

PREVIEW EXCERPT FROM  
BOOK ONE IN THE STAR CHILD TRILOGY

NOW AVAILABLE

# RISING SIGN

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# Prologue

The woman screamed and grabbed her head. She fell backwards onto the floor, stiff, her eyes open wide, but unseeing.

Sereny clutched her mother's hand, cringing as the ice cold flesh touched her own. The night wind howled around the house and, not for the first time, the girl wished her father wasn't away, but a special order had taken him out of the country. His amulets were famous all over the world. She remembered their conversation before he left.

"What if it happens while you're away?"

Her father had held her close. "You've seen what to do. Hold her hand and always have pen and paper nearby. You're twelve years old, Sereny. Soon, you'll be going through the same thing and we'll do the same for you."

She looked up into her father's face. "What if something else happens?"

His expression was serious. "You have this." He touched the hematite hawk amulet at her throat. He kissed her lightly on her forehead and added, "Take care of each other. I'll be home before you know it."

Sereny's fingers found the amulet, drawing comfort from the fact that a part of her father was still present. Stroking the back of her mother's pale hand, she waited for the psychic's vision to pass. As instructed, Sereny's blue notebook and favorite pen rested within reach.

Sounds began to emerge from her mother's open mouth. They were deep, guttural moans that slowly became words. Loath as she was to let go, Sereny released her mother's hand and grabbed the notebook and pen. The wind screamed as though attempting to drown out the woman's voice, but was no match for Sereny's concentration. Her hand scratched the words onto the page with careful precision.

"When thousand spins of Terra twins..."

The howling increased and with a sudden crack, the window shattered, bathing the pair in glass. A figure in a grey cloak swept through the room, shrieking. It saw the young girl and flew at her with a malicious cry.

While part of Sereny was frozen with fear, her instincts took over. She grabbed the amulet around her neck and yelled "Release!" An enormous hawk manifested before the girl, wings spread wide in a shield, just as the attacker reached for her throat. Repelled, it found itself next to her mother's body. The girl flew into a terrified rage and cast her arms around her mother, seeking to protect her.

The woman awoke, color and warmth returning to her flesh, and found herself face to face with the creature, her daughter desperately clinging to her. Quickly, she invoked her own amulet and a bear erupted into being, snarling. Finding itself blocked by guardian spirits, the creature retreated. Instead of leaving, however, it flew towards the back of the house, to the room that Sereny had never been allowed to enter.

The spells that sealed the door held, though the figure beat furiously at them. It no longer seemed to care about the other occupants of the house, which proved to be its mistake. The girl's mother spoke in a firm, but clear voice, invoking not only the power within her, but the untapped spell on the door, set in place for just such a situation. The door flashed, blinding all three of them, but when the flare subsided, only the girl and her mother stood before the forbidden room. Sereny coughed as the smell of sulfur washed over her. She felt pain in her fingers and became aware that she was still gripping her notebook, the rings biting cruelly into her hands. Relaxing her fingers, she looked down at the almost blank page and despaired. With the attack, she hadn't been able to record all that had been said. Her mother caught the expression and gently took the notebook from her. Upon reading the six words, she frowned slightly, then stepped forward to the door.

As her mother placed a hand on the knob, Sereny's heart skipped a beat, but there was no flash. The doorknob turned and with a squeak, the door opened. Her mother turned on a lamp.

Sereny entered the room with anticipation pounding in her heart and questions caught in her throat. She eagerly searched the room, hunting for forbidden secrets, but found only filing cabinets. Frowning, she watched her mother move with a careful step, her sharp eyes peering about.

Stopping at a nondescript cabinet, the woman opened a drawer and reverently removed an ancient piece of paper bound by a silver ribbon. She solemnly placed this into her daughter's outstretched hands and nodded.

The girl pulled gently at the ribbon, giddy with excitement. The ribbon fell to the ground and unrolled the crackling paper, revealing lines of scrawl. Her eyes widened in surprise. She read the lines upon the page, her mouth silently shaping the words.

*When thousand spins of Terra twins...*

She read them again, then looked up at her mother.

"What does it mean?"

Her mother spoke for the first time since her vision.

"It means that it is starting."

# Chapter 1

*Damn, damn, damn!* Tim cursed in time with his feet slapping the pavement as he made a mad dash down the street to the theater, his shoulder bag swinging in his hand. The rain splattered his face and hair, darkening the brown locks to an almost jet-black. He dodged around an elderly couple, silently cursing everyone on the sidewalk, the rain, and his boss. Especially his boss. Sprinting down the entire last block, he threw open the ancient door, taking satisfaction in hearing it clang against the side of the theater, then quickly surveyed the backstage area, relieved to find no sign of the stage manager in sight. Nikki was a stickler for punctuality. He started towards the room reserved for technical staff, but halted after three strides. “Forgot to sign in,” he murmured aloud. Frantically digging in his bag for a pen, he hurried back to the stage door.

“Well, well, well. How kind of you to show up.” The silvery voice dripped with derision. Tim groaned inwardly. *Please*, he thought. *This isn’t fair. I shouldn’t have to deal with her right away.* He forced a smile onto his face and turned to face the speaker.

