

PREVIEW EXCERPT FROM
BOOK THREE IN THE STAR CHILD TRILOGY

NOW AVAILABLE

RETURNING PLANET

JARED R. LOPATIN

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Prologue

"Are you sure about this?" she asked him.

"It is authentic," said the doctor. "The source is of high standing in academic circles."

"And that source is?"

"A local professor of mythology and metaphysics who was persuaded to assist us in our research," said the doctor with a dark grin. "People are incredibly helpful if given enough incentive."

"Wish he hadn't given it up so easily," grumbled Stark. The older man sat sullenly in the corner, fingering a three-pointed dagger.

"Has anyone attempted such a thing?" she asked. "Is it even possible?"

"Theoretically, yes, it is possible," said the doctor. "And it wouldn't have been hidden so deeply if it weren't true."

"Yeah, but without the spell or the damned machine, not gonna happen," said Stark. He tossed the knife into the air; caught it by the handle.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that," she said, echoing the doctor's grin. "We have access to the most extensive library known to mankind. If your source is correct and such a thing truly does exist, then we will be able to get our hands on it with little trouble."

Stark grunted. "And the machine?"

Her smile widened. "Coincidence is such a wonderful commodity," she said. "The machine rests within the same walls as the library."

"Oh yeah? Where?"

The woman's face darkened into a glower.

"We do not mean to question your authority," the doctor said quickly. "Stark is simply curious, but it is not something we need to know." He bowed and walked to the door, yanking the old man to his feet. Stark stumbled, then caught his footing and followed behind, throwing a look over his shoulder.

Merel rubbed her hands together with glee. There were so many wonderful little treasures to behold; so many little secrets to discover. She had had no idea that such

things even existed, but the more she learned, the more she delighted in each nugget of knowledge that brought her closer to ultimate control. The universe was filled with glorious power and soon it would be all hers. She licked her lips, her hunger ignited by the thought. She almost laughed aloud; it was just too easy.

The Gathering. What a fitting name. They collected the pieces of information like bees bringing honey back to the hive and Merel sat, as queen, content to let it all come to her.

She closed her eyes and reached out with her mind, immediately securing the connection between herself and her obedient servant. A bubble of mirth threatened to burst inside of her whenever she thought of him. Her acquisition of him had been an accident. He had never been her goal, but now that she had him, she was loath to think how difficult things would be otherwise. It had been so simple to take him with her power and then send him into the camp of the enemy. The Gathering. They didn't suspect a thing. Not even his closest companion. Merel was concerned about her at first, but the foolish female was devoted to him and he was loyal to Merel, so there was nothing to worry about.

She felt his mind awaken at her touch.

It was always a thrill, taking over his mind again. He fought it, of course, but her control was so complete that the battle was over almost before it started. Still, her heart quickened with every feeble struggle, ecstasy rushing through her as she dominated the weakened identity and took him once again for her own.

Merel sent tendrils through his brain, leeching information, checking for any small resistance or betrayal, and seeding new orders. *Find the spell*, she told him. She waited until it sank in and took root. Sure that her orders would be carried out, she withdrew, careful to erase all detectable traces of her presence. One could never be too cautious, after all. Her subliminal influence drifted back down to the base of his brain, lying there, dormant until the opportunity presented itself. As always, she impressed upon him the old, deep hatred.

The usually stoic star couldn't keep the smile from her face. This might be the very thing to tip the scale in her favor. The weak creatures of this planet had unwittingly handed her the key to their own demise. It was too delicious for words.

She drifted to the window and looked up at the stars. The usual flush of fury threatened her alabaster cheeks, but with it this time was an excitement, a vengeful glee. She thought of the many years she had waited for this moment, the torture she had endured, and the promise of success within her grasp. She thought of the Star Children, Adam and Dawn, and her murderous joy grew.

They had no idea what they were in for.

Chapter 1

“Dawn, look out!”

