

PREVIEW EXCERPT FROM
BOOK TWO IN THE STAR CHILD TRILOGY

NOW AVAILABLE

RULING HOUSE

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Prologue

Adam loved his mother.

At least he thought he did. With so little experience of the outside world, he had little to compare by way of emotion. Worship, awe, and terror all mixed together to form what he believed was love. He was scared of her violent outbursts, her screaming fits, her terrible threats. Yet he stood in awe of her power and beauty. Her followers treated her with no less respect or love. They bowed and fawned over her, only attending to him when she willed it. He preferred the human followers to the other ones and he rarely had contact with any of them except for his tutor, Lilith.

It was Lilith who gave him his name. His mother never called him by name. He didn't even know if she was aware that he had a name. But Lilith gave him the name "Adam" and as soon as he was old enough to understand, she explained the biblical reference. His mother hadn't liked him learning about the Bible. *Trivial religious nonsense*, she called it. *Born from the ancient truths, but transformed from their original art into mere myth and story*. Lilith said there was power in story and that's why he was named after the first man. A man given enormous significance because of his status as the progenitor of his race, but ultimately, an ordinary man.

Adam was no ordinary child.

At one year of age, he was constructing full sentences. He could spout mathematical theorems by age three and became deeply involved in the study of astronomy and astrology, as his mother wished. It was around this time that his telekinetic outbursts manifested and objects had to be bolted down. Even then, it was not a foolproof method for safeguarding valuables and during the child's tantrums, many servants were known to seek protection. Only his mother withstood his tantrums with minimal reaction. She insisted that he be trained as each new power revealed itself.

Shortly after his fourth birthday (which was not celebrated, of course; his mother didn't believe in such things), he discovered a musical talent. He was able to conjure instruments from the very air and once in his hands, he could play as a virtuoso. The

only instrument that eluded him was the lyre. No matter how hard he tried, he could not conjure it. The thought of it rankled, so he filled his room with other instruments, trying to cover for the perceived failure. He played often. These musical performances resulted in varying emotional responses from his listeners. He found he could affect emotions by calling up different instruments and he took to books of musical theory.

Soon after, his mother began visiting occasionally to teach him things that could not be found in books. She told him stories of her own experiences. The story he loved to hear most was the story of his birth.

He was born on a cold winter night at the turn of the millennium. His mother liked to say that he was the first child of the new age. He enjoyed hearing her describe the cottage, the candles, the warm bed. But most of all, he thrilled to hear about her triumph over twelve enemies. He was almost taken from her immediately after being born, she told him. She had had to use her powers to fight off the dozen enemies lest they take him away and brainwash him so that he never knew his own mother. His heart burned with fierce pride as she described the way she snatched him up and fought with all her might. And she escaped. And she won. He was her prize.

And he loved her.

Near to his fifth year of life, he developed a new power: telepathy. This new ability was wild, uncontrolled, and it led to a terrifying discovery: his mother was in danger. During one of the rare times he had his mother alone, his mind automatically quested for information and he was suddenly within his mother's mind. There was a dark knot of fear and he found himself speeding toward the source. He was shocked to find the simple image of a girl.

He was even more shocked by the slap that followed.

His mother stood, her eyes smoldering with fear and rage, fury written across her face. She never said a word. She stalked from the room. He cried out his apologies to no avail.

Adam badgered his tutor for information. She refused to acknowledge his requests. Frustrated, he tried to use his telepathy to gain access into her mind, but it was still too new for him to use it consciously.

It was during a meal that the vision came. He was eating alone, as he normally did, when he froze, his fork clattering to the floor. His mouth went slack and he saw a complete vision before him that made his insides churn. The girl from his mother's mind appeared and before he could cry out warning to his mother, he saw her slain by this simple little girl. The first of his oracular powers had manifested.

And as Adam saw the horrific death, a terrible hatred was born within his breast. He silently vowed that this vision would never come to pass. He would kill the girl so that his mother would survive, unafraid.

For Adam loved his mother.

Chapter 1

The air buzzed with excitement. Dawn's head swiveled to follow people as they ran back and forth, clothing and makeup floating through the air after them. Every so often, the room would wince from a particularly sharp mental shout from Dawn's Aunt Dana. The nervous bride was having trouble keeping her telepathic abilities under control. Whenever that would happen, silver light would flow over the room and people would pause, their expressions suddenly calm. Dawn glanced to the side. Her Aunt Emily sat, her hands folded in her lap, still emanating soft silver light. She caught Dawn's eye and winked.

