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“Human Nature” short story, Lupi #11

# *Chapter 1*

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excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

“Sorry I’m late,” Lily called as she sped for the stairs. “I need to shower and change, but I’ll hurry.”

“They’ll hold the reservation.”

The man who’d spoken came out of the dining room that bridged the parlor with the kitchen. His black dress shirt was unbuttoned at the neck. His black dress slacks broke at just the right point on his black shoes. His hair stopped just short of black, being mink brown, thick, and a bit long for current fashion. He had a lean face, sharp-featured, with a sensuous mouth and eyes the same color as his hair. The dark slashes of his eyebrows mirrored the pitch of his cheekbones.

Dressing all in black made most men look like Goth wannabes. Not Rule. Maybe it was the excellent body beneath the civilized clothing that made it work. Maybe it was the sheer arrogance of the man. He looked good. He knew it. He would have looked good in tattered jeans, a doorman’s uniform, or in nothing at all.

He knew that, too. Lily’s heartbeat hitched and she paused without intending to, one hand on the banister, and just looked at him.

Mine.

It was a thought, an attitude, Rule wouldn’t have approved. Tough. He was hers and sometimes she just had to revel in that. In him.

“This is supposed to be dinner, not a race,” Rule said mildly as he walked toward her. “If you . . .” Those wonderful eyebrows drew down. “Is that your blood?”

The way she stood, with one foot on the stairs and her back mostly to him, he couldn’t have seen it. Must have smelled it. “Damned gremlins,” she muttered, and turned. “Yes, but it’s a scratch, no

more. I was careless.”

His eyes were getting blacker. Too black.

“There’s no one for you to kill,” she said firmly. “The surviving imps have already been sent back.”

“Imps?” His eyes returned to normal and his eyebrows lifted. “I hadn’t heard of an outbreak.”

“It wasn’t a biggie. Probably be on tonight’s news, but the gist is that a seventeen-year-old idiot in Arlington used a spell from some Internet site to summon a demon. He got a handful of imps instead.”

The eyebrows went higher. “This spell was on the Internet?”

She sighed. “So not good news, is it? MCD tries. They have people watching for stuff like that, but they can’t catch everything.” It would be worse, of course, if any of the summoning spells actually worked. This one had been more effective than most, since it actually did summon something.

Damned imps. “Supposedly the major search engines will wipe out the cache they have for that site, but who knows how many idiots have already seen it? Listen, I need that shower. If you want to hear more—”

“You need to be tended. Imps’s claws aren’t poisonous, but they probably weren’t clean, either.”

She waved that aside. “The EMTs already cleaned up the wound. Scratch,” she amended. “It’s long but shallow, honest. I just want to wash off, forget about minor hellspawn, and go eat something fancy by candlelight.”

“Hmm.” He studied her face, but whatever he saw there seemed to reassure him. “There may be a present involved, also.”

“Another one?” He’d already given her earrings—exquisitely handmade lilies made from citrine, topaz, garnets, and what she suspected were emeralds. And the way he’d given them to her . . . well. Rule was big on presentation.

She grinned and started up the stairs. “Even better.”

He followed. “I thought the FBI used Wiccans to deal with imps.”

“They do. We do,” Lily corrected herself. Now and then she still spoke as if she weren’t an FBI agent herself, though it had been almost six months since Ruben Brooks recruited her for his special Unit. Which just proved how weird minds could be, considering the intensive training

she'd almost finished at Quantico.

Training that had been much interrupted. Major upheavals between the realms will do that. "But the teenage idiot did his summoning just as I was headed back from Quantico, which of course Ida knew, since she knows everything, so she sent me. There were a couple patrol officers on-scene, but they aren't trained for imps. Still, we were able to keep them contained until the coven arrived."

"You had help, then."

"Sure. Those two uniforms." She unbuttoned her blouse and pulled it off. "Trash. This is just trash now." She sighed. The shirt was the perfect shade of red for her, but even if she got the blood out, the silk was ripped.

He took the shirt from her. "Here, I'll get rid of it. You and two uniformed officers kept an imp outbreak contained?"

"It wasn't an outbreak," she said, heading for the bathroom. The row house had been built in the nineteen-teens, way before people routinely put in master baths, so there was a single bathroom on each floor. But the bathroom on this floor was the one thing she'd miss when she finally finished her training and went home . . . marble floor, granite-topped counter with vessel sinks, a glass-walled shower stall, and a huge tub.

No time for that tub now. She reached into the shower stall and turned on the hot water. "Five of the nasty little creatures don't constitute an outbreak—just a huge pain in the ass. Good thing Gan's idea about baiting them with blood worked."

She fell silent. Gan—a former demon who'd become a friend in the most unlikely way—was missing. So was Lily's boss. So were two even dearer friends, Cynna Weaver and Cullen Seabourne. They'd been kidnapped, along with a few others—like a special assistant to the president and a trigger-happy FBI agent Lily had worked with. Not just kidnapped, either, but snatched into another realm. There was no saying if or when they'd return.

Lily was not naturally an optimist. What cop was? But she was determined to believe they were okay. All of them. They were okay, and sooner or later they'd find a way to come home. She refused to consider other possibilities—at least for six months. That's the deal she'd made with herself. For six months she'd assume the best instead of the worst.

Rule took her shoulder, turned her to face him, and kissed her gently on the lips. "They'll be fine, Lily. Even your obnoxious orange friend."

She found a smile. "I think it's my turn to say that."

“Nope.” He skimmed her lips with his again. “Mine. As often as I want it to be.”

Somehow she and Rule had managed to trade off worry periods. When anxiety about their friends started to choke her, he was feeling steady. When he was hurting, she'd been able to summon enough confidence to reassure or distract him. The thing was, their missing friends mattered to her, but one of them—Cullen Seabourne—mattered hugely to Rule. They were lifelong friends, heart friends, the kind you'd risk your life for . . . but there was no risk Rule could take that would bring Cullen back.

So Lily smiled and agreed. “They'll be back, safe and sound. But worrying is my hobby, remember? Speaking of which . . . maybe you should call the restaurant, make sure they won't cancel our reservation?”

This time his kiss suggested he'd just as soon be even later, but he straightened without following through. “They'll hold our table. Knowing how unpredictable your job can be, I made it clear they were to hold it if we were late.”

“Okay, then.”

“I'm going to take this”—he wiggled the shirt he still held—“to the Dumpster outside. The smell . . . bothers me.”

“Because of the blood? Or because it's my blood?”

He smiled. “Yes.”



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