The warning echoed as Dawn leapt to the side. A blast of fire scorched the ground where she had just been. Grass curled back against itself as it burned. Dawn rolled and came up hurling a rock back towards Drew. Satisfied that Dawn was out of danger, Adam turned too late and found himself flat on his back, Rhys on top of him in lioness form. Her sharp teeth were mere inches from his face. Adam wished, not for the first time, that he had knowledge of the solar flare. He tapped into his telepathic abilities and flung mental pain into the feline. Rhys roared and pulled back, giving Adam the chance to push her off telekinetically. She slid away, claws digging into the ground to stop her skid. Adam geared up for another mental attack, but a block appeared almost immediately. Dana, the Aries, was using her telepathic ability to keep him at bay. Adam felt Dawn’s mind join with his and together, they flung a battering ram at Dana’s wall, shattering it and crippling the Aries. Dana sank to the floor in exhaustion. Rhys came back with a roar.

“On their way!” Xander answered the lioness. Adam saw two shapes materialize behind Rhys, one the brightness of snow, the other dark. The snarling trio advanced on the Star Children.

“I’ll take care of Rhys,” Adam shouted. “You get Xander.”

“No,” said Dawn amid a chorus of barking. Adam shot a look at his sister to see a pack of wolves baring their teeth at the three felines. “You get Uncle Xander. We have the cats.” The wolves leapt forward, moving in to bite at flanks, then sheering off before the cats could retaliate. The air was filled with animal screams. Adam threw a mental block at Xander, cutting him off from his talent. Xander’s nostrils flared in frustration. He crossed the grounds quickly, prepared to take on Adam physically, but was sent sprawling as a wolf ran in front of him. Adam dodged as another ran past him and he tried to get to Xander, but was slammed from the side by Drew. Adam scrambled to his feet just in time to see Drew fling a fireball at Dawn.

“Dawn!”

Dawn turned just in time for the fireball to engulf her completely. Adam’s reed pipe appeared in his hand and he began to play. The melody soared above them, slashed through the sky, and a deluge of water rained down upon the fire. The flames disappeared with a hiss, but it was too late. Dawn’s body was left on the ground, charred and smoking. The wolves lifted their muzzles in mournful howls, playing counterpoint to Adam’s melody. Drew began to laugh, a hideous sound that added to the horrifying orchestration for the scene before them. The others moved towards Adam. He lifted his pipes and changed tunes, but Rhys and the cats drowned him out with their roars. They were on him before he had a chance to react. Drew grabbed him from behind, pinning his arms behind his back. Adam tried to call the solar flare, but nothing happened. He struggled and writhed against his captor, but Drew squeezed tighter and Adam began to lose breath.

“Enough.” The professor’s voice was amplified so that they all heard it.

“Yes, Professor,” Kelsey responded. The scene dissolved and Adam could breathe again. He inhaled deeply before opening his eyes. He saw Professor Blanche Galten standing in the middle of the meditation center. Michael was sitting at Dawn’s side and he helped her up from her mat. Izzy was by Adam’s mat. She’d insisted on being present in case an extra pair of hands was needed. Adam wouldn’t have said it aloud, but he was glad she was there.

“You okay?” she asked.

He nodded. Izzy looked over at Michael, who echoed the nod. He was monitoring the group, making sure they were physically sound.

Dana stood up, immediately putting a hand to her head. “Whoa. Head rush.”

Drew laughed at that. “Ironic.”

She shot him a look. “And how do you feel?”

“I– I feel okay,” he stammered. Even after a year with The Gathering, Andrew was still somewhat nervous around the Signs. He held them in high esteem.

“Good for you,” Dana responded sourly. Drew flushed.

“Are you okay?” Izzy repeated. Adam’s head throbbed with dull pain, but he nodded.

“And where was your problem?” the professor asked him.

Adam had gotten used to the professor’s sharp way of cutting through to the heart of the matter. He sighed. “I let myself be distracted. Dawn was in trouble and I wanted to make sure she was okay first.”

Professor Galten nodded. “Yes. Caring is an asset, but not in battle. You must take of yourself, lest the cause be completely lost. Dawn fell due to her own mistakes,” and here, she threw a glance at Dawn, who cringed, “but you should not have been concerned with her. It allowed you to be overcome.”

Adam hung his head. “Yes, I know.”

“Still, you showed resourcefulness and a nice display of power. You require more discipline, but the power is there.”

"Thanks, I think."

"I don't like these training sessions," muttered Dawn. "It's weird to fight your own family."

