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TEMPTING DANGER, Lupi #1

# Chapter 7

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excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

A scrappy little road wound up into the mountains northeast of the city. About twenty miles up that road some forgotten county planner had stationed a scenic overlook boasting a cement picnic table and a metal trash drum. At eleven o'clock Rule was waiting there, leaning against his car with his arms crossed and his nose lifted.

The sun was a glaring disk in an empty sky, but there was wind--a sharp, dusty wind smelling of sage and creosote and rabbit. Before him the folded earth descended in irregular humps to the city, satisfyingly distant. A mile up the road, hidden by scruffy oaks and the curve of the little road, lay the entrance to Nokolai lands.

Rule closed his eyes and wished for time. He needed to be in two places at once right now--and neither was where he wanted to be. He'd been trying to reach Cullen all morning. He needed to find him, or at least find out if his friend had pulled one of his disappearing acts. Every so often Cullen dropped out of sight, telling no one here he was going or when he'd be back. It was annoying at the best of times.

This was not the best of times.

Rule held himself in quietness, trying to settle. It had been too long since he'd run these hills in his other form. Too long since he'd even walked them in this one. He needed to absorb and be absorbed by the land, and there was no time . . . yet he was here now.

He looked upwind, searching out the source of the rabbit scent, and found it beneath a scrubby bush, where a dun-colored patch of fur quivered, barely distinguishable from the dirt. Rule watched, motionless himself, and breathed deeply. It helped.

Her face floated across the surface of his mind . . . a heart-shaped face with a strong, straight nose and eyes like black almonds. When she smiled, her mouth made a pretty triangle and her cheeks rounded. He thought of her skin--thick cream, with honey stirred in. And her scent. A

touch spicy. Wholly human. Unique.

The memory aroused him, turned him restless. He wanted to see her now, not two hours from now.

And that, he thought, was not a good sign. Not good at all.

A few minutes later, tires crunched on gravel. The rabbit bolted from its hiding spot. Rule turned to watch a dirty gray Jeep pull up behind his convertible. Two men got out instead of the single man he'd been expecting. Both wore jeans and athletic shoes. Both were bare from the waist up. One--the Jeep's driver--had three long scars across his chest, remnants of the attack two days ago.

He was a big man, with the build of a fullback and a basketball player's hands. Unusually dark for a lupus, he had his mother's coppery skin. His silver-shot hair was black and very short. The leather sheath on his back held a machete; the one at his waist was for his knife. The blades of both would be sharp, Rule knew, in spite of the softness of the metal. There was too much silver in the alloy for it to hold an edge well.

The Jeep's passenger was built like the blade the first man carried--long and slim, with broad, bony shoulders standing in for the hilt. His face was narrow, his skin and eyes pale, and his light brown hair was long enough to tie back. Most people would have guessed him to be about Rule's age.

They would have been right. But then, most people didn't know Rule's real age. "Mick." Rule straightened, a familiar wariness stealing the bit of ease he'd snatched. "I didn't know you were here."

"Drove down," the slighter of the two men said as he approached. "The vineyard can toddle along without me for a few days. Toby sends his love," he added. "Along with a request for Sweet Tarts or anything else to rot his teeth. You know how Nettie is about a healthy diet."

Rule's heart jumped. "You saw him?"

"For a few minutes, before the slave-drivers carted him off to his lessons. You're overreacting there," Mick added. "No need to yank the boy clear across the country. No lupus would harm a child."

Rule just shook his head. Mick didn't know about Cullen or what he'd discovered. For now, that's how Rule wanted it. He held out his hand and the two of them clasped forearms in formal greeting--then Mick grinned and pounded Rule's back hard enough to have staggered a human.

It wasn't the mock-friendly blow that had Rule pulling back, his lip lifting in a snarl, knees flexed and arms ready at his sides. It was the scent.

The big man gripped Mick's shoulder. His voice was cavern-deep. "Cry pax."

"For the Lady's sake, I just slapped him on the back!"

Benedict snorted. "You stink of so much seru even a human would react. I've no time to waste on this foolishness. Cry pax."

Mick looked sullen, but he muttered the word. Rule eased his stance, but it would take a while for the chemicals flooding his body to disperse.

"And you," Benedict told him, "had better learn control. The Lu Nuncio can't afford to react like a challenge-crazed adolescent."

Rule's lips tightened. He didn't react that way anymore--except with Mick. "I know. I'm on edge."

"All the more need for control." Benedict released Mick's shoulder. "We need to get straight to business. I don't want to be away from the Rho for long."

"Your choice," Rule said. "We could have met closer to him." Why had Benedict brought Mick to their meeting? He must know there were things Rule couldn't discuss with anyone else present.

"I argued with him about that, believe it or not," Mick said, rubbing his shoulder. "Not that it did any good. But I don't see any reason to ban you from Clanhome."

Benedict favored him with one of those expressionless looks that used to make Rule squirm, back when Benedict was training him. "You're very tender about your brother's rights."

"I suppose you expected me to rejoice that he's banned." One side of Mick's mouth tucked down. He looked away. "I've got a problem with my little brother being Lu Nuncio. You know it, he knows it, everyone knows it. Maybe that makes me all the more angry when someone else shows disrespect."

"The ban is customary. Wait." He slashed a hand through the air, cutting Mick off. "I'm aware that custom bars him from the Rho's presence, not Clanhome. But Isen agreed with my decision."

Mick looked shocked. Rule wasn't. He'd guessed as much. Isen hadn't been asleep or in sleep the whole time. He could have countermanded Benedict's orders . . . if he'd wanted to.

"Rule," Mick said, "I--I don't know what to say. Our father can't suspect you."

Rule shrugged, ignoring the ugly tangle in his gut as best he could. "Isen always has reasons for what he does."

“If it makes you feel any better,” Mick said, “I’m not allowed to see him yet, either.” He gave Benedict a sour look.

Benedict was unmoved. “I let you tag along so I wouldn’t have to say everything twice. So listen.”

Anger flashed in Mick’s eyes. “So speak.”

“It looks as if Nokolai has a traitor.”



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