Dawn's cadre of aunts and uncles were probably the most unusual family anyone could conceive, but she'd never known anything else, nor wanted to. The past six years had seen a lot of events, but this was the first wedding that Dawn had attended, let alone participated in. Dana and Chris had been reunited by the prophecy foretelling Dawn's birth and Dawn permitted herself a small sense of accomplishment in light of that. She watched, like a proud parent, as her other aunts fussed over Dana, applying makeup, twisting her red hair up into curls, laying out jewelry. Only Aunt Emily sat to the side, maintaining the emotional atmosphere of the room.

There was one woman who looked uncomfortable despite Emily's efforts: Barbara Wyntrap, Dana's mother. She wore an expression of deep misgiving which, to Dawn, had seemed stamped upon her face since the speeches of the previous evening. Glasses were raised in toast to the happy couple, mostly by members of The Gathering, the society of gifted individuals to which Dana and Chris belonged. Dawn had been watching carefully and though Mr. Wyntrap appeared to ignore most of the proceedings, Dana's mother winced every time someone mentioned anything having to do with Dana being a Sign, the Aries, or a telepath. It was unusual for Dawn to see such a negative reaction to something that she had grown up accepting and she found it fascinating. Dawn didn't think Barbara Wyntrap was an unpleasant woman; after all, she had accepted The Gathering's invitation to the wedding. However, she had particular ideas of what was

proper, which was why she had insisted upon holding a ceremony of her own for her friends and family. Memories would end up as a blend of both weddings while memories of The Gathering itself would be erased. This was a condition that both The Gathering and Mrs. Wyntrap approved of. She had no desire to recall her time among those to whom she kept referring to as “those people.”

So Barbara Wyntrap sat stiffly on a plush couch, her arms folded across her chest. She made no move to help her daughter get ready. Her eyes darted from side to side, observing the mayhem, her mouth a thin line of disapproval. The only subject she would discuss was the flowers.

“I still say that roses are traditional for a wedding. Honeysuckle just seems so out of place.”

Dana glanced at her in the mirror. “Mom, we’ve talked about this.”

“I just don’t understand. I had roses at my wedding. Huge, beautiful bouquets. Everyone commented on them. And they smelled lovely.”

“Well, Mom, that was your wedding. This is mine and I want honeysuckle. They’re pretty and simple. Chris likes them too. Ouch! Not so tight,” she said to Izzy, who was styling her hair.

“I need to set it in place before I can spray it,” Izzy told her. “Stop moving.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Dana shot back.

Dawn laughed with the others, appreciating the joke. As the Taurus, Aunt Izzy had the power to turn to stone.

“Why couldn’t you have had professional hairstylists doing your hair?” Mrs. Wyntrap wanted to know. “Can’t those people afford that?”

“Of course they can afford it, Mom, but the girls offered and it means more to have them do it.” Dana beamed at her sister Signs.

“Well, for the other wedding, you will have your hair professionally done.” She fidgeted with her coiffeur. “We all will.”

“Mom, leave your hair alone. You’re going to ruin it and then we’re going to have to do it again,” Dana warned.

“You look wonderful, Mrs. Wyntrap,” Rhys added, trying to pacify her. The woman sniffed and didn’t answer.

Dawn surreptitiously slid a hand up to feel her own hair. She had been awakened early and hustled down to the bridal suite. Once there, she was attacked by a telekinetic who applied makeup and styled her hair at the same time. She was then sprayed with enough hairspray to choke an elephant, handed a basket of honeysuckle petals, and directed to an easy chair. She sat patiently and waited while the other women prepared for the big day. When Dana came in, though, she sent a mental smile to Dawn and the child smiled back.

The hour was drawing near and honeysuckles were being woven into Dana’s hair. “Remember,” she told them, “I want it to outline the nascregala.” Her hands traced the glyph for Aries that had been patterned into her hair six years ago.

"I still don't see why you display those things," said her mother. "It's unseemly. I'm sure that nice Tim fellow would agree with me."

"Tim has one of his own, and I don't want to do this again. The nascregala are symbols of our birthright, which we had to fight very hard to get. They are marks of courage and intelligence as well as power and we have every right to display them as we choose."

"But don't they seem a little tacky for a wedding?" the woman protested. "I mean, Elizabeth has hers on her neck. Couldn't she have gotten it on her back, like Rhys? You can hide it with the dress."