"We don't really like it either," said Xander. "If it weren't for the dream power imposed upon us, we wouldn't dare attack you."

"It's the best way for training," Kelsey insisted.

"Indeed," agreed the professor. "If you are to face Merel, you must be ready for anything. Suppose she turns the Signs against you?"

"Not gonna happen," Rhys growled.

"While I appreciate your loyalty, Rhys, it is not unthinkable to recognize Merel's threat. She has grown more powerful since you last came up against her. Were she to wield her full ability upon you, it is not inconceivable that you would fall under her spells. If that happens, the Star Children must be ready to face former allies as enemies. Besides, even if you were to resist, she may have found a way to imitate your abilities."

"I still think that she's not operating on an elemental level. Throwing all the Fire Signs at the Star Children at once is not the best way to challenge them," put in Dana.

"True. That's why we have the random factor. Drew was kind enough to volunteer for the position," said Professor Galten.

"I just thought it was the best way to help out," said Drew, embarrassed.

"We appreciate it," said Izzy.

"Yeah, thanks for blasting us," Adam muttered. He received a stony look from the Taurus.

"I didn't really have a choice!" Drew pointed out.

"None of us did," said Xander. "The magick of the Dreamworld is more powerful than many can imagine. Especially when the Dreamwalker is involved." He threw a look at Kelsey.

"Yes, well, none of you would attack if there weren't some kind of magick involved," Kelsey defended himself.

"You must remember not to call on Dreamworld powers, though," said the professor with a look at Dawn.

"I didn't!" she protested. "At least, I didn't mean to."

"I still think we should have these training sessions in the First House," argued Adam.

Dana shook her head. "Too dangerous. Especially after what happened last year with the ramkansah. They're angrier than ever." She turned a discerning eye on the male Star Child. "I figured you, of all people, would be more sensitive to that."

Adam colored. "I wasn't saying that. I was just thinking that since all possibilities are there, we might be able to create a more realistic battle scenario."

"Trust me," said Dawn, "the last battle scenario was realistic enough."

Kelsey spoke up. "Don't worry. I was completely in control."

“Thank you, Kelsey. The House of Illusions is perfect for such purposes,” said the professor.

“Happy to be of service,” said Kelsey.

“Hey, if you wanted service, we should have gone to my House,” Michael joked, his eyes still on Dawn. Then he thought about it. “Though I wouldn’t really recommend it. They have some odd ideas about life.”

“What do you mean?” asked Drew.

Michael looked up from his charge. “They don’t understand what fun is.”

“Yeah, there’s nothing as fun as fighting mind-controlled friends and family to the death,” Adam muttered.

“Excuse me,” interrupted Kelsey, trying to retain the levity, “but that’s dream-controlled.”

“Yeah, the mind is my department,” put in Dana. “Well, mine and Mercury’s.”

“I think that’s weird,” said Dawn. They turned to her. “I mean, you’re a telepath, but your planet isn’t Mercury, the planet of the mind.”

“Hey, I have Mars, the planet of passion and aggression. Makes me a formidable opponent.” Dana smiled a feral smile.

“We blocked ya, though,” said Adam smugly.

Dana glared mockingly at him, overdoing it so much that the rest of them burst out laughing. It went a long way to restore their spirits after the fight. Michael took the opportunity to pass a diagnostic sweep over all of them, assessing and repairing. One by one, they arose from their mats and headed for the door. Dana and Kelsey spotted the meditation guide, Unega Wahuhi, and hurried over to talk to him. The professor detained the Star Children.

“We will discuss the strategies used in this attack scenario tomorrow,” she told them. “Get some rest tonight. You worked hard.” She squeezed their shoulders.

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Adam.

Unega Wahuhi had taken Dana and Kelsey back into one of the private sectors, so Dawn led the rest of them out of the meditation center. She marveled silently that Adam continued to show Professor Galten such respect. His adjustment to living at The Gathering had opened up some resentful reactions at times. Dawn knew it stemmed from his jealousy of her family. She did her best to make him feel like one of the family, but there was a wall between him and the rest of The Gathering. Except Izzy. She was the one Sign who, though not completely comfortable around him, seemed to have formed a connection with him. They were deep in conversation at the back of the group. Dawn hung back to eavesdrop, letting Xander and Rhys take the lead.

