

Kelley ARMSTRONG

# ADVENTURER



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# Adventurer

*This story is dedicated to Alexis, who convinced me that*

*“Silent Kenneth” had a story . . . and deserved to tell it.*

He could feel Taira flitting about in his brain, buzzing with annoyance. When Kenneth pictured his ayami—his spirit guide—he always thought of Tinkerbell: tiny woman with a full-sized sense of herself. He had no idea what Taira really looked like . . . if she had any form at all. He blamed the image on Peter Pan. As a child, that story had spoken to him more than J. M. Barrie could have ever imagined. A boy who could fly above the world, accompanied and guarded by a jealous fairy guide. Kenneth had often wondered whether Barrie could have been a shaman himself.

What had Taira buzzing now was not jealousy, but frustration.

Kenneth was in a meeting of the supernatural council, as they debated how to break into a St. Cloud Cabal satellite office.

“You could help,” Taira said, her voice like an echo in his head.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“You could at least *offer*.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“You won’t, will you?”

He didn’t respond.

A spark of fury, like a tiny firecracker exploding, and she fell silent. Sulking. It is said among shamans that each is paired with his or her perfect spirit guide. A system that Kenneth suspected had broken down the day he’d come into the world. Perhaps another shaman had been born at the exact same moment, and the Creator—distracted by something more pressing, like an earthquake or angel uprising—had misassigned the ayamis. Somewhere right now, there was probably a shaman CIA agent being parachuted into enemy territory, accompanied by an ayami who’d really rather be napping.

Around him, the council’s momentary burst of planning had dissipated—again—swallowed by the unresolved question of whether they *should* be planning.

“I’m still not convinced we ought to be involving ourselves in Cabal business,” Cassandra said, then leaned back, as if—having given her opinion—the matter should be resolved.

“I disagree,” Paige said. “But we can pick up *that* debate another time. This case is different. Bryant Peters is being blackmailed by a St. Cloud AVP, using Cabal files, but acting on his own initiative. It’s personal. Not Cabal business, therefore not Cabal related.”

As they continued, Kenneth’s gaze shifted to Elena—the werewolf—who was fidgeting, casting glances at the door, where her mate waited down the hall . . . not so much standing guard, Kenneth suspected, as avoiding the meeting.

Kenneth had heard, through the council grapevine, that the werewolf couple were trying for a baby. When they’d arrived, he gripped Elena’s hand—a greeting he knew the werewolves

preferred to back slaps and warm hugs, and one he preferred as well. That fleeting contact had been enough for him to read the rhythms and cycles of her body, and he'd leaned over and murmured, "I hear you're trying to get pregnant. *This* would be a good time."

Now she was whispering something to her alpha—Jeremy—as Cassandra and Paige battled it out. Jeremy excused Elena, and she was gone in a flash.

Kenneth smiled. He liked the werewolves, liked their energy, humming from them like electrical charge. It was similar to Paige and Adam's youthful exuberance, but different. Like white wine and red, both delicious in their own way. Kenneth could sit in a meeting for hours, drinking in all the energy, and leave feeling as if *he'd* been on that parachute drop covert mission himself . . . without ever leaving his warm and comfortable chair.

"The problem—" Cassandra was saying. "—is not whether we are getting involved with Cabal business, but whether we *appear* to be, which we must be more careful of now, with Lucas taking a role in the council—however peripheral."

"Why?" Adam said. "Are we afraid of pissing off the Cabals? If we do piss them off? I say good. Let them know the council is changing, getting stronger. Let them worry."

Paige shook her head. "We aren't ready for that. Not nearly ready."

"And I don't believe we should be *getting* ready for that," Cassandra said. "The council has always, whenever possible, avoided contact with the Cabals, for good reason."

Paige waved her hand. "Another argument for another time. We need to focus on this specific call for help, which does not directly involve a Cabal."

"Yet Cassandra does have a point," Jeremy said. "We should not appear to involve ourselves in Cabal business, not for fear of offending the Cabals, but to avoid giving other

supernaturals is the impression that—with your marriage—the council has become a tool of Lucas Cortez’s crusade.”

