
“Inhuman” short story, Lupi #6

Chapter 1

excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

Kai Tallman Michalski stood at her kitchen sink looking out the window. In daytime she would have seen mesquite, tumbleweed, and the pale grasses of winter stretched across land as flat as her frying pan. But it was after eight o'clock at night in late January, and her apartment complex perched at the very edge of town. Beyond the reach of the parking area's lights, across the wide road that ran along the back of the complex, darkness waited.

Lightning stitched from one black-hung pocket of sky to the next. Eight seconds later, thunder rumbled like a giant's empty belly.

Her own belly tightened.

“Where's your plastic wrap?”

She twitched all over like a nervous horse.

“Chill,” Jackie said. “It's just me.”

Kai turned away from the window to see her friend standing in a tiny kitchen aglow with color. Ghostly patterns swam through the air, some soft as a soap bubble, some so vibrant they seemed almost solid.

She clenched her fist, digging her fingernails into her palm. Pain was a quick way to focus—handy, too, since it was always available. The colors faded to a transparent overlay, barely visible. “Sorry. I phased out watching the storm rolling in on us. Listen, y'all don't have to clean up.”

Jackie rolled her eyes. The transparent sea around her was olive shaded with royal blue. Small, discrete shapes swam in her colors like agitated minnows. “Plastic wrap,” she repeated. She jiggled the platter she held, still half-full of broccoli, carrots, and bell pepper.

As usual, the vegetables had gone largely unappreciated. Kai always put them out—she liked them, even if no one else did. “In the bottom drawer by the stove. But there isn’t much mess, and the storm—”

“Now, Kai.” A chunky blond zipped through the arch between the kitchen and the living area, her hands full of glasses. The colors swimming around her were as quick and lively as her hands as she plunked glasses in the dishwasher. Ginger was twenty years older than Kai and Jackie, but she didn’t move like it. “That storm will bother you a lot more than it does us. You need to learn to accept help gracefully, like Jackie does.”

Kai’s smile stretched across her face, slow and amused. “Jackie does almost everything gracefully. Then she opens her mouth.”

“Hey.” Jackie’s eyebrows lifted above eyes almost the same warm mocha as her skin. “You think I can’t chew on my foot gracefully?”

Ginger patted the taller woman on the arm. “We love you anyway, sweetie. So,” she said, ripping off a paper towel and turning on the water to dampen it. “Y’all are going to the rally tomorrow, right?”

“Count me out.” Jackie’s colors looked upset, the shapes breaking up and reforming. “If what Kai said about those two people who were killed is true—”

“It is,” Kai said quietly, opening the refrigerator to put away three unopened Cokes and two cans of Dr. Pepper. “You won’t read about it in the paper, but they were both Gifted.”

“So we’re supposed to band together and march in public, demanding our rights?” Jackie snorted. “Might as well hang a sign around my neck: Gifted here. Come get me. Even if the psycho who whacked those two people doesn’t come after me, other nulls might. Like my boss. Or the idiots in Reverend Barclay’s congregation. Bet they’d be thrilled to know exactly who to hate.”

“We’ve got to do something.” Ginger was uncharacteristically serious. “We can’t let them march us off a cliff without speaking up.”

“Not everyone has your nerve,” Kai said. “But I suppose I’ll go. If you . . .” Her voice trailed off.

Jackie’s colors were too jumpy, too dark. She was a deeply reluctant medium who did her best not to contact the dead, but sometimes they pushed their way in. “Hey.” Kai put a hand on Jackie’s shoulder. “What’s wrong? Is one of the dearly departed giving you a hard time?”

“No. It’s nothing. Here.” Jackie thrust the wrapped veggies at her.

Deliberate lies were snot green. Something was wrong, but Jackie didn't want to talk about it, so she lied.

Kai didn't call her on it. She accepted the platter and found room for it in the refrigerator. People lied in so many ways, for so many reasons. Most lies weren't malicious. People dodged the truth to spare someone's feelings, to avoid long explanations, to get what they wanted, to fit in, to avoid the consequences of their actions.

Kai knew that good people lied, sometimes for good reasons. She just wished they'd stop. Which, of course, made her quite the hypocrite. She might only lie about one thing, but it was a whopper.