“I’m fine,” Adam was saying. “It just takes some adjusting. I mean, I just got used to calling you friends.”

“We’re family,” corrected Izzy. “And the only reason for the attack is to prepare you for whatever Mer– for whatever might happen.”

Adam sighed. "It's okay. You can say her name. I guess I should be used to family trying to kill me."

Izzy put an arm around his shoulders. "It's not your fault." Dawn had heard this said to Adam many times. She'd told him the same thing.

"I know it's not," he replied automatically, but Dawn could tell he was still wounded by the incident with his mother. Technically, Merel was Dawn's mother, but Dawn had only ever known her as an enemy. It was much easier for her than for Adam who had grown up idolizing the woman who took him into her home, but at the first suspected betrayal, she took his life without a hint of regret. Dawn still wondered what it must have been like to die and be reborn in the Lake of the Phoenix, but she wouldn't dare open that door into Adam's pain. There were moments, like now, when his pallor paled in memory, but those moments happened less often and he regained control almost instantly.

"Well, you did great out there," said Izzy. "I'm not looking forward to Earth's turn to fight you guys."

Michael overheard this last bit. "Neither am I. They did pretty well against Fire, though."

"And we fought with everything we had," said Xander.

"Only because we had to," Rhys declared, loyal to a fault. "But yes, the Star Children did well."

"Except we didn't win," pointed out Adam.

"You will when it counts," Izzy assured him. The professor, silent until now, bid them a gruff goodnight and stomped off in the direction of her office. Andrew murmured something about not feeling well after all and disappeared. Dawn suspected that he was heading off to see the librarian, Virginia Balcombe. They'd become something of an item since he joined The Gathering.

As always, Dawn smelled the astrology wing before she saw it. There was an odd mixture of scents that she had learned to associate with the Signs that shared her floor. As she stepped into the hallway that housed her immediate family, she felt her muscles relax. A smile bloomed on her face as Tim emerged from his room, having sensed Xander's return, the way those in love do. Hand reached for hand and fingers intertwined in an almost automatic gesture.

"How did it go, Alex?" Tim asked.

"All things considered, it went pretty well," Xander answered him with a smile for the Star Children.

"Good." Tim released Xander's hand and held out his arms for a hug. Dawn happily obliged.

"What's the word?" asked Stephen from his doorway.

"A successful first trial," said Rhys.

"Glad to hear it."

“Where are the others?” Izzy asked.

“Twins’re doing research. You know the insatiable curiosity of the Gemini.” Everyone nodded. “Rory and Cole are swimming. Em is grabbing a snack.” There was a slight flush to his face as he said this last bit, but as usual, everyone pretended not to notice. “Tired?” he asked Dawn, extending the question to his newly acquired nephew.

“Very,” responded Dawn. Adam nodded his head.

“You worked hard,” said Michael. “You deserve a good night of sleep. You all do,” he told the two Fire Signs.

Tim placed Dawn back on the ground and she wobbled slightly as she got her legs back under her. “Looks like I haven’t fully recovered yet,” she said.

“Looks like you could use a bed, missy,” said Tim.

“I know I could definitely use a bed,” said Xander, with a wink at Tim when he thought Dawn wasn’t looking. She suppressed a smile.

“I think we all could use some sleep,” Michael emphasized. Dawn almost groaned. She loved her Uncle Michael, but sometimes, he was a little too overprotective. She wasn’t an average seven-year-old and he knew that.

The Signs said their goodnights and dispersed to their various rooms, Dawn and Adam doing the same. The Star Children were housed across from each other at the end of the hall. It had made for ease when Adam couldn’t sleep at night and was in a rare mood to talk. Dawn stopped as she reached her door, realizing that this might be one of those nights. “Adam, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he replied quickly, turning to face her. “It’s–” He paused, searching for the right words. She waited. “It’s still a lot to absorb.”

She nodded. “If you need to talk–”

“No, I’m fine,” he repeated. He opened the door to his room. “Thanks.” The door closed behind him.

