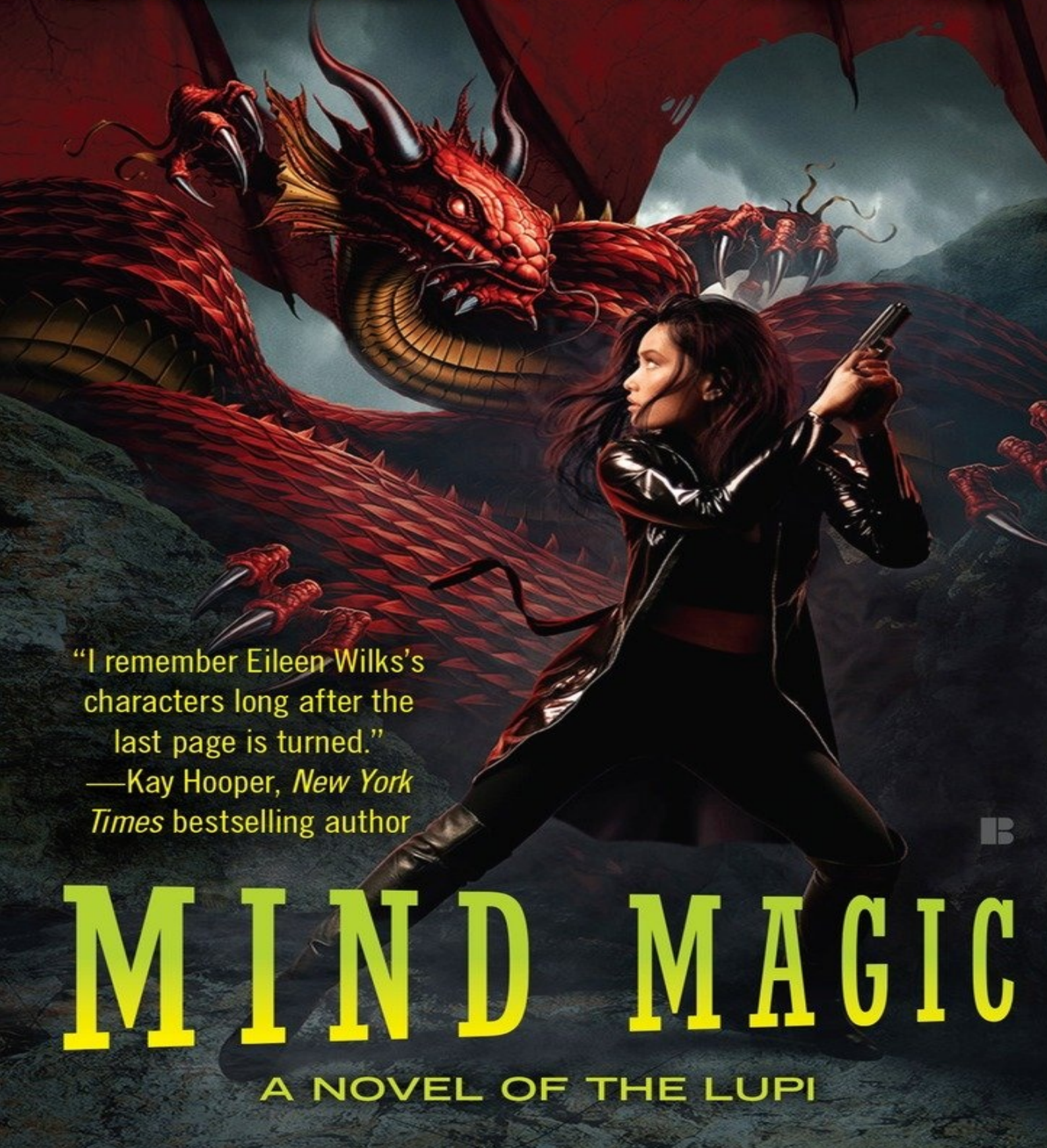


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I'd like to thank Richard Manning for helping me get the weaponry right. Any mistakes that remain are, I assure you, entirely my own.

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ONE



August
West Virginia

THE guards came as a shock.

Demi 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.

She 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 whirlwind, 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 just because he was right, either. You could be right and people would still laugh at you or get mad. She understood the getting mad. It's like Mama used to say: 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. 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 rambling 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 August 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. Trees, cliffs, walls, whatever—if it went up, she went up. She scaled 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 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?

For 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. She'd told Sensei that. Sensei had said that she misunderstood the goal of those avid studiers. Their real 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 fact

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. 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 a while she could shoot them down herself with little thought. When it looked like someone had used disproportionate force, it meant that either (a) she'd misidentified their real goal, or (b) they'd misunderstood their situation and the amount of force needed. The truth was, people mostly weren't very good at estimating the amount of effort needed. They frequently 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 sometimes that was disastrous.

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 three weeks now. She'd wasted a week thinking he'd turn up any minute, and when it was clear he wouldn't, no one would tell her anything. His parents wouldn't even talk to her now, not since she tried to tell them about Mr. Smith. Either they thought she was nuts, or Mr. Smith had gotten to them somehow.