"No, Mom. They're specific to our bodies just as they're connected to our signs. And we didn't have any control over where the nascregala were put. Let it go."

There was a light knock on the door and an older gentleman peeked in. "Ladies?" Mr. Pears inquired.

"We're almost ready," Rhys told him.

"Excellent," he replied. "We are ready when you are."

"Five minutes," Emily promised.

"I will tell Christopher," said the librarian.

"He already knows," Dana told him with a smile.

"Ah, yes. I see. You look beautiful, my dear. I will see you soon." The door closed with a gentle snick.

Dawn hopped down from the chair and wandered toward the clump of ladies. "Aunt Dana?" she asked, her hand held out.

The bride knelt down to be on eye level with the raven-haired child. Dawn's hand opened to reveal a crystal honeysuckle. It glimmered and gleamed with ethereal beauty. Dana gasped. "Where did you get this?" she asked.

Dawn whispered shyly, "I made it." Gesturing for her aunt to kneel, she carefully worked the gift into the bride's hair at the point of the Aries glyph.

Dana's surprise beat at the edges of their minds, but she kept her face composed as she kissed her charge's cheek. "Thank you," she whispered. "It's beautiful."

It was the last touch. When she straightened and turned around, a sharp intake of breath could be heard throughout the room. Mrs. Wyntrap stood, her hands clasped together as though in prayer.

"You look resplendent," she said, tears in her eyes. The others were quick to agree.

Dana flushed with pleasure and uncharacteristically fluttered her hands. Mrs. Wyntrap was instantly at her side. Dana hugged her mother, her eyes wet. "Mom..."

"You're ready," Mrs. Wyntrap assured her.

"It's your destiny," Emily added.

"And we know something about destiny," Jamee joked wryly. Dana laughed shakily.

Rory took her hand. "You'll be great. He loves ya and he's gonna fall over when he sees ya."

Dana's smile grew and Dawn knew it wasn't just because of the Scorpio's words. Her Aunt Rory had grown up with no control over her poisonous talent. She couldn't touch anyone for fear of harming them. Once she gained her nascregala, however, she found that she could control her talent, making skin to skin contact safe for her. It was a gift that brought her endless joy and all of the Signs took delight in her freedom.

Mrs. Wyntrap took Dana's other arm. "It's time to go," she said.

Chapter 2

Dawn could smell the woody scent from the oak doors. It was a heady odor that crept inside her and took her far away to the forest. Her mind traveled, breathing in the sweet air and listening to tree conversations. She was at home here in the outside world. She loved the damp breeze that caressed her face and licked at her fingertips. The trees were dressed in their evening moss and she laughed to think that she was somehow underdressed for a party, although she was wearing her flower girl dress and plenty of makeup. It seemed too artificial for this natural beauty. She wanted to be a part of it all, the trees, the grass, the breeze, the earth. It was so pure, so easy.

Let yourself go, the trees whispered to her.

“How?” she asked them. Even her voice was unnatural in this quiet setting.

A hand took her shoulder and the vision dissolved. “Are you ready?” a male voice asked her.

Dawn looked up into the eyes of her favorite uncle, Michael. He was the Virgo. For the first year of her life, Uncle Michael had lived in the room next to hers. His power of healing had kept him very close just in case anything should happen and he had given her the name Dawn. Although she loved all of her aunts and uncles, she was closest to Michael. Only eighteen years older, he was more like a big brother. As the youngest of the Signs, the job of ring bearer had fallen to him.

“Dawn, you ready?” he asked again. Behind him, Dawn’s aunts and uncles were lining up. At the very back, Dawn could see Dana fidgeting with her veil. Her mother was trying to help her. Mr. Wyntrap, a balding, middle-aged banker, stood nearby, watching the proceedings with barely suppressed apathy. Dawn turned back to Michael.

“Yes, I’m ready.”

Michael reached for the handle.

As the doors swung open, Dawn straightened her back and smiled. She held the basket in the crook of her right arm. Her pink dress rustled pleasantly as she stepped forward, Michael close behind her. The assemblage oohed and ahhed, but this wasn’t

merely the common appreciation of the flower girl's childlike beauty; she was a celebrity among this group. To have the Star Child in the wedding was an honor, but Dawn knew her aunt wasn't thinking of it that way. The flower girl was always the youngest girl in the family and in this family, odd as it may be, Dawn was it.