Dawn turned the knob and stepped into her room. Candles flared to life before her, filling the room with light and an almond-cinnamon scent. She inhaled deeply, letting the room welcome her. She walked to the dresser. A black magnolia with white speckles sat in a glass of water, surrounded by pictures of her family. The newest picture was of her and Adam and stood off-center. She picked it up. People found it hard to believe they were related. Adam’s shining gold hair and his bright blue eyes seemed almost a negative of her own dark locks and irises. Still, she was the one with the bright smile, while Adam’s lips barely curled at the edges. He hadn’t wanted the picture, but Dawn loved keepsakes and insisted on having a picture with each member of her family. “Like it or not,” she had told him, “you are a part of us now and you have certain sibling obligations.” He had sighed and acquiesced, something she saw a lot of in his first few months at The Gathering. It was only in the past couple of weeks that he had begun to assert himself more. She supposed that it would take time for him to recover fully, and she worried that they hadn’t much time left. Merel was on the move. Or at least that’s what reports from The Gathering were saying. Nothing definite, but there were stirrings

on the psychic winds. It caused no end of tension and unease among the people around her and she suspected that it was partly why the professor insisted on beginning the training sessions. She placed the picture back on the dresser and headed into the bathroom for her nightly routine. It wasn't until she climbed into bed that she realized how truly tired she was. She fell asleep almost instantly.

She awoke in the middle of the night with a strange buzzing in her head. Her heart leapt into her chest and she immediately drew a protective shield around her, with actual blankets as well as psychic energy. She peered around the room, the familiar objects suddenly cold and strange to her suspicious eyes. Since being taken over last year by a mind-demon, she knew that her only protection was to be prepared. Scared that there might be an attack from outside, Dawn looked toward the wall where a window appeared, but as it did, a flash from the dresser caught her eye.

She cautiously approached, but by the time she reached the dresser, it was gone. She peered closely at each of the pictures, tilting them this way and that. It was only when she picked up the photograph of herself with Adam that she realized it was reflecting light from behind her. She turned and walked to the window. The sky was a hazy one with clouds snoozing high above them, but here and there, a section of stars peeped through. As she watched, a light played through the clouds, bouncing from haze to haze, descending in an erratic pattern that hypnotized her. It was coming closer and closer. It caught a patch of unprotected night sky, streaking through; a brilliant comet and Dawn gasped aloud, "A shooting star!" She closed her eyes and was just about to make a wish when a familiar voice erupted in her mind.

Friend!

Dawn opened her eyes wide. "Palagre!"

Chapter 2

Adam entered his room with a sigh. He knew his sister meant well, but she didn't seem to share the frustrations that he did. He thought she would have had more of a problem with fighting her own family, but she had accepted the professor's orders without comment as soon as she had made them. Even afterward, she only offered minimal complaint and then moved on. Dawn had been burned to a crisp and she woke up laughing and joking with her aunts and uncles. She didn't even care that they had lost. He hated the fact that they had failed. He hated the fact that he still felt like an outsider. And he really hated the fact that he resented Dawn for it.

He drifted through the room in the same pattern he'd developed since his first night in The Gathering. It was nothing like the room he'd had while living with his mother. He refused any semblance of his former life, especially the wall of instruments. The only music he played now came from the reed pipes he'd brought back from the First House on the astral plane. It had been a gift from his older self and though the meeting had been an unusual one, the pipes reminded him what he could become. They were never far from his reach. His quarters were furnished with a haphazard mix of the old and the new and it made him uncomfortable. The four-poster bed rested against the wall, plush with fresh sheets and a downy duvet. There was a large-screen television with the latest gaming system that sat in the corner, untouched. A fireplace roared to life the second he entered the room. There was nothing here that was authentically Adam and he had to confess that he preferred it that way. He was still hoping that he could adapt to The Gathering and reinvent himself. After all, he reasoned, he had been given a second chance at life and that was like being born all over again. He figured he could be someone new, but the past year had yielded little result. He refused to give in to the stifling feelings of stagnancy, but this night, the compounded failure of change and battle was too much and he sank onto the bed. His body ached with weariness and as he hadn't even undressed, he decided he would sleep as he was.