Probably, she admitted glumly, they thought she was nuts.

Nicky must be so miserable and frightened. She didn't think they'd actually torture him. Surely they weren't that depraved, and besides, they didn't want him broken. They wanted to use him. But 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 was probably 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 Refuge—that was its official name: "Bright Haven Refuge for Gifted Young People"—but 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 in the same way she used to sneak out.

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. At least the guards were staying put, so she should be able to slip away unnoticed. She sighed and began making her way down the tree, going a lot more slowly than when 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, oh God,

now what? She was going to be sick. No, she wasn't. She refused to throw up and give herself away. She'd plant herself on this branch and hold extremely still. She was still fairly high up, with lots of branches and leaves 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. His slacks were gray, his cheeks were plump and pink, and his head was 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 her as light glinted off them.

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

He sounded like a teacher who'd discovered that his favorite pupil had cheated on an exam. Her cheeks went hot as humiliation washed through her. It felt every bit as bad as fear, only with a sour, rotten tang, and it wasn't fair. She wasn't the one in the wrong! He was the one who'd lied and betrayed her trust and was doing—well, she didn't know what, but something bad. He was the one standing there with soldiers, armed soldiers, and—and he was right. He did have those armed soldiers so she might as well climb down.

With none of her usual ease, she did. Feeling them watching her made her horribly self-conscious and she resented that, and clung to that resentment so she wouldn't think about what might happen next. Once she had both feet on the ground, she looked at one of the soldiers so she wouldn't have to look at Mr. Smith. He was tall and young, his skin darker than hers. She said the first thing that came into her head. "What kind of rifle is that?"

"Uh . . ." He looked at Mr. Smith.

"Our Demi has no off-switch on her curiosity. Unfortunately. Demi, do you have any idea how dangerous it was to try to sneak in here?"

That was so unexpected she had to glance at him. He was looking at her with such disappointment that she automatically wanted to apologize. She clamped her jaw tight to keep herself from saying anything stupid.

"I don't deserve this distrust. Why would you work so hard to sneak in here, where you've always been welcome?"

"You—" *You kidnapped my friend.* She couldn't say that, so she asked, "How did you find me?"

He smiled a touch smugly. "How can you ask? You know that Amanda is here."

"Amanda?" She was incredulous—first, that he even brought Amanda up, given the way he'd broken his promise about her. Second, that he thought she'd believe him. "Amanda's Gift doesn't work on me."

"Amanda has discovered many useful abilities since we unblocked her Gift. You must ask her about it sometime. But it isn't Amanda you came to see today, is it?"

She didn't answer, thinking hard. If Amanda hadn't spotted her telepathically . . . and she hadn't. Demi was sure of that. So how had they found her? Mr. Smith and the soldiers had walked right up to her tree. They'd known exactly where she was.

Mr. Smith sighed. "You do possess tenacity. That isn't always a virtue, my dear. You want to talk to Nick, I presume."

Her voice went hoarse. "You admit he's here. That you kidnapped him."

"Oh, he's here, but it's entirely voluntary. Such a dramatic imagination—but it's your age, I

suppose. He's not going to be happy with you. Come along, Demi." He turned and started for the house, clearly expecting her to obey.

Reluctantly she did. She hadn't been this scared since . . . maybe she'd never been this scared. "Where is everyone?"

"Field trip," he said. "Were you aware of that when you planned your little visit?"

Of course. She wasn't an idiot. "How come Nicky didn't go on this field trip? If he isn't here against his will—"

"The trip is to the zoo in Roanoke."

"Zoos are nothing more than prisons for animals."

"I'm aware of your views on the subject," Mr. Smith said dryly. "Since Nick shares them, he wasn't included in the field trip."

Nick loved animals the way she did. That's why they were vegetarians, which was how they'd met—at a vegetarian covered-dish supper on campus. Nick's parents weren't vegetarian, but they thought it was cool for him to be one, if he wanted. They saw it as an extension of their beliefs. They were Quakers, and so was Nicky. Which made it ridiculous for Mr. Smith to claim Nicky was here voluntarily. He was a dedicated pacifist.

A few months ago, she'd told Nicky about Mr. Smith. She hadn't told Mr. Smith about Nicky because he didn't want anything to do with the NSA. That was one of the few things they'd argued about. He'd wanted her to cut her ties to the agency.

"You've stopped, Demi." Mr. Smith sounded exasperated. He was several feet ahead of her.

She flushed and scowled. "Why are you here today anyway?" He hardly ever was. Dan and Sharon took care of everything.

"That's hardly your concern, is it? Now come along."

Slowly she did, somewhat reassured. If he didn't want her to know how he'd tracked her, maybe he wasn't planning to shoot her, or have one of his soldiers shoot her, or whatever. Because she was pretty sure he was here because of her. He'd found out what she planned to do and come here to stop her. Only how? She'd never found a precog for him, except for that one boy whose parents hadn't wanted him to leave home, so he hadn't been tipped off that way. And even if Amanda could read her mind, which she couldn't, Demi had been too far away until today. Amanda might have increased her range, but not that much.