Soft music sighed throughout the chamber as Dawn floated down the aisle, dipping her hand into the soft petals and strewing them about. She saw Chris standing at the end, a nervous, lopsided grin on his face. He was part of the family too. As she advanced, she recognized faces in the crowd.

The librarians, Mr. Pears, Miss Balcombe, and Mrs. Sart, sat together, watching carefully. Mnemonics all, they would recall every detail of the ceremony with complete accuracy.

Professor Blanche Galten sat with the Conlyns, John and Rachel. She nodded once in approval and Dawn almost laughed. Leave it to Professor Galten to make everything into a test of some sort.

Mrs. Conlyn sat with her hand resting lightly on Mr. Conlyn's knee. They were smiling, but there was still a haunted look in their eyes. John Conlyn had barely survived the night of Dawn's birth and had to fight every day not to succumb to the darker magic that had been placed inside of him. Mrs. Conlyn suffered an almost greater pain in watching her husband fight a force she could not feel, knowing there was nothing she could do to help. They were happy to attend such a joyous event. It helped remind Mr. Conlyn what he was fighting for.

Dawn and Michael reached the end of the aisle. Chris bent down to kiss Dawn on the cheek, straightened, and shook Michael's hand. Dawn moved to her left, while Michael took his place on Chris's side. She was glad that she was the first one to reach the front. Now, she could watch as her family ventured forth to meet her.

First down the aisle was Rory, escorted by Dawn's Uncle Kelsey, although technically, Kelsey was her half-brother. The Star Child and the Pisces shared a mother and a common enemy, both found in the same woman. Using his dreamwalking power, Kelsey often showed up in Dawn's dreams. Through Kelsey, Dawn learned a great deal about the woman she had emerged from, including the history of her own birth. Aunt Rory was a bit of an enigma. She was quiet and treated the Star Child as a precious commodity. Dawn's time with Rory was confusing, but affectionate.

Next came Izzy, escorted by the Gemini in male form, James. The Gemini had compromised. Jamee was there for the bride's preparations, but James would attend the wedding. He strutted down the aisle with a mischievous grin ever playing about his lips. Dawn adored the Gemini. Their talent for transformation was always entertaining. Plus, ever since she had learned about her own twin, the Gemini had become infinitely more fascinating and she asked them endless questions about what it was like to be two. Her Aunt Izzy was practical and blunt. She never talked down to Dawn, always treating her as an equal. Dawn loved that about her. She even had Izzy turn her to stone a few times, just to see what it was like. She liked the feeling of invincibility that it gave her.

Her Uncles Tim and Xander walked down the aisle together, hand in hand. They wore twin smiles and Xander winked at Dawn. Dawn had enjoyed countless hours with the Sagittarius, traveling all over the world. Uncle Tim often accompanied them. The Libra had charmed Dawn on more than one occasion to keep her well-behaved but since the age of three, she had developed a resistance to it. They were playful, fun, and Dawn couldn't help but grin back at them.

Uncle Cole and Aunt Rhys entered. Dawn's tiny aunt was dwarfed by the Aquarius, but somehow, it was a fitting pairing. Even in human form, the Leo was strutting with feline grace. Rhys had introduced Dawn to the animal kingdom. As a lioness, she could command any animal, but she treated them with kindness and now many of them were her friends. Dawn had learned the language of almost every animal. Her Uncle Cole was teaching her about the elements. His talent for water magic had expanded into an interest for all five elements and for the past six years, Cole had been studying the elements and their balance. His studies had piqued the interest of the young Star Child, although her interest was more from the element of ether, the element of the stars.

The last pair was Dawn's Uncle Stephen and Aunt Emily. The sensitive Cancer and the usually stoic Capricorn appeared slightly nervous. It was slight, but Dawn knew the cause of it. Uncle Stephen and Aunt Emily had been attracted to each other since they joined the team. Unfortunately, both were shy in their own way, but Dana, picking up on their thoughts, paired them together for the wedding. Dawn hoped that Aunt Emily was able to control her emotions so that they didn't leak out and affect the entire audience. Stephen walked with a stiff gait, but his eyes were soft as he escorted the Cancer down the aisle. They separated as Emily came to stand with Dawn's line and Stephen joined Michael's.

The audience rose as one and all eyes focused on the back of the room, but Dawn already knew what Dana looked like. She turned to watch Chris.

