
NIGHT SEASON, Lupi #7

Prologue

excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

In the east, dawn smeared a promise across the inky sky, but air and earth were dark yet. At an abandoned house just outside Midland, Texas, a pair of headlights shut off. A man and a woman climbed out of a 2005 Toyota Corolla.

“I keep thinking we’ve forgotten something,” the woman said as she popped the trunk. She was tall and angular, with a runner’s build and with strong shoulders—not pretty, but more striking than some. She wore jeans, hiking boots, and a dark sweater; no makeup. Her hair was long and straight, a medium brown, her skin an indeterminate tan that looked more Anglo than not, but she had the broad, high cheeks and strong nose of her mother’s people, the Diné. Navajo, as outsiders named them. “I always forget something.”

The man gave her a singularly sweet smile. He was also tall, angular, and athletic, his only remarkable facial feature his eyes. The gray of a winter sky, they were heavily lashed and set off by the dark slashes of his brows. Some might guess him to have native blood as well, based on his coppery skin and black hair.

They would be wrong. “We have everything on our list,” he said as they pulled camping equipment from the trunk. “If we failed to plan for some need, we’ll make do. You’re frightened.”

She nodded, though she looked and sounded almost placid. “Not all the way to real panic yet. About a six on the ohmygod scale.”

“Well, then.” He put down the duffle bag he’d been holding and folded her up in his arms instead. “Let’s see if we can get it down to a four, at least.”

“Mmm,” she said after a moment, the sound muffled by his neck. “Yes, but we won’t get much done like this. My anxieties say inaction would be fine, the lying rats, that we can just stand around and nuzzle each other. But your queen is going to expect some promptness, I think.”

“Among other things. She’s a great one for expectations.” He let a few inches come between them without releasing her. “You’re all right, Kai?”

“I guess I can be scared and okay at the same time. Excited, too. It’s a whole new world, after all. I’m still all boggled about it.” Kai drew air in through her nose, sighed it out, and nodded once. “Let’s get moving.”

She shrugged into her backpack and tucked the sleeping bags beneath her arms. They’d not be afoot long, so the weight wasn’t a major issue. Still, he carried more of it, which was sensible. He was probably five times as strong as her normally, and she wasn’t normal now. Hunger gnawed at her, a hunger food couldn’t satisfy since it wasn’t hers. She tired quickly, too.

Not for much longer, though.

Her backpack held a change of clothes, thermal underthings, plenty of clean socks and underwear, their medical kit, and a few more odds and ends. He carried the heavier items-- their cleverly compact tent, camping tools, and trade goods: several packets of cinnamon, a roll of zippable plastic bags; a pair of small, sharp axes; four very fine knives; two boxes of nails; a hammer and a small spade; and a pound each of gold and silver made up as chains.

He lifted the oversize duffle and they walked slowly away from the car. Her friend, Ginger, would retrieve it later today. Ginger knew Kai was leaving with Nathan, but had no inkling just how far they meant to travel. The story Kai had given her for abandoning the vehicle out here was pretty lame, as Ginger had pointed out several times, but Kai was used to Ginger’s inquisitiveness. And Ginger was used to not getting all of her questions answered.

She hoped hard that she would see her friend again. “You’re looking forward to this.”

“Parts of it, yes. Your home is lovely, but I’ve been here a long time. And even with the recent influx of magic, it’s still a bit thin here for me.” Without breaking stride or changing tone he added, “You’ll do, Kai. I know you’ve doubts, and that’s as it should be, for this quest is a testing. But you’ll do.”

And that, of course, was where the ohmygod scale came from. Not a fear of running out of tampons. Though she sincerely hoped she’d packed enough, if she hadn’t she’d make do. The fear that she couldn’t learn enough, understand enough, to do what she was supposed to—oh, yes, that was huge.

One step at a time, she reminded herself, following him through the darkness around the side of the old house. He could see here, she thought. She couldn’t, not yet, certainly not in the shadow of the derelict building. She couldn’t hear his footsteps, either. Just her own.

They reached what she would have called the back yard had it possessed anything other than

dirt, trash, and dead weeds. Kai could see those weeds now, their rusty skeletons smudging air on its way from black to gray. The sky had lightened from ink to charcoal overhead, with a band of steel along the horizon. She moved up beside him.

Like Grandfather said, swallowing tomorrow's troubles will give you gas today. And yet . . . "I don't see why we're doing it this way. You could find it. That's what you do."

"I could, once I got the scent. But that isn't what my queen wishes. And no," he said with a sideways smile for her, "while her wishes are sufficient for me, I don't expect you to accept them without a question or two. I imagine she saw something that led her to send us this way about things, rather than another."

"By 'saw' do you mean foreseeing? Or farseeing?"

"Likely both. Odds are she has her hand on a pattern developing there, and this is the best way for it to proceed."

"Or she may just want to make this as hard as possible on me."

"That's also possible. Eh." He rubbed his nose with his free hand. "You're all puckered with worry, and a bit angry, too, and I'm still giddy with relief, which is a bad match in our moods. But it will work out, Kai. You'll see."

Nathan was giddy because his queen hadn't killed her six days ago. Kai had been pretty relieved herself at the time. The queen and her brother had thought she was a binder, a rare and dangerous type of telepath who could bind others to her will. Nathan had stood for her, placing himself between them and her, though he couldn't have stopped them. They'd all known that.

But he'd bought a pause, one in which the queen had listened, because she loved him enough to give him that much. In the end, Kai was allowed to live—for now. But not here. Not where people couldn't protect themselves from her.