As for more prosaic means . . . she'd been so careful! Surely if they knew about her back door, they wouldn't have left it open? And she'd paid cash for her bus ticket, and she didn't see how they could have known about the bike she'd borrowed to come the rest of the way. She supposed that someone could've been following her, but the NSA was all about electronic surveillance, not the in-person kind. And she'd left her phone in airplane mode the whole time, so . . .

Wait a minute. Look at it the other way around. How would she track someone's phone when it was in airplane mode?

That had her thinking furiously until they reached the porch, where the two soldiers peeled off, going back to whatever they did when they weren't helping Mr. Smith collect trespassers. Demi felt a little sick, a little scared, and altogether weird as she went up the three stairs.

The farmhouse had started out big, with ten rooms plus a finished basement that held the classrooms, a couple of half baths, and the housekeeper's room. When she first came here, she'd had a bedroom of her own, but that hadn't lasted, and she'd moved out before the addition was finished. That had nearly doubled the house's size. The two-story wing had a rec room, the teachers' bedrooms, and shared bath, plus lots more bedrooms, restrooms, and shower rooms for the kids. The kids'

bedrooms were dorm-style. There were twenty-one “Gifted young people” living here now, most of them below the age of thirteen.

It felt so odd to walk inside the Refuge . . . and that’s what it had been when she first came here. Not a home, but a refuge. The place looked like it always had—the same scuffed floorboards, with one that squeaked three steps inside the entry hall. The big, square living room on her right still had that squishy couch where she’d liked to curl up with a book. The TV was new, but she’d bet they still weren’t allowed to turn it on until after supper.

Three kids were in the living room playing some kind of board game. She knew two of them because she’d found them. Adrian was fourteen—two years younger than her—and a strong farseer. Susan was fourteen and a Finder. The other boy, the one she didn’t know, looked about twelve.

All three were staring at her. She looked away.

“He’s upstairs,” Mr. Smith said. “Second bedroom on the right.”

Not in the new wing, then. The only way into that was down the hall on her left. Demi’s heart pounded as she started up the stairs. Mr. Smith came up behind her. “Adrian and Susan and that other kid aren’t on the field trip.”

“I’m afraid they’re grounded. Minor infractions, but the rules exist for a reason. I’ve always thought you agreed with that.”

It was true that Demi liked rules. Rules kept things fair and orderly. Because she followed most rules scrupulously, everyone thought she was a good girl, not the sort to cause problems. It had never occurred to Dan and Sharon that she might sneak out sometimes at night. But Demi had needed time alone more than she’d needed to follow the house rules. To her surprise, she’d turned out to be good at sneaking.

Not good enough, apparently. She paused at the top of the stairs. “Why isn’t Amanda on the field trip?”

“A stomach virus. Please keep moving, Demi.”

A virus?

Her heartbeat picked up, but not with fear this time—with that little thrill she got when she found the answer to a hard problem. It wasn’t Amanda with the virus. It was Demi’s phone. Her phone must be infected with a virus that made it ping the cell towers even when it was in airplane mode. That’s how Mr. Smith had known she was coming here. He must have them tracking her phone. That wouldn’t be hard for him to arrange. He’d had more distance to travel than she had, but he hadn’t had to travel by bus and bicycle. He’d had time to figure out where she was going and get here before she did.

All of a sudden she was at the door. Second bedroom on the right, Mr. Smith had said. This used to be Laura’s room. “Where’s Laura?”

“California. She’s twenty now, so she isn’t with us anymore.”

“Nicky’s twenty.”

“Nick has made different decisions than Laura did. Do you want to see him or not?”

Mr. Smith was so sure of himself. Demi was so . . . not. Her mouth was dry. Her hand shook a little when she raised it to knock.

TWO



NICKY sat at the desk with a laptop in front of him. There was at least three days' worth of bristles on his pale skin; his hair had needed a trim two months ago; his jeans were ragged, his feet bare. He wore the same black-framed glasses he always did. She'd seen that T-shirt dozens of times. On it, a cartoon cow and chicken held out a plate piled high with green peas.

All in all, he looked scruffy, malnourished, and one step away from homeless. That was normal. The stony face he turned toward her with was not.

Her gaze skittered away from that unwelcoming face to take in the room. It was barely big enough to hold the bed, the desk, and a chest of drawers, which was why it was one of the private bedrooms. It didn't look like Nicky, either. None of his stuff was here. It couldn't be, because everything was back at college or at his parents' house.

Almost everything. She still had his copy of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. He'd loaned it to her, and she hadn't been able to bring herself to give it to his parents like she should have. "Nicky?" Her throat closed up. She couldn't get another word out.

"Shit." He shoved back his chair and stood. "I should've known you'd pull something like this."

She felt worse than she had since Mama died.

"Oh, God, now with the puppy dog eyes." He ran a hand through his hair. "Listen, Demi, I'm fine, okay? I changed my mind about some stuff. No biggie. Mr. Smith told me you were out there trying to sneak in. What did you think, that I needed to be rescued?" He snorted. "If I had, you wouldn't be my first pick. A team of commandos maybe—"

"What are you talking about?" she burst out. "Your parents are worried sick! You just vanished without a word to anyone. Your advisor didn't know where you were, and neither did Mike or Sean. You stopped coming to classes, and you left all your stuff, and—"

"For crying out loud—look at my T-shirt! I wasn't wearing it when I—when I left. And here. Look here." He strode to the closet and threw open the door. "There's my stuff."