Jaime nodded. “And that could scare away supernaturals who may need our help, but who don’t trust a Cabal son, whether he’s with the family business or against it.”

Jeremy nodded. Jaime flushed, like an unsure student who blurts out an answer . . . and gets the right. Jaime was the newest council delegate, and Kenneth knew she was often overwhelmed—intently following the volley of debate, processing as fast as she could, but saying little. The new kid who starts class midway through the year and is making a valiant effort to catch up.

“So we ignore this guy’s call for help?” Adam said. “Tell him ‘Sorry, but we can’t risk giving the wrong *impression*’?”

“No,” Jeremy said. “We help him, but cautiously, avoiding any unnecessary contact with the Cabal. We get what we need from his office. Quickly. Then move on.”

So discussion turned to getting that information from the Cabal satellite office where the AVP worked. The office was nearby. Paige, being in charge of choosing meeting locations, had made sure of that. If they could get inside tonight, they could finish this part of the investigation and move on. The problem with getting inside . . . and finding the information.

“You could help with that,” Taira said, rousing from her snit.

“I could . . .” Kenneth replied.

“You *should*.”

“And spoil their fun?” He stifled a yawn. “I’ll let them plan this. It’s time for a nap.”

She didn’t let it go at that, of course. She bullied, harangued and cajoled him all the way to his hotel room, as the others went to eat lunch before a busy afternoon of planning. Only when

he laid down on his bed and closed his eyes did she stomp off again, this time with a parting, “You are impossible.”

He waited until he was sure she was gone. Then he waited some more. When she didn't return, he separated from his body and took flight, Peter Pan on a mission.

Kenneth found the Cabal office easily enough. When Paige had told him what they'd be discussing, he'd driven past the office, memorizing the route in case he needed to return.

Once inside the building, he sought out the AVP's office first. He found it, and popped inside—getting the layout of the room rather than searching for the blackmail file or the AVP's home address. Unless such things were lying about, Kenneth was as helpless to find them as any non-corporeal being, unable to so much as open a drawer.

But he could memorize the layout of the room, and then the building, finding the safest and quickest routes inside. He passed a few areas rigged with shaman alarms, spells to detect astral projection. They might have caught a younger, more eager shaman, but Kenneth moved at his usual speed—“Granny speed” as Taira called it. So he felt the familiar twang as soon as he neared the alarms, and simply steered past them.

Once done, he returned to his room, exhausted, and truly in need of that midday nap.

Thirty minutes later, a tap at the door awoke him. It was Jeremy. Kenneth handed him the plans and explained the layout and security he'd found. Getting past the security would be the council's job. Kenneth couldn't help them there.

Jeremy nodded. “I know. Lucas will be coming with us, and he's familiar with the St. Cloud security systems. This—” He lifted the blueprints. “—will be an enormous help.” A small smile. “As always.”

Kenneth nodded, accepting the only acknowledgment he'd get. His terms. While he never refused to astral project if it the council asked, he liked it better this way. No fuss. No pressure. Like Robert and Ruth before him, Jeremy would take the blueprints, memorize them, then use them in the planning session. No one ever asked how the missions went so smoothly, as if they'd known exactly where to find everything. Everyone need a bit of mystery in their lives. Even supernaturals.

Jeremy was confirming the last of the blueprint notations when Taira returned. Kenneth inwardly winced, but she said nothing, just fluttered about, working herself into a proper fury until Jeremy left.

"Where did those plans come from?" she said as Kenneth closed the door.

"He found them. On the Internet, I believe. Jeremy is a very clever man."

"You did it again, didn't you?"

"Hmmm?"

"You took off on an adventure. Without me."

"An adventure?" He shuddered. "I should hope not. Nasty things."

"You—you—" she sputtered, and he pictured her, tiny wings flapping madly, fairy dust scatter into the corners of his brain. "You are impossible."

He stretched out on the bed. "I know."

One final indignant shake of her wings, and she was gone. Kenneth smiled. She'd be back. And he'd make it up to her. Next time, he'd take her along. Maybe.