"So how's Nathan?" Ginger asked, whisking herself back into the living room, paper towel in hand.

The question wasn't the non sequitur it seemed. Kai had told everyone who showed up tonight about the two victims being Gifted; she wanted her friends to be wary. She hadn't told them how she knew, but they would assume the information came from Nathan.

As, of course, it had.

"More to the point," Jackie added, "where's Nathan? How come he didn't show? He always comes to your parties."

Gayle laughed. "Comes? He's usually here anyway."

"He had to work tonight." Kai looked around. The kitchen was spotless, so she headed for the living area. "Besides, this wasn't my usual sort of get-together. Ginger, there isn't a thing left to clean in here."

"I guess you'd know his schedule." Ginger tossed her a grin as she wiped down the coffee table, a garage-sale find Kai had painted turquoise and coral and black. "Though I can't believe y'all are still paying for two apartments when you spend most of your time in just one."

Jackie's dark, angular face broke out in a smile. "So you and Nathan aren't just friends! I didn't see how you could be. I mean, the guy is seriously hot in a tall, dark and uncommunicative sort of way, and you're hetero, right? And the two of you look good together, like bookends. You're both so buff and bony."

Ginger hooted. "Jackie's mouth strikes again!"

Jackie grimaced. "I didn't mean—"

“No, of course you didn’t.” Kai smiled. “But Nathan and I aren’t lovers. We spend a lot of time together because we’re friends, and because he’s teaching me self defense. He—”

“And you’re teaching him computers,” Ginger broke in. “And you run together. And eat dinner together half the time.”

Kai looked at Jackie. “Ginger likes to think she’s matchmaking with these little comments she makes. It’s annoying, but I haven’t been able to hint her into stopping.”

“Hint!” Ginger laughed. “If I ever learn how to say things as bluntly as you do without people wanting to slap me—”

“It’s that Buddha smile,” Jackie said. “She smiles like that and you can’t get mad.”

“I think I’m blushing,” Kai said.

“Really?” Ginger made a point of pressing her hand to Kai’s cheek. “Nope. Not a hint of heat.”

Kai looped an arm around Ginger’s shoulders and hugged. “Okay, not blushing, but I feel like I should be. Now, that gully washer is nearly here, so you two need to be on your way. I don’t want to worry about you getting home safely.”

Ginger returned the hug. “We’ll be fine. But you’ll do better if we aren’t around when it hits, won’t you?”

“What?” Jackie frowned, looking from one of them to the other. “I’m missing something here.”

“You know Kai’s Gift has a hitch in its gallop?”

“Well, yeah, but erratic empathy isn’t such a bad deal. Who wants to feel everything everyone else feels all the time?”

“So true. Problem is, it goes wonky when there’s a storm. Sometimes she gets nothing. Sometimes every feeling for a mile around washes right in on her.”

Jackie looked appalled.

“Not to worry.” Kai patted Jackie’s arm reassuringly. “Someone gave me a recipe for a tea that helps. It’s got a little magical boost that helps me shut things down. But I’ll sleep after drinking it, and I can’t do that until--”

“Until your guests are gone,” Jackie finished for her. “Got it.” She retrieved her coat from the

couch and handed Ginger her jacket. “Come on, Ginger. I can’t leave until you do, remember? I rode here with you.”

Ginger just grinned. “Would that friend who gave you the tea be Nathan, by any chance?”

“If I’d wanted you to know who it was, I would have used his or her name. Go home, Ginger.”

“Because I’ve wondered if Nathan was Wiccan. That’s not a big deal in some parts of the country, but here in the Bible Belt it can be. Especially now. With Nathan being a deputy, it could mean trouble if he were known to be a witch. So I thought that might be his big secret. He’d have to be a solo practitioner, since he’s not part of my coven, but—”

“Home.” Kai grabbed Ginger’s purse from the couch and held it out.

A few minutes later, Kai shut the door behind her friends. She breathed a sigh of relief. She loved Ginger dearly, but her friend’s inquisitiveness could be a trial, and Nathan’s secrets weren’t hers to disclose.

Not that she knew many of his secrets, but she knew the biggie. Part of it, anyway. Nathan wasn’t Wiccan or Gifted because those were human labels. And Nathan wasn’t human.



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