Demi took a few stiff steps toward the closet. She knew that dark blue T-shirt. It said, I SUPPORT HABITAT FOR A MANATEE. And the gray one next to it—that's the one she'd given him that said, STOP MAKING CHEMISTRY JOKES. ALL THE GOOD ONES ARGON. She got it because his dad was a chemist and a punster and he'd always been really nice when he and Nicky's mom came up to campus to visit and . . .

"My folks boxed everything up and sent it to me," Nicky said.

Bewildered, she shook her head. "Your folks didn't know where you were. They asked me if I knew." They hadn't liked her answer, but they'd asked.

"I didn't handle it very well, all right? I should've told them right away, but I knew how they'd react. I knew. And I was right. They don't want anything to do with me now."

Slowly she turned around. "What are you talking about?"

“You’re just going to keep poking and poking, aren’t you?” Abruptly he turned away. “My Gift got away from me.”

“Oh, no, Nicky!” Instinctively she moved closer and reached out—then paused, her hand hovering uncertainly in the air between them. “What happened?”

“It was that damn Wayne Diamond. He was talking—bragging!—about this girl that he got drunk and I told him that was rape, and it was, but he just laughed, and when I said I was going to report him he hit me, and he kept hitting me, and . . . and that’s no excuse. I know that, but . . .” She heard him swallow.

She vaguely remembered hearing something about Wayne Diamond getting hurt. He was a jock, a football player, and she never paid attention to them, so she didn’t remember what had happened to him. “I’m pretty sure,” she said cautiously, “that he didn’t die.”

“No.” He still wouldn’t look at her. “Your Mr. Smith was on campus that day. He’d come to see you, but you were out. When he saw the EMTs, he . . . we talked.”

“I assume,” Mr. Smith said dryly, “that’s why Demi decided I’d abducted you. She knew I was on campus and yet I didn’t talk to her, so I must have been there to kidnap you.”

“But—but Nicky, you don’t want to work for the NSA! You always said—”

Now he looked at her. Glared at her, really. “That’s why I didn’t want to tell you. I knew you’d throw that in my face. I changed my mind, okay? Mr. Smith is helping me get my Gift under control, and I need that.”

“But—”

“Geez, Demi, can’t you take ‘you were right’ for an answer? You told me Mr. Smith was different and I should trust him.”

No, she hadn’t. She hadn’t said anything like that. She opened her mouth to remind him of what she’d really said—that Mr. Smith had helped her a lot and she thought he was helping the others, but she wasn’t sure anymore, not since he broke his promise about Amanda.

“I don’t want to hear ‘I told you so,’” he said quickly. He took two steps and closed his hands around her arms. That startled her as much as all the odd, angry things he’d said. “Look, we had a good thing going, the two of us, but everything’s changed now. Though I should’ve known you couldn’t take a hint.” His mouth cocked up on one side, and for a moment he looked like the Nicky she’d known. “Hints just blow right on past you. And I guess you deserved to hear from me in person so here it is. I’m breaking up with you, Demi. I like you. I think you’re a great girl. But we aren’t a couple anymore.”

Nicky had lost his mind. Had he gone crazy when he lost control of his Gift and hurt someone? He couldn’t break up with her because they’d never been a couple. They’d been friends, and that was better than—

He bent and brushed her mouth with his, shocking her into utter stillness. “There’s your good-bye kiss,” he said firmly. And then, with his face still close to hers, he looked at her and suddenly his eyes were wild. And he whispered very softly, “Run.”

* * *

THE other thing Demi had figured out about disproportionate force was that no one ever expected it. If someone was selling his car, he didn’t expect anyone to offer him twice as much as he was asking. If a woman was rude to a clerk at the store, she didn’t expect the clerk to shoot her in return.

Mr. Smith hadn't hurt her. He hadn't locked her up. He hadn't even forced her to return to the Refuge to live where she'd be more under his control, and he could have. She was underage and Brigham Haven Refuge for Gifted Young People was her legal guardian—which was the same as him being her guardian, because they did whatever he said. No, he'd used what he considered the minimum force necessary to get Demi to stop making trouble. He wanted her to keep working for him. He even said something about it.

But he didn't say one word about her back door. Not one. He didn't know. She was ninety-five percent sure of that.

So Demi did what he expected. He expected her to be upset about Nicky, and she was. She was upset all the way down. When she refused his offer of a ride back to school, he looked sorrowful and disappointed, but not surprised. Then he took away everything she had with her except for her phone and ten dollars for Cokes and snacks. That was supposed to show that he was being strict but not mean. He gave her bus ticket to one of the soldiers and sent the man with her to return the bicycle and wait with her at the bus stop. The soldier handed over her ticket and watched as she got on the bus, but he couldn't buy a ticket there, so he didn't come with her.