“Cassandra,” he greeted her. “How are you this lovely evening?”

“On time,” the actress responded, placing an emphasis on the words. “I realize this is the first time that you’ve worked in a professional theater, but that’s no excuse. The stage crew is supposed to arrive before the actors. It’s opening night. This is not a good way to start the run!” Cassandra emerged from the shadows like a predator stalking its prey. She posed, leaning slightly forward and causing her robe to fall partly open, exposing a generous amount of cleavage. Her movements were careful and calculatedly seductive, demonstrating a high opinion of her own beauty. *Too bad most of it’s fake*, Tim thought, but he didn’t dare say this out loud. Her face glazed over in a perfect simulation of sympathy. “Oh, dear me, little boy, what happened to you? You look like a drowned rat.”

“It’s raining,” Tim muttered through gritted teeth. His eyes darted left and right, expecting Nikki to appear at any moment. Cassandra didn’t seem to notice.

“Oh, is it still raining? I could barely feel it through the furs. Of course, I arrived early, ready to warm up, and nothing is ready for me! The stage is dusty and you know how dust affects my voice. If my performance suffers tonight, it’s your fault.”

*I’ll take that chance*, Tim thought to himself, but kept his mouth shut as he sifted through his bag, removing contents and shifting others in what was swiftly becoming a fruitless search. Cassandra seemed oblivious to his actions.

“When are you going to get to the stage, Timothy? I can’t let your incompetence get in my way.”

Tim continued to rummage through his bag while the actress sighed theatrically and lightly tapped the toe of her stiletto. Finally, he resurfaced with a pen. “As soon as I sign in,” he answered.

She observed him with a false, cold smile. “You might want to dry off. You’re going to have to mop back here as it is. Make sure you get to the stage immediately. I need to warm up. And by the way, looks like someone already signed you in.” With that, she turned and strutted off to her dressing room, her stilettos clicking on the boards, leaving Tim seething.

Shutting his bag with a vengeful tug, Tim stormed his way in the opposite direction towards the tech room. Latwanda was waiting for him when he opened the door. She was dressed in all black – the stagehand’s uniform – her long hair braided and held back in a tight bun. Her look was reproving, but all she said was, “Hello.”

“Hi. Don’t even say anything. Mark was being such a jerk today. He knows it’s opening night and he still wouldn’t let me go until my replacement came in and she was twenty minutes late. I didn’t have a choice. There’s no reason for it either; he could handle things at the store by himself for that little amount of time, but of course, he won’t do that. He wants to squeeze every last second of work out of us.” He slammed his bag down on the table with a bang and tore through it, yanking out black clothing. He paused. “Thanks for signing me in. You’re a lifesaver.”

“Tim, you have got to get here before Cassandra,” Latwanda begged.

“I know, I know, I have to set things up before the actors get here and–”

“No, I just can’t deal with that prima donna by myself.” Tim laughed, feeling his frustration mitigate with commiseration. “I mean it. She’s a pain in the ass. She asked if I could collect rainwater today so she could observe it and see if there was anything in the rain that might affect her voice.”

“You’ve got to be joking.” Tim pulled out the rest of the required outfit.

“I wish I were. That woman is a bitch. She has no heart.” She went over to the kitchen section. “Want a cup of coffee?”

“That would be awesome. I’m wet to the bone.” Dry clothing in hand, he headed for the bathroom. “Be right back.”

Latwanda hummed to herself as she started the coffee and Tim emerged a few minutes later dressed in his new outfit. “Beautiful,” she said. “This is the perfect look for you. Slicked back hair, all black clothes. You look like a rebel of some sort.”

Tim laughed. "Yeah, that's me. Rebel Tim. Well, I was going to wear my robe and stilettos, but..." Latwanda snorted. "Does she really think that's a normal outfit?"

"Who knows what she thinks? Or if she thinks." She handed him a mug. "Drink quickly; we have work to do." They could hear the familiar noises of other people arriving and getting ready for the show. As if on cue, the door opened and Nikki entered.

"I need coffee," she said, making a bee-line for the kitchen. She quickly filled a mug and sipped at it. Turning to them, she added, "And the stage needs sweeping and mopping, the props need checking – there are things to be done."

Tim and Latwanda looked at each other. "Yes, Nikki," they said together, dumping their mugs and heading for the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tim spent as little time at the opening night festivities as possible. It just wasn't his idea of a good time to stand around watching Cassandra being fawned over by her entourage. As one man from the audience knelt and kissed Cassandra's hand, Latwanda said, "There isn't enough alcohol at this party. I'm outta here."

Tim was right behind her. "Wait for me." They gathered their things and left the theatre, walking out into the cool night. The sky had cleared, but the ground was still wet and shiny in the moonlight. They walked in companionable silence, each enjoying the outdoors. At the corner, they parted ways and Tim made his way back to his apartment.