She felt the bitterness coating that thought. She also saw it, strings of greasy gray wrapping the thought as if to mummify it. Oh, she'd seen what happened if you held onto such thoughts, seen people trapped by bitter thoughts too long hoarded, how the grayness strangled all the color out of them. She took a breath and did her best to let the thought and the bitterness go, and was rewarded as they faded away.

Kai wasn't exactly a telepath. She wasn't a non-telepath, either, just as she wasn't exactly a binder, yet could do some of what binders did. Her Gift baffled everyone, including herself. Maybe most of all, herself. She didn't read minds, but she saw thoughts and the emotions connected to those thoughts. And sometimes, when conditions were just right—or wrong--she changed minds. Literally.

After a lifetime of suppressing that particular talent, now she had to learn how to master it. Quickly. Before it mastered her.

She felt the purr before she heard it, a low rumbling in her mind. A moment later a lumpy spot ten feet ahead of them shifted and stretched, becoming eight feet of dappled gray cat. Kai smiled. “Dell’s purely glad about this, anyway.”

“She understands we’re leaving now?”

“Oh, yes.” The bond they’d formed was very new, the intimacy of it sometimes unsettling, and some concepts didn’t travel well between minds so different. But Kai knew Dell understood that her long hunger was nearly over.

They’d reached the rendezvous. Kai set one of the sleeping bags down so she could rub behind one tall, tufted ear as the big cat stropped herself against Kai’s legs. Dell had learned that her human was easily unbalanced, so her affection was tempered by care. “She’s eager.”

Dell would be much better off where they were going, and that gave Kai a happiness to hang on to. If the magic here was somewhat thin for Nathan, it was starvingly low for the chameleon-cat—which was why Kai had begun to tire. The familiar bond ran both ways, and the power the queen had generously offered Dell to sustain her while Kai and Nathan readied themselves for the trip was gone now.

“Best pick up the sleeping bag. It’s time, Kai.”

“What?” But she stooped to retrieve it. “I don’t see . . . is she here?”

“She doesn’t have to be here. It isn’t a true gate. I explained that.”

He had, but that wasn’t to say she understood. Somehow Nathan’s queen was reaching him though she wasn’t even in this world, broadening his innate ability to cross between realms so he could take with him things that were his—clothes, gear, and Kai. Who would bring Dell with her.

“Focus on your bond with Dell.” His voice was low. He stared ahead at something she couldn’t see at all.

She took a breath and did her best to slip into the state she’d avoided all her life, the condition she called fugue. At first it wouldn’t come. She allowed the frustration to wash through her, focusing only on Dell, the bright, simple colors of her familiar’s thoughts.

Gradually her breathing eased and her mind slid into that other place, where the colors and shapes of thoughts drew her, their shifting endlessly fascinating . . . a place where she could lose

herself. Had lost herself as a child. A place where her own thoughts could reach out and touch the minds of others, change them. Where the compulsion to do just that could be overwhelming.

But Dell's thoughts were clear and true, triggering no urge to meddle. Her heartbeat steadied and she found the bond between them, a smooth, pale tube just tinged with yellow, and she smiled it stronger. Brighter.

She felt Nathan's hand on her shoulder. "Now," he said, his voice the only thing in the world besides the colors, "we walk forward."

So she did, trusting him, smiling at how beautiful his colors were, and how intricate, the shapes flowing into a new pattern, then another, each elegant and enticing, endlessly fascinating . . .

A sharp pain in her cheek made her gasp—and brought her back, dizzy, into the world of the senses. A world different from the one she'd been in only moments ago. Snow whirled through the night air, damp and cold on her skin. She looked around, but could see neither buildings nor road, only the endless, muted white of the storm.

But Dell was warm beside her, gloriously excited and urgent. Nathan stood before her, worry tilting his brows down. "I'm back," she said, "though we really need to find something other than pain to get my attention." The hot sting in her cheek suggested he'd had to slap her out of fugue this time.

"We need jackets. Gloves for you." He unzipped the duffel.

She gripped the sleeping bags close. "I was expecting something more . . . inhabited."

"There's a village or holding east of here."

Relief swept through her. "You know where we are, then."

He found a smile, this one apologetic. "No. I smell woodsmoke. Here."

They shuffled burdens between them so both could don their jackets. Hers was quilted, hooded, good to subzero temps if she added the lining. She didn't. It was cold, but not much below freezing. She'd warm quickly once they started moving. "Dell's hungry. Can I--?"

"Yes. Don't worry." But the last was addressed to the cat, not Kai. "I'll watch out for her."

In spite of her eagerness to hunt, Dell studied Nathan a moment. Kai could feel the big cat considering whatever communication she'd received from him—not the spoken words Kai had heard, but something. Then she vanished into the snow-blurred night.

Kai tugged on her gloves. Dell considered her too weak to survive on her own. In this place, she was likely right. “Can you tell if the others have come through yet? The ones we’re to follow?”

He tilted his head as if listening, though she had no idea what sense he was actually consulting. “We have two or three weeks, I think. I stepped somewhat backwards as we came through.”

“Backwards?”

“Time isn’t entirely congruent between Earth and Edge. There’s enough flex to allow me some choice. Forward would be tricky, but it wasn’t so hard to slide it back a bit.”

She stared. “You can adjust time?”

“No.” He was patient. “But when two realms aren’t time-congruent, it becomes one of the one of the choices I make when crossing.”

He thought that made sense. Ah, well. She had a great deal to learn about him still. They’d been friends for two years, but lovers for only six days.

And now they were supposed to rescue this world, or play a part in its rescue, anyway. If she could make her Gift work. “We’d better get moving.”



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