sorts of things, but presents were different. Her eyes lit with delight. She exclaimed with pleasure over everything, no matter how odd or humble, and held it up for everyone to admire.

“So what did you get Mother?” she asked when Freddie paused.

“Why, I got her a gift.”

That meant he was dying to tell, but she was supposed to coax him. She glanced at her watch: 8:22. “Guess I’ll find out soon. She’ll be finished primping any—”

The first scream was loud and piercing and terrified. So were the ones that followed. Lily was on her feet and digging into her purse before the others got their dropped jaws working. She wasn’t wearing either shoulder or ankle holster, but she didn’t go anywhere unarmed. These days she carried a Glock 19—durable, reliable, accurate, and the clips held fifteen rounds. The pull was a bit long, but it was lightweight and she liked the grip.

By the time she slammed through the door, she had her weapon out and ready.

Barnaby and Joe were on their feet, faced out. “Hold your positions,” she snapped. The other two guards, Scott and Mark, were already on the other side of the dining room and moving fast as only lupini can. They turned into the hall that led to the restrooms. Lily followed at a quick jog, veering around startled diners and a couple of servers. The screams cut off when she was halfway across the room.

Scott reappeared at the entrance to the hall and smiled at everyone. Scott cultivated the geek look. He wore glasses he didn't need and clothes a bit too large that turned his wiry frame skinny. If you didn't notice how well he moved, you'd think he never did anything more strenuous than tote a laptop. "I think she saw a mouse or something."

There were a couple of nervous laughs. Someone said, "Must have been a really big mouse." More laughter as the roomful of people began to relax.

Rule was in that hall. The mate-sense told Lily that as clearly as if she could see through the wall. Had some woman with a phobia about lupi seen him and freaked? Could be. His face was well-known. Whatever kind of trouble had triggered the screaming, though, she probably wouldn't need her Glock. Scott had put his back to the hall. He wouldn't do that if something needed shooting.

Still, she kept her weapon in her hand, down at her side. Scott gave her an odd look, but stepped aside without speaking. As soon as he did, she stopped dead.

Mark stood a couple feet into the hall. Either he hadn't drawn his weapon or he'd already put it up. A few feet beyond him, Rule stood with his arms around Lily's mother. She was sobbing. Her hands gripped his arms. He was stroking her back and murmuring something. He looked up from his soothing to meet Lily's eyes. He looked baffled.

"Mother?" Lily stepped forward cautiously. She'd never seen her mother come apart like this. Never. To do so in public . . . "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

Julia Yu lifted her head from Rule's shoulder. Mascara streaked her face in long black runnels. "I'm old! I'm so old!"

"You . . . you look great."

Julia shuddered and wailed.

"I was coming down the hall and saw Julia," Rule said carefully. "She looked upset, so I asked if she was all right. She reached up to touch her hair, then started patting her face. Then she screamed."

"Mother—"

"I'm not your mother! I'm not anyone's mother! I'm twelve years old and someone has stuck me in this old, old body!"

The last fifteen months had been difficult. Lily had killed. She'd died herself—or part of her had—and she'd seen someone die for her. She'd dealt with a wraith, too many demons, a Chimea,

a crazy telepath, and a couple of really nasty elves. She had literally been to hell and back. But this . . .

For a long moment her mind was simply blank. Then she thought of psychotic breaks. Then she thought of magic. She swallowed hard and put her weapon back in her purse. “You’re twelve, you said.”

A vigorous nod. “It’s my birthday.”

Yes, it was. Only Julia Yu had turned fifty-seven today, not twelve. “Do you recognize me?”

“N-no. You look kind of familiar, though. Maybe we met sometime?”

“My name is Lily. You’re Julia, right?”

Her mother sniffed. “Julia Lin.”

Lin. Her mother’s maiden name. “I’m an FBI agent. Would you like to see my badge?”

“A real FBI agent?”

“The real thing.” Lily pulled her shield from her purse and held it out. “See?”