His mind had other plans. Though he was physically worn out and his body longed for sleep, his mind returned to the battle, replaying each move again and again. He

analyzed his own actions and the actions of others, both companion and enemy. He discerned what attacks were most effective and why. He cringed as he remembered his own mistakes. He tried to determine how different it would have been if it had been a real battle and others had been involved. Namely, his mother. He knew her ruthlessness and her cavalier attitude toward the lives of others.

Not for the first time, he wondered what had become of Lilith, his former tutor and friend. She had been left as a helpless victim of Dawn's newly discovered talent that Dana called "Tabula Rasa," which meant "blank slate." It was a fairly accurate description of what had happened to Lilith. It was as if her sense of identity had been wiped clean and she was left with a childlike vulnerability. He feared for her safety.

Adam laid awake for hours, not even moving, just thinking. It was as if his mind wouldn't turn off. He did his best to make his mind go blank, to force himself to go to sleep, but the more he concentrated, the more sleep evaded his grasp. Inevitably, the moment he dreaded came back to play in his memory.

Adam was in a garden. His mother was there and there were two versions of Dawn. He knew only one of them was real and the other was a ramkansah – a mind-demon. He stood motionless as Merel and Dawn faced off and began to fight. Across the way, he saw the other Dawn staring in horror at the scene. A snarl came from the girl fighting against his mother and suddenly, he knew how to help. He hollered, "Mother!"

The ramkansah was fighting well, but Merel was mad with bloodlust. She stuck a powerful blow on the side of the ramkansah's head and the demon went down, whimpering. Merel towered over the small figure and raised her arm. A glowing sphere of ether appeared in her hand.

"Mother, no! It's not her!" Adam ran in and placed himself directly in front of the ramkansah.

Merel's eyes burned. "Traitor!" she hissed. "You dare protect her from me?!"

"Listen! It's not–"

A wave of energy smashed into Adam, lifting him high into the air. His body lit with an ethereal glow and arced across the sky. He landed in the fiery lake with an enormous splash and sank among the flames.

Sadness and guilt flooded Adam's mind as the memory faded. And the anger. Always the anger, brimming beneath everything else. If only his mother had listened! If only he had been able to warn her! Yet, even as he thought such things, and as dearly as he wished to believe otherwise, he knew he had never had value in her eyes except as a source of power. That was what hurt the most. And Dawn, the person he had sworn to kill, had welcomed him without a second thought. The girl he had tried to betray forgave him effortlessly. If only he could forgive himself.

His mind refused to go to sleep! He decided that it might be best if he talked to someone. Izzy was always willing to listen. She was the one who made him feel most at home here in The Gathering. He sent out a searching thought, but her thoughts were

the jumbled and muffled thoughts of one deep in sleep. He hadn't felt the same connection with any of the other Signs. Even Rory, who had shared part of his adventures on the astral plane and seemed to know something about pain, was something of an enigma to him and he didn't know that he could talk to her. That left Dawn. He opened his mind to his sibling Star Child and discovered that there was already another mind there. Curious, he lingered, hoping to go undetected, but Dawn called out to him the moment she felt his presence.

Come on over, Adam. Palagre says he has news for both of us.

Palagre. The name was familiar but Adam couldn't place it. Wasting no time, Adam slid out of bed. He grimaced a little against the exhaustion in his bones and continued across the hall to Dawn's room.

He raised his hand to knock, but Dawn must have sensed his presence because she called out, "Come on in!" He opened the door and stopped as he took in the scene before him. Dawn was half leaning out of a window, rubbing the head of a— what was the creature? It had a bearded face with two horns protruding from its forehead and blood-orange eyes, the deep color that brushes the sky just as the sun kisses the horizon. Patches of cream mixed with brown to form the furry upper body and the lower half ended in a pale green, almost translucent tail. It was a seagoat resting in a pool of water. The Gathering's rooms really did accommodate everyone!

Hello, friend.

The voice in his mind was warm and welcoming. Adam couldn't deny a desire to earn the title of *friend*. "Hi," he said.

"This is Palagre," said Dawn. "He's from the Tenth House."

"He's from the astral plane?" asked Adam, surprised. "How did he get here?"

Saturn sent me.

"The Crone is here?" asked Dawn, excitement in her voice.

The Crone is one of the astral parts of Saturn. She has to talk to you.