And at the first stop, she quit doing the minimum necessary. She got off the bus and started walking. She had a ten-dollar bill in her pocket. She left her phone and her life behind.

Nicky had said "run." She did.

WHITE HOUSE DENIES VIOLATION OF DRAGON ACCORDS

Term in Accords Allows for Dragon "Sabbatical"

By GORDON SHELLEY and JENNIFER MARKUM

JUNE 22

In an effort to refute claims made by some on Capitol Hill that the apparent absence of Mika, Washington, D.C.'s dragon, constitutes a breach of the Dragon Accords, administration officials made the rounds of the Sunday talk shows. U.N. Ambassador Harvey Farrow, appearing on *Face the Nation*, downplayed the idea that the dragon is missing. "Just because we haven't seen Mika for a while doesn't mean he's gone. Dragons have ways of going unseen. New Yorkers rarely see their dragon—standoffish fellow, apparently. Won't even tell them his name. More importantly, the ambient magic level here in the capitol remains low. Our tech's not in any danger." Asked why Mika, who is considered one of the more approachable of the world's twenty-three dragons, might have started masking his presence, Farrow shrugged. "I'm no expert on dragon psychology. Maybe he's having a bad hair month."

On *Meet the Press*, Secretary of State Amanda McCutcheon also pointed out that there was no evidence that Washington's resident dragon had in fact abandoned his lair, adding that, "Even if he is temporarily gone, there is no violation of the Accords. Per that treaty, dragons may absent themselves briefly from their assigned cities for communal or personal reasons." Asked if a month's absence could be considered brief, McCutcheon said there was also a provision in the treaty providing for a more extended absence due to "de'zell afianim ayi'ah veeshun." McCutcheon was unable to define this term or identify the language used. She said that Sun Mzao, the black dragon who negotiated the Accords, had insisted on its inclusion, although he refused to provide a translation. "I believe it refers to a sabbatical related to their spiritual practices," she said. The provision, which appears in Article IV of the Accords, allows

each dragon to vacate his post for an indefinite period once every forty-two years.

~~Efforts to contact Sun Mzao outside his lair near San Diego were unsuccessful. None of the reporters involved in the attempt were injured, and all but one have woken from their magically induced sleep. A shaman and physician connected to the Nokolai lupus clan, Dr. Nettie Two Horses, offered a firm assurance that the man's health was not affected and that he would wake eventually. "I'm told he actually tried to enter Sam's lair," Dr. Two Horses said. "Under the circumstances, Sam showed great restraint." "Sam" is the nickname bestowed on Sun Mzao by some members of Nokolai Clan, which has close ties to the black dragon.~~

The Dragon Accords, which were signed by the president eighteen months ago, were a response to mounting levels of ambient magic after the Turning. The effect of high levels of ambient magic on computerized technology had resulted in plane crashes, power failures, intermittent cellular outages, and last year's brief panic on Wall Street. Dragons' ability to absorb large amounts of magic convinced a large, bipartisan majority in both the House and the Senate to back the president's proposal to permit dragons sovereign status within their lairs along with more tangible payment. In exchange, dragons agreed to remain within their assigned territories, with exceptions as noted above. Since the Accords were signed, no significant technological problems due to ambient magic have occurred in the dragons' territories.

THREE



July
Washington, D.C.

LILY woke slowly in a bed that wasn't hers. The bed was soft. So was the early morning light. The man pressed up against her back . . . wasn't.

"I had a wonderful dream," Rule murmured, his thumb idly circling her nipple. "It was a sunny day, and you and I stood on opposite sides of a bridge. We both walked out onto it until we met in the middle. There, in front of our families and friends, we agreed we were married."

"Never happen," Lily said, rolling over so she could see his face. "Everyone knows your people don't believe in marriage."

And then she just lay there smiling at him while he smiled at her. She loved the way Rule looked in the mornings. Messy. Which was funny, because she didn't like mess anywhere else. But when he first woke up, with his face all stubbled and his hair every which way, he was hers. Once they left the bed, he'd be Rho of Leidolf Clan, Lu Nuncio of Nokolai Clan, and second-in-command of a highly secret group fighting a war the rest of the world didn't know about. Here, he was just hers.

Funny, Lily thought, how unimportant she'd thought weddings were before she had one of her own to look back on. Not very far back, of course. They'd returned from their honeymoon a little over two months ago. It had been a busy two months, but relatively peaceful until . . .

A waking-up yawn overtook her, making her need to stretch, so she did.

"Do that again."

Her mouth twitched. "Yawn?"

"You can do that, too, if you like," he allowed, "but I was referring to the part where you pressed up against me."

"Oh, you mean like this?"

He confirmed that and added another request. She asked for clarification, so he gave her a hands-on demonstration. Suddenly she was wide awake. He began trailing kisses down her torso, pausing here and there at points of interest, making her wish she could purr. She combed her fingers through his hair.

And shrieked, jerking her hand back and shaking it.

His head came up in alarm. "What?"

She closed her eyes. "Your hair turned into spiders."

"Spiders."

"Hundreds of them. Thousands. Crawling and waving their nasty little legs around."