Julia Yu released her death grip on one of Rule’s arms so she could lean forward to peer at Lily’s ID. She didn’t reach for it, though. “It looks real.”

“It is. Have you heard about—” Noise behind Lily had her turning. Her father and two of her cousins were at the hall’s entrance. Edward Yu told Scott he’d better step aside right now.

“Edward,” Rule said, “give us a couple more minutes. Please.”

“I’m going to see my wife,” Lily’s father said. “Julia—are you all right?”

“Who’s he?” Julia said, her voice wobbly. “He’s not your husband, is he? He looks too old.”

Lily almost lost it. She swallowed and blinked like crazy and prayed her voice wouldn’t break. “Father. Give me a minute. Please. If magic’s involved—”

“Magic!” Julia cried.

Edward Yu didn’t answer, but he shoved at Scott. Who didn’t budge, of course. Neither of them was a large man, but Scott was lupus.

“Edward.” The cousins parted to allow a small, awesomely erect old woman to come forward. Her black hair was skinned back from her face and fastened in an intricate bun. She wore crimson satin, lavishly embroidered. Grandmother murmured something in Chinese that Lily didn’t catch and laid a hand on her son’s arm, adding in that language, “Something bad has happened. Julia does not know you. We will stay back so we do not overwhelm her.”

Edward Yu frowned hard. His eyes were frantic. “Not long. I won’t wait long.”

Lily turned back to the woman who didn’t know she was a mother. Who thought she was twelve years old. “I’m with Unit Twelve, Julia. Have you heard of that? We investigate crimes connected with magic.”

“Someone put a spell on me, didn’t they? That’s what’s wrong!”

“It’s one possibility. I can find out if you’ll shake my hand.”

Julia’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Why?”

“I’m a touch sensitive. If magic has been used on you—a spell of some kind—I’ll feel it when we touch.” Her mother was null, with not a whisper of a Gift. Any trace of magic Lily found would have been put there by someone else.

Julia cast a worried glance at Rule. He nodded reassuringly. “I guess that’s okay,” she said and held out her hand. It was shaking.

Lily took it in both of hers.

Julia Yu used to play the piano. She had the hands for it, long fingered and graceful. Her manicure was immaculate, the polish a pale pink. The hand Lily held was covered in soft, well-tended skin and a hint of . . . something.

The sensation was so faint Lily wasn’t sure she really felt it. She closed her eyes and tried to shut out every other sense, concentrating on her hands . . . yes. It was like the difference between air that’s completely still air and the merest puff of a breath, but it was there.

“You found magic.” Julia’s voice was high and quick. “You did. I can see it on your face.”

“I found something,” Lily agreed, opening her eyes. Something that bothered her, but she didn’t know why, when she’d barely been able to discern that anything was present at all. Maybe her unease had nothing to do with her Gift and everything to do with whose hand she held. “I don’t know what. It’s very faint. Would you mind if I touched your face?”

“My face? I—I guess not.”

Julia Yu was five inches taller than her second daughter. Lily reached up and laid her palm flat on her mother's cheek.

The skin was soft there, too. Pampered. Had she touched her mother's face at all since she was little? She couldn't remember. Julia was staring at her with such hope, as if Lily could fix things with her touch. Lily's eyes stung, so she closed them. Her hand. She had to focus on her hand.

Not as faint here. Still a barely there sensation, but a bit more present, just as she'd hoped. A spell that tampered with identity or memory should be more concentrated on the head. Only she still didn't know what she was touching. Magic always had a feel to it—slick or rough, intricate or smooth, oily or dry or whatever. This wasn't tactile. More like being in a dark room where you couldn't see a thing, but you knew someone was there. You didn't hear anyone or smell anything. Maybe you sensed the air move or the heat of their body, but you weren't aware of that. You just knew someone was there.

