

-----  
MIND MAGIC, Lupi #19

# Chapter 3

-----  
excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

The guards came as a shock.

She knew about the alarm system and exterior lights. Those had been in use when she lived in the big farmhouse. She knew about the perimeter alarm they'd added, too, having checked the updated schematics through her back door. No problem. There wasn't a tech system yet invented that she couldn't subvert, given enough time. She'd crossed the perimeter with no problems.

Maybe she'd been cocky. No, definitely she'd been cocky. Tech wasn't the only way to keep people out.

Or to keep them in.

Demi pressed her back against the big oak as if she could get it to soak her up if she pushed hard enough. Her heart pounded. Her mouth was dry. Nausea stirred in her gut. She didn't deal well with surprises, even the happy sort. This one was not happy. Her mind was a mess, thoughts shooting off in all directions like accidental fireworks. Her fingers began moving in an automatic pattern, fingering an imaginary flute.

Sensei said once that her mind was her biggest friend and her most terrible enemy. Sensei could say stuff like that and no one laughed at him. It wasn't because he was right, either. He was, but you could be right and people would still laugh at you or get mad. She understood the getting mad. It's like Mama said: people don't like to feel stupid, and sometimes if you're right it means they're wrong, or else just you being right makes them feel dumb, and that makes them mad. She knew how that felt. She didn't understand the laughing, but it always made her feel stupid.

She missed Mama so much.

The tree refused to absorb her. Her fingers kept moving repetitively. Gradually her mind calmed down enough to be useful again. The situation wasn't what she'd expected. She needed to evaluate it before deciding what to do.

Demi was in a small copse of trees about a hundred yards from the big farmhouse. There was some cover between her and her goal—a dip in the grassy meadow that she knew from experience would conceal her as long as she crouched low. That would take her to the barn, which would block her from view of the house as the dip petered out. She'd planned to slip inside the barn, climb to the hay loft, then out the window at the back and into the big elm. From the elm she'd go to the roof of the detached garage; from there to the patio. The motion sensor aimed at the patio was tied into the security system, so that wasn't a problem. She was already hacked into it.

She couldn't hack into eyeballs or the brains and bodies that went with them. The guards had been wearing camo, as if they were soldiers. Maybe they were. Mr. Smith could probably get soldiers if he wanted some.

Why would he want soldiers? What was going on?

She drew a shaky breath. That's what she was here to find out, wasn't it?

The knot of determination in her chest tightened. She wasn't giving up. Nicky was in there. She was ninety percent sure he was. If she was right, all kinds of things she'd thought true were fake and false, lies created to get her to help them do . . . whatever dreadful thing they were doing. Because you didn't lie in order to get people to do wonderful things, did you?

First things first. If Nicky was here, she had to rescue him. Which meant she had to figure out not just how to get in without being seen, but how to get both of them out again. Slowly she sank to the ground, sitting with her knees drawn up. She needed to think. To get her mind pointed in the right direction. If she didn't get all hurried and frantic, she could do this.

First question: should she abort the mission? Not give up, but gather more data, come up with another plan?

She tried to weigh the risk of continuing against the risk of postponing, but she didn't have enough data to make reasonable estimates. What she needed, then, was more data. How many guards were there? Were they armed? Were they really soldiers? Did they stay put or move around?

She didn't know any of that. She'd seen two guards and panicked and kept backing up until she bumped into this tree. She must have been quiet because they hadn't come after her, but all she really remembered was being scared. She still was, but she was thinking again.

It was three o'clock on a sunny September afternoon. The sun would be up for hours. She had time and a tall tree at her back. She stood, crouched, and launched herself at the lowest limb, grabbed it, and scrambled up.

Climbing was Demi's one athletic skill. She went up that tree like an oversize squirrel, stopping

when she reached a convenient fork that gave her a good view of the house and grounds. She straddled it with her back to the trunk and looked out.

Still two guards, one at the east end of the house, one on the west side. Those sure looked like Army fatigues, with their billed caps and the pants tucked into combat boots. There was some kind of insignia on the sleeve of the closest guard. That made her stomach unhappy. So did the holstered gun.

Grimly she pulled out her phone and tapped in the data: 3:05 Guard 1 by fountain; Guard 2 25 ft. fr. west wall (dining rm) Then she took pictures of the guards using the phone's zoom feature and got a fairly good shot of the insignia so she could check it out later. She couldn't do that now. The phone was in airplane mode so it wouldn't ping any nearby cell towers. That was probably excessive caution on her part, but why take a chance if she didn't have to?