As he put the key into the lock, he was met by a barrage of meows coming from the other side of the door. He chuckled quietly and opened the door with a practiced foot to keep the cat from escaping. He dropped his bag and scooped the tawny ball of fur into his arms. "Hello, Harmony. Miss me?" The cat nuzzled his face, purring. Shutting the door with his shoulder, he chuckled again and set her down on the floor where she immediately began weaving in and out of his legs, purring all the while. He flicked on a light and looked around his apartment.

On the walls hung poster after poster of various Broadway shows; some with autographs. Playbills littered the tables and floor. Pictures with friends and cast members shared the bookshelves with books of theatre history, acting techniques, and librettos. A stack of original cast albums claimed a spot by the couch.

Inhaling the familiar scent of his living space, his body relaxed. The highs and lows of the day paled as the simple desire for a glass of water took over. He noticed the answering machine light flashing, and hit it en route to the kitchen.

"Hi honey."

"Hey, Mom." He always talked back to the messages.

"Just wanted to drop you a line and say happy opening night." *Thanks.* "I hope everything went well." *For the most part.* "Anyway, your father and I have been thinking about you, wondering how you're doing." *I'm single.* "Seeing if there's anything exciting going on." *Nope, Mom, still single.* "Anyone special?" *Ha, that's what I thought. No –*

*single*. "Well, hon, as I said, hope you had a wonderful opening night. I love you and good luck." Mom, not 'good luck'. Say 'break a leg'. He'd never cured her of the habit.

He took a large gulp of water and strolled back into the living room, grabbing his bag and flipping on the television. Harmony jumped up and curled onto his lap. Absently stroking the cat, he let his eyes follow the pictures on the screen.

The film featured a handsome man striving desperately to save his love from evil's clutches. It was a stereotypical hero/villain story and just perfect for Tim's tired brain. He found himself engrossed in the film, silently cheering on the hero. Tim's heart squeezed as the villain caught the heroine in his trap. The music built, adding suspense to the scene and though he was aware of the convention, Tim's pulse quickened with anticipation.

A sharp pain in his legs made him sit up with a start. Harmony was standing on his lap, claws extended into his skin, fur fluffed out. Her head swiveled back and forth, scanning the room. The hair on the back of Tim's neck stood up and he echoed the cat's scrutiny. Harmony moved to the arm of the sofa and, as quietly as possible, Tim stood. He tiptoed to the edge of the room and peered down the hallway. There was nothing.

A gunshot rang out and both of them turned sharply to face the television where the hero and villain faced off. Neither of them moved. Harmony turned back to Tim and with an almost apologetic air, settled on the sofa as if nothing had occurred.

Only partially comforted by the cat's manner, Tim performed a quick search of the apartment. Nothing out of the ordinary. Tim rejoined his companion for the rest of the movie, letting the fictional characters play out the tension that had arisen within the room. By the time evil had been vanquished, both Tim and Harmony were feeling calmer. Tim sat for a moment, then glanced at the clock. 1:00 am. "Well, Harmony, it's time for bed." The cat looked at him with unblinking yellow eyes.

He stood, dislodging the cat, put his glass in the sink, and crossed into his bedroom. A large red circle on the wall calendar caught his eye. *Dinner with Nell; Ilene's*. His best friend had complained about never seeing him recently, but she always did that during the week before a show opened. She knew he disappeared from the face of the earth during that week. So, he arranged dinner at their favorite place, Ilene's, for between work and the show.

As he was undressing, a movement at his bedroom window caught his eye. He moved closer to the window. Harmony was already perched on the windowsill, watching intently. Tim observed the cat, his apprehension returning, then turned his gaze back to the city. Nothing. Just the same skyline he saw every night. Without warning, something swept by the window, grey against the blackness. Tim jumped back with a startled oath and Harmony streaked by him, screeching. Blood thundering in his ears, he crept slowly towards the window and peered out. The skyline greeted him, undisturbed. He squinted into the darkness, daring something to come again, willing it to appear. Nothing. Just a peaceful city working, celebrating, slumbering.

Heart pounding, Tim looked around for Harmony. She had disappeared. He called for her, but she didn't come. Uneasy, he went to the kitchen pantry and grabbed her bottle of treats. Shaking it while moving from room to room, he called her name over and over. Silence. *Tim, you're scaring yourself*, he thought. *She's probably just hiding from that thing*. He knew he had seen something – no, someone. That shape had had a face. He didn't know who or what it was, but it had some kind of face.

There was no sign of the cat anywhere. His unease increasing, he put the treats back in the cabinet and returned to his bedroom. Swallowing his panic, he continued to reassure himself that Harmony had been scared and was now hiding somewhere he was unable to look. His heart fluttered against his ribcage like a frightened moth and he thought about calling Nell. *No, she's probably sleeping and anyway, what can she do?* he thought. Shivering, he crawled under the covers and stared at the window, half-hoping the figure would come again, half-afraid that it would. Against all expectations, eventually his eyes closed.

# STAR CHILD TRILOGY

RISING SIGN

RULING HOUSE

*RETURNING PLANET – SPRING 2012*

by JARED R. LOPATIN

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