"I'm guessing that's a mood killer."

She nodded, her eyes squeezed tight.

“Headache?”

“Not this time.”

“Then if you kept your eyes closed—”

She opened her eyes to glare at him—and promptly shut them again. “I hate spiders.”

“You’re afraid of spiders.” There was a hint of amusement in his voice.

“Don’t even think about teasing me.”

“You’ve fought demons, dworg, a chimea, a wraith, a god, a sidhe lord, and God only knows how many gun-wielding bad guys, but spiders—”

“Shut up, Rule.”

“—make you shriek like a little girl.”

She couldn’t hit him. She might get one of the spiders on her. They weren’t real—she knew that—but they looked and felt real, and would for another . . . shit. She’d forgotten to note the time the hallucination started. “Take your gloating and your creepy spider-covered head elsewhere. But first tell me what time it is.”

A short pause. “Six fifty-eight. How is it I’m just now learning about this phobia?”

“It’s not a phobia. I can handle them one at a time,” she said with dignity. “Just not in the thousands.”

The bed shifted as he stood up. “I’m going to go wash my spiders.”

“No, wait, I need to log how long it lasts, and if I don’t see them go away, I won’t know—”

“Your eyes are shut. You won’t see them go away anyway.”

Oh, God, she was going to have to look at them again. She forced her eyes open long enough to confirm that the episode was not over. “I can take quick peeks.”

A man spoke on the other side of the bedroom door. “Is everything all right?”

“Lily was startled by one of the hallucinations,” Rule said. “She’s fine.”

“I see. The coffee’s ready when you are. I’m going to stir up some pancakes to go with it. We’ve got maple syrup and a blueberry syrup that Deborah makes from the bushes out back.” Ruben’s feet made almost no sound on the hardwood floors as he moved away from the door.

Great. Her boss had heard her yell. Not shriek like a little girl. Rule had exaggerated. Yelling was perfectly natural response to seeing your lover’s hair turn into spiders. Seeing and feeling it. Teeny little spider legs on her hand . . .

Lily tossed back the sheet and sat up. Scowling, she reached for her notebook on the bedside table. She jotted down the approximate time the hallucination had begun, what she’d seen—and felt—and added “no headache.” Then she snuck a quick peek at Rule, who was contemplating ties. He’d already slipped on a pair of ragged cutoffs to make the trip to the bathroom and selected the day’s armor: a suit the color of wet charcoal.

His head still squirmed with horrid little spiders. She looked away and checked the time.

Keeping a record of when each episode hit, what she saw, and how long they lasted might not do a damn bit of good. Sam had called the episodes unpredictable, and the black dragon used words with the precision of a surgeon’s scalpel. But he’d also said that both the duration and the nature of experiences during the adjustment period were “highly idiosyncratic,” which was why he couldn’t tell her how long this would last. Between a few weeks and a few months, perhaps. Though it might be shorter. Or longer.

Given all that uncertainty, Lily really wanted Sam to be wrong about one thing. Maybe her version of the hallucinations would turn out to be predictable. It couldn’t hurt to try, and she had learned one thing. When a hallucination was triggered by her connecting with Rule’s “frequency,” she didn’t get

headache afterward.

“Red or blue?” Rule said.

“Hmm?”

“I’m leaning towards red. Politicians often wear red ties, and people are more comfortable if you seem to be like them.”

“The honorable representative is not going to think you’re like him in any way, no matter what you wear.”

They were on this side of the country for several reasons. Representative Jack Brownsley was one. He was on the committee where the Species Citizenship Bill had languished for over a year, and was among those who’d kept pressure on the chair to prevent the bill from coming up for a vote. He was also one of the politicians screaming loudest about the disappearance of Washington, D.C.’s dragon, which was why he’d agreed to talk to Rule today. He knew Rule had a connection to the dragons.

“Not consciously,” Rule said, “but I’ll use other tools to influence his conscious mind.” A pause. “I am not looking forward to this.”

Surprised, she glanced up—and quickly looked away again. This one was lasting awhile. “I didn’t realize you found dealing with Brownsley that unpleasant.”

“I find it unpleasant to have our mate sense scrambled.”

And he’d be well over half a mile away, so it would be messed up, but . . . “If we don’t ‘look’ for each other, we won’t notice.”

“True.”

Something in his voice bothered her, mainly because it made her think he was bothered. “Do you want me to go with you?”

A pause while he considered that, then a chuckle. “I might not have a problem dealing with Brownsley, but he’d annoy you. He has some things in common with Leidolf—notably his attitude towards women. At some point he’d try to figuratively pat you on the head. You’d wither his manhood with a glance, and then where would we be?”

“I do not wither manhoods with a glance.” Though she liked the idea. Grandmother could wither pretty much anything with a glance, and she wanted to grow up to be like Grandmother.

“Of course you do. I’ve seen it.”

“Now you’re just flattering me. Why not go with your silver tie? It’s perfect with that suit. Makes you look like a celebrity, and that’s a different kind of power than the representative wields.”

“True, which is why Washington is fascinated by celebrity. Silver it is. Are you going to accompany me to the shower so you can track the duration of the episode?”

