
UNBINDING, Lupi #18

Chapter 1

excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

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 damndest 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 antidimensional.”

“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.”



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