"Why didn't she just come herself?" Adam asked, his old suspicions returning.

Oh, she hasn't visited Terra or the others since the Worshipping Years. That was the agreement, Palagre told them.

"The Worshipping Years?" Adam repeated.

She'll be able to explain it better. You have to get ready and we have to go before daylight comes.

"We can't just pick up and leave right this second," said Dawn. "We have obligations, we have training. I don't know if you know it, but there's a major battle going on."

There are lots of battles to come, agreed Palagre, but if you want to win this war, you need more than mere training. This place, though formidable, can't give you the tools to success. You know this. There was a pause. *Saturn told me to tell you that.*

"Tools?" Adam asked, but he answered it almost as the word left his mouth. "The Lyre of Man."

And the Bow.

"The Bow," Dawn breathed. She looked over at Adam. He saw the resolve on her face; she wanted to do this. He looked at the seagoat hovering before the window. The pupilless eyes stared back and he felt as though they were searching his soul for an answer. Searching for a commitment. He felt his heart respond in the affirmative, but his mind was still busy working through all of the logistics to form the words, either mentally or vocally. They had just begun their training and he considered it a step in the right direction, but if what Palagre said was true, then the training was worthless. Still, he had just met Palagre and he knew nothing about Saturn. The only cause he had to trust either of them was the fact that his sister was willing to believe what they had been told. Despite the skepticism he innately possessed, he had learned to trust her instincts. Although that meant he was going to agree to the journey, he still wanted more information.

"What exactly does Saturn expect from us?" he asked.

She wants you to win. There was a note of urgent frustration to Palagre's voice. *We have to go. She can tell you more. I'm just the messenger.*

"Of course we'll go with you," said Dawn. There was a mental feeling of triumph.

"Wait a second," Adam interrupted. "First of all, we should talk to people before we go. Last time you disappeared, things didn't really go that well," he reminded Dawn.

She managed to look somewhat embarrassed. "True."

"And second of all, how exactly do you plan on taking us to outer space?" he asked the seagoat.

We'll travel by stars, Palagre answered.

"What?"

"Seagoats travel by jumping from star to star," Dawn explained. "Explains how he got here so fast."

"And we're supposed to do the same thing?" Adam asked, the skepticism returning. "First of all, I don't think Palagre can carry both of us, and second of all..."

"Okay, can you stop with the 'first of all, second of all' thing?" Dawn asked him, annoyed. "I bet Palagre has a plan in mind. Don't you, Palagre?"

You use the Tears of Terra.

Dawn said, "There. You see? We use- huh?"

The flower on your dresser. Crush it into powder and mix it with boiled water until it becomes a paste. Then use it to put this symbol on your body. He projected an image into their minds. It was a circle with a cross inside.

"What's that?" Adam asked.

That's the glyph of Earth. It marks you as someone under Terra's protection. It also means you take a little bit of Earth with you so you can survive outside her atmosphere.

"Will the mixture hurt us?" Adam asked.

I don't think so. The seagoat's fur rippled; a caprine imitation of a shrug. *I've never seen it used on human beings before though.*

Dawn and Adam glanced at each other. “Sounds like a mission for Professor Galten,” said Dawn. Adam nodded in agreement.

Where is your professor?

“She’s probably asleep,” said Adam.

“This is an emergency,” Dawn said.

“You think we should wake her?” Adam asked her in a pointed, warning tone.

Dawn shifted her feet, silent for a moment. “I think we should ask Uncle Michael.”

I will wait here. Don't take long.

Chapter 3

Wrapped around a sconce high on the wall of the main hall, Caudaput kept watch. She had discovered passages that fit a snake perfectly and allowed her to travel unseen anywhere she wished. It was as though The Gathering itself was opening up to her, sharing its secrets. Her sharp eyes took in everything, cataloguing data that might be helpful to her mistress. Anything out of the ordinary was something worth noting. She knew Ophiuchus was gathering his own information, but since meeting Virginia Balcombe, he had been more distant, spending less time with Caudaput. Sometimes, he even seemed to forget she was there. Still, she kept watch over him just as she kept watch over The Gathering itself. Tonight was no different. The snake found herself ignored again, keeping tabs on the lone figure crossing beneath her. There were always people wandering about, but as it was later in the night, the buzz about The Gathering was lessened. Those few that were venturing about were busy with their own agendas, oblivious to the environment around them.