Lily opened her eyes and drew her hand back. Her right hand. Not the one with Rule's diamond. The one with the ring she'd had made to hold the toltoi, the charm the clan had given her when she'd become officially Nokolai. The Lady's token, they called it. "I think . . ." God, she could not cry. Not now. She had to be a cop, not a daughter, right now. She made her voice firm. That was what people needed from a cop—firmness, authority, even when said cop was clueless and wanted badly to curl up in a ball. "I did find something."

"Can you take the spell off? Make it go away?"

"No, I'm not a practitioner. We'll get someone who is, though. Someone who knows a lot more than me." Lily tried to smile reassuringly. She was sure it was a sad and sick failure. "Rule—"

"I'll call Cullen." He tried easing one arm away from Julia. She clutched at him. "I'm right here," he said soothingly. "I've got you. I need to call a friend of mine. He's very good with magic."

Cullen Seaborne was one of a kind, the only Gifted lupus in the world. His Gift was one of the rarest, too. He was a sorcerer, able to see magic much as Lily was able to touch it. He'd have some idea what to do.

Lily sure didn't. She drew a shaky breath. What now? If this had been anyone else, a stranger, what would she be doing right now?

"Lily," Grandmother said. "You will now tell us what you found."

All right. Yes, that was one thing she could do. But first . . . "In just a moment. Rule, I need to give your people some directions."

He had his phone to his ear. He nodded.

“Scott, I need the restaurant exits shut down. No one is to leave. Julia, you’d probably like to sit down. You’ve had a shock. Grandmother, maybe you could take her to—”

“What did you find? What’s wrong with Julia?” That was her father, who had waited all he could. Scott had moved away as soon as Lily gave him his instructions, leaving defense of the hall to Mark, who also didn’t budge when Edward Yu shoved him. Her father’s hands clenched into fists. “Move.”

“Father, I don’t know exactly what’s wrong, but I know this is a Unit matter. I need to talk to Uncle Chen. Will you bring him here?”

His mouth tightened. He cast his wife one long look, then nodded and turned, pushing his way through the crowd gathering at the hall’s entrance. It wasn’t just relatives now—several customers had decided they needed to see what was going on.

“Everyone else—you will go back to your tables. Now.” She whipped the last word out. Several people did back away. None of her family budged. “Mark, keep this hallway clear. Anyone who doesn’t go sit down—” Quickly she amended what she’d been about to say. “Anyone other than Grandmother who doesn’t go sit down will be taken politely but firmly to their table.”

“Don’t be absurd.” That was Paul, her brother-in-law. “You can’t intend for him to lay hands on any of us.”

“This is a crime scene. I mean exactly what I said. I need you to go get Susan.” Lily’s older sister was a dermatologist, so this was way outside her field, but she could at least make sure their mother didn’t go into shock or something.

Being given an assignment tempered Paul’s indignation. He frowned to let her know he did not appreciate her attitude, but he left to get Susan.

“Cullen’s on his way,” Rule said.

Thank God. Though it would take him a while to get here. He was at Nokolai Clanhome, well outside San Diego. “Grandmother, can you take Moth—Julia—into the ladies’ room so she can sit down?” There were a couple of chairs in there.

“Who are all these people?” Julia said plaintively. “I thought I was here with my family, but I don’t see them. Is my mother here? You need to call her. Mrs. Franklin Lin. She’ll be worried. You’d better call her right away.”

Lily met Grandmother’s eyes. Her mother’s mother had died forty-five years ago . . . two months after Julia’s twelfth birthday.

Grandmother stepped forward. “You will allow me to worry about that. I am Madame Yu. I am not your grandmother, but you may call me that, if you wish. Come.” She slid an arm around Julia’s waist, gently but inexorably detaching her from Rule. She was a full head shorter than the younger woman. “You will sit down now. Someone will bring you a glass of water.”

“Can I have a Coke?” Julia asked as she was steered into the ladies’ room.

“A glass of Coca-Cola, then. We will not worry about caffeine tonight.”

The ladies’ room door closed behind them.



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