Right now the guards were staying put. She set herself to watch. While she watched, she thought about minimum force.

When she first began taking lessons from Sensei, he'd talked about how minimum force was the idea behind every martial art. You learned how to spend the least possible force, often using your opponent's own force to defeat him. This, Sensei said, was what everyone tried to do in every aspect of life: use the least effort possible in order to achieve a goal. No one used one bit more effort than he or she thought was necessary. The trick was in figuring out what that minimum was and how to apply it. That's what people got wrong. That's what they would learn to do in his class.

Demi had been fascinated by the concept. For the next few months, she'd tried to find examples of people intentionally using more effort than was needed. The first one that occurred to her was studying for a test. Some people crammed like crazy, going way overboard. But that, Sensei had said, was because their goal wasn't to ace the test, but to reduce their anxiety about the test. Because they couldn't control what was on the test, they could never eliminate that anxiety entirely, so they kept trying to memorize more and more facts.

Another time she'd suggested that suicide bombers broke the rule. Sensei agreed that they appeared to do so, because giving one's life to achieve a goal could be considered spending the maximum possible to any person. But if your goal is to be a martyr, death is the minimum requirement. And those who sent a suicide bomber out to kill strangers were obviously expending the minimum force. They exchanged one life for several of those they considered enemies and caused fear in hundreds or thousands more.

She'd come up with lots more examples, but after awhile she could shoot them down herself with a little thought. People mostly weren't very good at estimating the amount of effort needed. Mostly they underestimated it, which was why diets failed so often. People tried to make sweeping changes without allowing for how difficult, how against their nature, this was. Incremental change worked better because each step felt like the minimum necessary. On the

other hand, when people were scared they often overestimated the amount of force needed. That's why police departments had rules and training for when it was okay to use deadly force. You couldn't rely on instinct when you were scared. Your instinct might be to shoot whatever was scaring you, and that could be a terrible mistake.

Demi had also come to realize that when people seemed to use disproportionate force, she'd probably misidentified their goal. As she sat high in the tree watching the guards and brooding, she fought valiantly to persuade herself she could fix this, could find some way to avoid being seen by those soldiers. Nicky had been missing for a week now. She didn't think they would actually torture him, but he must be miserable and frightened. Who knew what kind of pressure they were putting on him to do—well, whatever it was they wanted him to do? Given the nature of his Gift, it must be something awful. She had to get him out.

Only she couldn't. Not yet. Her chest ached with the knowledge. She hung her head. Nicky, I'm sorry. I'll be back.

The dreadful truth was that she'd overlooked the obvious.

The amount of force people use is always in proportion to their goal. She'd been ninety percent sure that Mr. Smith had lied about his goal for the enclave, yet she hadn't reevaluated the amount of effort he might employ to secure it. She'd acted as if nothing had changed, trying to sneak into the enclave the same way she used to sneak out of it.

She had been downright woolly-headed. That stung.

Demi's eyes watered. Angrily she rubbed them. Much as she hated it, today's plan was a bust. She was going to have to go back to campus and come up with another one. She began making her way down the tree, going a lot more slowly than she'd climbed up.

A stick cracked. She froze in an awkward crouch, one foot firmly placed on a thick branch, the other foot reaching below it for the next one. Her heart pounded. That might have been anything--

Faint but clear, she heard the rustle of feet. Coming this way? She thought so. Oh, God, of God, now what? She was going to be sick. No, she wasn't. She refused to throw up and give herself away. She'd get herself firmly planted on this branch and hold extremely still. She was still fairly high up, with branches and leaves and all between her and the ground. Maybe whoever it was wouldn't see her.

Slowly, careful not to make noise, Demi made herself secure and held very, very still. Even when the pair of soldiers moved into view, heading right for her tree, she didn't move. She may have stopped breathing.

The soldiers carried rifles slung over their shoulders. The man with them did not.

He was a round little man. Not fat, but with a bureaucrat's round little tummy and gray slacks. His cheeks were plump and pink, his head round as a bowling ball and almost as bald. Even his glasses were round. He stopped at the base of her tree and looked up. Those glasses winked at her as light glinted off them.

“Demi.” Mr. Smith shook his head sadly. “You might as well come down.”



For more information on this book,  
and other books by Eileen Wilks,  
visit [eileenwilks.com](http://eileenwilks.com).