The man strolled across the main hall to the heavy doors that marked the entrance to the library. He was tired, but the voices in his head kept pushing him, urging him onward. He laid a hand on the massive, wooden door, and pushed it open into the world of books. Caudaput quickly slithered through a hole in the wall onto the tall shelves near the circulation desk and kept to the shadows. He slipped in quietly, letting the door alert the librarian. Mr. Pears looked up at the sound and placed another book on the pile near the computer. He advanced on the reference desk.

“Hello Pears,” he greeted the librarian.

“Hello.” Pears’s southern twang cut through the muffled quiet that was natural to the library. “Surprised to see you up and about after today.”

The visitor shrugged. “We all have to do our part.”

“Indeed,” Pears readily agreed. “How did they do?”

“They did well. It’s always a challenge: getting used to one’s powers, understanding how to use them in a different environment.”

"I can only imagine. Active powers are difficult to control. I'm glad that a mnemonic's memory is easily accessed." Pears waited for a response, but there appeared to be none forthcoming. "So, what brings you here at this time of night?"

"Research."

The librarian wanted to inquire further, but the man before him seemed exhausted and he didn't want to push him too hard. "Well, I'll let you get to it then."

"Thank you." Pears watched him disappear among the stacks.

That went well, the man thought to himself.

Are you sure about that? he responded with a chuckle.

You're talking to yourself.

I know.

You're responding to yourself.

He sighed. *I know.*

Go find the book. It's in here somewhere. Unaware of his serpentine shadow, he traveled deeper into the stacks, losing himself among the musty tomes. He ran his fingers over the spines in a loving fashion. The shadows grew as he penetrated the farthest districts of this literary world. Stacks gave way to alcoves; cozy nooks dimly illuminated by the soft glow of electric candles. He spared barely a passing glance for the first two; it was the third alcove that held the treasure he sought. He examined the titles before him, searching for the information that would complete the puzzle. There were books of all sizes, colors, and textures sitting side by side on the shelves, seemingly innocuous. They all had one thing in common: each contained information about energy. Human energy. Animal energy. Etheric energy. Psychic energy. Countless books with objective experiments, first-hand accounts, anecdotal evidence, and observances; available for anyone who had the wherewithal and discerning eye to take advantage of them. And here he was. He stood among them all, turning this way and that, hardly daring to stretch out his hand until he saw the book he desired. As he took it in his hands, there was a triumphant feeling that grew within him. Gently, his fingers slipped open the leather cover and tripped playfully over the pages, halting suddenly midway through. His eyes scanned the page, eagerly drinking in the first paragraph. Mirth building up within him, he hugged the book to his chest and traced his steps back toward the front desk. He could barely let it out of his possession, but he forced himself to hand it over to Mr. Pears.

Pears peered at him over his spectacles. "I hope you're feeling better," he said. He made no comment about the type of book as he entered it into the computer.

The precious tome once again in his possession, he exited the library and went directly to his room, Caudaput following silently by her own means. There was one other occupant in the room and she was fast asleep. He slid the door closed and crept across to his wardrobe. Instantly, his appearance and demeanor changed. He straightened up and color returned to his face. The serpent watched his mask drop, the listless, exhausted appearance vanishing as he opened the wardrobe. He pushed his

clothing aside and felt along the back wall for the tiny latch he knew would be there. His fingers caught it and pulled the door open. He breathed in sharply at the sight of the silk bag sitting in the hidden compartment. He brought it out with careful hands. With a sacred air, he placed the new book in the bag and closed it with the braided string. He put the bag back into its hiding place and closed the door, the wall becoming solid once more. He moved his clothing in front and closed the wardrobe; better not to leave anything that might raise suspicion. He stood for a moment, staring at the wardrobe, his heart quickening, excited by the knowledge that the first piece of the puzzle was in place.

Soon. The whisper intoxicated his mind. He smiled as he crawled into bed. A corner of his mind sparked and he lost consciousness.

Caudaput left the room, a mix of terror and relief growing inside of her. This was the beginning of the end. It would all be over...

...soon.

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