“I . . .” She looked up. And smiled. Rule’s head was once more topped by the shiny, mink brown hair she loved. “I won’t have to.”

“Excellent. In that case, you should definitely come watch me shower.”

She laughed. “Forget it. It’s seven thirty.”

“It’s Sunday. Millions of people sleep in on Sunday.”

“Ruben didn’t. He’s going to make us pancakes. After which I’m going to work out with Deborah.”

“I’ll be quick,” he promised.

She snorted. “Sure you will. I want pancakes.”

He sighed. “Rejected in favor of pancakes.”

“With Deborah’s blueberry syrup.”

“There is that.” He smiled and crossed to her and dropped a kiss on her head. “I’m glad the spiders are gone.”

“Me, too. Everyone dislikes spiders, Rule. It’s not a phobia. It’s a perfectly natural reaction. I do not want to be teased over a perfectly natural reaction.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Shit.”

He laughed and headed for the door.

She jotted down the time the episode ended, set down her notebook, and stretched. She’d take her shower later, after her workout. There’d be plenty of time for that, she thought gloomily. She was on sick leave. Indefinite sick leave.

Most people did not stay with their boss while they were on sick leave, and Ruben Brooks was Lily’s boss twice over: in an official sense, since he headed Unit 12 of the FBI’s Magical Crimes Division; and in a highly unofficial and not precisely legal sense. Ruben was also the founder and head of the Shadow Unit.

The Shadow Unit was Ruben’s quiet conspiracy to stop the Great Bitch from swallowing the world, most of which didn’t know she existed. Things had been quiet on that front lately. The Great Bitch hadn’t made a move since her agent, Robert Friar, had been sent to hell—otherwise known as Dis or the demon realm—in late April. This lull would end at some point, but it was welcome, especially with the current communications problem.

Normally the dragons handled the Shadow Unit’s communications—you couldn’t get more secure than mindspeech—but with Mika AWOL, Ruben had been forced to fall back on more cumbersome and less secure methods involving either encryption and the Internet or burner phones. That was reason number two Lily and Rule were in D.C. As the Shadow’s second-in-command, Rule had two primary duties, one ongoing and one contingent. He managed the Unit’s finances, and he stood ready to step in as head of the Unit if Ruben were killed or incapacitated.

Reason number three was Leidolf Clan. Ever since the mantle for that clan had been forced on Rule, making him Rho, they’d crossed the country to visit that clanhome as often as possible . . . which hadn’t turned out to be all that often. The mate bond made it impossible for Rule to go without her, and often Lily’s job made it impossible for her to get away. She knew it worried Rule. All lupi needed the occasional presence of their Rho and the mantle he carried; some needed it more than others.

This time, they planned to spend at least a week at Leidolf Clanhome. Longer, if her hallucination continued.

Lily heaved a sigh and stood. She’d unpacked as soon as they arrived last night, so it took only a moment to pull on her workout things and head for the bathroom to brush her teeth. Deborah and Ruben’s home was large and lovely, but back when it was built, people didn’t see the need for more than one bathroom per floor. They’d added a master bath after they moved in, but the only one available for guests was at the far end of the hall. On the way she met a wolf coming up the stairs. He was pale gray with a grizzled muzzle—a rare sight. Rare, too, was that he seemed a bit winded from climbing the stairs.

He stopped and ducked his head.

“I’m afraid I don’t recognize you,” Lily said apologetically. He must be Wythe—Ruben’s clan—and he looked old, but beyond that she couldn’t tell. “We must have met, but—”

He shook his head once.

Her eyebrows went up. “You weren’t there when I supposedly met every Wythe clan member?”

“That’s Charles,” said the man at the foot of the stairs. Ruben Brooks did not look like a Washington power broker—or a werewolf, for that matter. More like a modestly successful geek. His

black-framed glasses weren't held together by duct tape today, but Lily had seen them that way in the past. "Charles Dupree. You've seen him, but you didn't actually meet him because he was in sleep at the time. I gather," he added dryly as he moved lightly up the stairs, "he wanted to amend that."

Charles nodded.

Now she knew who he was. "You're the one who was hurt by the bear." Hurt saving two human hikers who never knew what he'd done. "I'm honored to meet you, Charles."

He shook his head, then bowed in a way that born-wolves don't, going down on his front knees and lowering his head.

Because of the mate bond, the lupi saw her as a Chosen—chosen by their Lady, the Old One who'd created them over three thousand years ago. Lady-touched. "I know you're honoring the Lady, not me, but it feels weird, so could you get up, please?"

Charles huffed and stayed in his bow.

"I think he's honoring you, not just the Lady," Ruben said. "You preserved Wythe's mantle at great risk to yourself."

Eight months ago, Lily had played temporary host to the Wythe mantle when the clan's Rho—the mantle-holder—was killed without an heir. Eventually Lily had found the person the Lady wanted to pass the mantle to: Ruben Brooks. Who was her boss at the FBI and—at the time—not a lupus at all. Turned out he had a teeny trace of their blood in his ancestry, and that had been enough. Like all of the Old Ones, the Lady was barred from acting directly in their realm, but she could act through the people she'd created. The lupi. She could, within limits none of them understood, act on the lupi.

She'd used that trace of lupi blood to turn Ruben fully lupus, then she'd bestowed the Wythe mantle on him. And now the head of the FBI's Unit 12, a man who had the ear of the president, turned furry at times.

The mantles were the lupi's deep, dark secret. A clan's mantle gave the Rho his authority; it united the clan; it helped lupi maintain the balance between wolf and man. Mantles also ensured that no lupus ever felt entirely alone. That sounded partly good, partly awful to Lily, who needed time to herself now and then. She'd said something like that to Rule.

"I can't really relate to your need for time alone," he'd admitted. "I try to respect that need, but I don't feel it myself. But mantles aren't intrusive, no more than clothing is. You don't spend your day thinking about how clothed you feel. We don't notice the mantles every moment, but they garb us, keep us from ever being naked, stripped, isolated."

Interesting, she'd thought, that he compared being alone to being stripped. As for her, she might not notice her clothes most of the time, but she always enjoyed removing them at night. Especially her bra.

"Charles," Ruben said, "Lily appreciates the honor you do her, but she's embarrassed."

The wolf huffed again and lowered himself to lie on the floor next to Lily. He sniffed her leg, then settled his head on his forepaws with a sigh of what sounded like satisfaction. And promptly dozed off.

"Charles is one of Wythe's elders," Ruben said softly. "Last month he celebrated his one hundred and fiftieth birthday."

Lily blinked. "He fought a bear when he was a hundred and forty-nine years old?"

"He told me he was glad the bear didn't kill him because he always wanted to go out on an even number." Ruben regarded the sleeping wolf wryly. "Charles has spent much of his century and a half mastering the art of stubbornness. He's good at getting what he wants. He wanted to remain wolf for his last days, so of course I granted that. He also indicated—strongly—that he wished to spend those

days near his Rho instead of at our elder home. He persuaded me to allow that, too.”

In other words, the wolf dozing at Lily’s feet was dying.

Lupi lived longer than humans. A century and a half wasn’t unusual. Some lived even longer, and they were healthy and vigorous almost up to the end. But there came a moment, a distinct point, when they began to fade—“like a switch was turned off,” one of the Nokolai elders had described it to Lily. They called the remaining span of their lives the waiting time. Some waited only a few days. For most it was a couple weeks, and a few lingered for a month or two. But for all of them, after that point the Change was too taxing without help.

Help was available. A Rho could propel any of his people into the Change, even those who’d passed into the waiting time.

The bathroom door opened and Rule stepped out. He wore a dress shirt with the almost-black slacks, but hadn’t yet donned his suit coat or tie. His hair was still damp. “Ruben.” He nodded once.

Ruben matched his nod. “Rule. You slept well last night?”

“Very well, thank you. And you?”

“I slept well, also.”

Charles snorted.

Lily glanced down, her eyebrows raised. He still looked like he was sleeping.

“Charles,” Ruben said dryly, “does not approve of our little experiment.”

Nokolai Clan was the majority owner of a perfectly good house in Georgetown, which was somewhat closer to the political action than the Brookses’ home in Bethesda. Lily had stayed there several times. Rule was the public face for his people, and he came to D.C. occasionally to advocate for them. The house had recently been renovated, too—the basement could now sleep up to sixteen guards. But she and Rule weren’t staying there this time. Ruben had suggested that they could sell the Georgetown house and stay with him and Deborah when they needed to be in Washington.

War was expensive. The clan could use the profit from the sale. First, though, they had to find out if two Rhos could share space comfortably—with “comfortably” being the key word. Rule and Ruben could share space if they had to. They were both aces at control, they liked and respected each other, and neither of them would attack or knowingly offend the other. But lupi need hierarchy. They need to know whether they’re the dominant in the room, and each man’s instinct would push him to test the other in subtle ways. When they asked about each other’s sleep last night, they weren’t being polite. They were gathering data.

After a pause Ruben added, “Though I did have an odd dream.”

“Shit,” Lily said. She and Rule looked at each other. When an off-the-charts precog said he had an odd dream, you wanted to pay attention. Ruben’s Gift usually manifested as hunches. Crazy accurate hunches. Lily knew of only one time that Ruben’s Gift had escalated into out-and-out visions. Then, the fate of the world had hung in the balance. But those had been visions, not dreams. “Or maybe not. I hope not. Is a dream the same as a vision?”

He smiled, but it was a bit crooked. “No. For some reason, on the rare occasions that my Gift tries to tell me something about my own future rather than larger events, it often manifests as a dream. Precognitive dreams are distinctive in that they’re unusually vivid and memorable. Also, they tend to recur, and are often couched in symbolic terms. This one certainly was.” Ruben’s tone indicated that he did not approve of dreams that failed to state their meaning clearly. “It may be that I have an enemy I’m unaware of. There were a lot of masks in the dream. But that wasn’t what I came up here to discuss. Deborah wishes to know if you’d prefer cantaloupe or strawberries.”

“Strawberries,” Lily said. “Maybe if you told us what, exactly, you dreamt—”

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