He stood straight and tall, eagerly awaiting the arrival of his bride, and Dawn knew the second that Dana appeared. Chris's mouth twisted up at the ends and his eyes glowed with love. Satisfied to see the helpless affection on the groom's face, Dawn turned her attention to the bride.

Dana floated on the arms of her parents. She was stately and collected, with no hint of the nervousness that had oozed from her personality a mere half hour prior to this moment. However, for those who were paying attention, there was a thrumming at the edge of the mind. Dana reached the end of the aisle, received a kiss from each of her parents, and took her place at Chris's side. Her eyes shone through the gauzy veil. Smiles bloomed on faces of the wedding party when Dana slipped her hand inside Chris's. A squeaking sound pervaded the air as the audience sat.

The ceremony was beautiful.

The first time she heard the voice, Dawn thought she was hallucinating. It seemed so harsh, so angry, but it was faint. She thought it might have been a fear-based imagining,

but she couldn't understand why she would be afraid at this moment. She reminded herself that she was in the safest place possible, surrounded by numerous people sworn to protect her. She forced her mind to focus as the couple exchanged their vows. Chris's voice broke as he proclaimed his love and Dana sniffled a little, but was able to keep tears from her face.

The kiss was something to see. It was the one moment when Dana lost control of her telepathy. The audience was hit with a single word.

"Wow."

Thereafter, the telekinetics transformed the room into a reception hall and while this was happening, the telepaths presented their gift to the newlyweds. Everyone's mind was suddenly swept up in an individual slide show of Dana and Chris, complete with their happiest moments at The Gathering. There was laughter and a few sniffles as the memories floated through people's minds. It had been a tremendous undertaking and required a great amount of mental energy on the part of the telepaths, and as the show ended, Dawn saw that they were tired, but smiling broadly. Dawn realized that they must have collaborated with the mnemonics to get so many wonderful memories and she saw the three librarians looking on in proud affection.

The telekinetics had finished. Scented candles cast flickering shadows throughout the room as the guests took their places. An enormous dance floor drifted in a sea of crimson tablecloths. Dawn sat at one of the tables, listening to the sound of clinking glasses and silverware while chewing on a piece of asparagus. Michael sat to her right, chatting with James in hushed tones about the bachelor party. Dawn listened eagerly, her curiosity aroused.

"I can't believe you missed it!" Michael said to James.

"Well, Jamee wanted to be at the bachelorette party and since I got to do the wedding, I thought it was fair that she got to go. Besides, I was there for the first half!"

"Yeah, but the girl came later," Michael assured him.

"What girl?!"

"She was—"

"Hungry."

The word slunk into Dawn's mind like a predator in the tall grass, and pounced with sharp, short stabs that pierced and stung. It was over so quickly that though Dawn tried to follow it back to the source, there was nothing there. She turned to the boys to ask them if they had heard anything, but they were still deeply involved in their discussion. As she opened her mouth, there was a loud announcement through the chamber. It was the emcee.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you now to rise as we welcome Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Jamsen." The audience burst into thunderous applause as the bride and groom appeared in the doorway. Both were beaming as Chris led his new wife to the dance floor. "And in a timeless wedding tradition, the bride and groom will now dance the first dance." The first notes of the music drifted through the air and Dawn couldn't

help but grin as she recognized the melody of Alison Kraus's "When You Say Nothing At All." A fitting song for two telepaths. All memory of the voice was temporarily banished. Even precocious six year-old girls can be distracted.

Polite applause heralded the end of the dance and a faster song began. More people joined the happy pair and Michael pulled his giggling niece onto the dance floor. Swooping down, he snatched her into his arms and whirled around the other couples. Dawn laughed and threw her head back, letting herself feel pleasantly dizzy. The evening passed by in a flurry of merriment. Dawn danced with all of her uncles and aunts, including the bride. Even Chris grabbed her for a spin around the floor. Plates heaped with food floated over the guests' heads to settle on the various tables. Then it was time to cut the wedding cake. Chris slipped a tiny piece of cake into Dana's mouth. Dana returned the favor by cramming a larger piece in Chris's face. The groom submitted to the indignity with a cheerful expression and said something mentally that set the bride off in giggles.

All too soon, it was time for the receiving line and then the happy couple was heading out the door to the bridal suite. The audience followed them to the doorway. Dana and Chris paused on the stairs to wave at the audience, then disappeared up the staircase. The official honeymoon would commence in the morning with a trip through Europe. Giddiness fluttered at the edge of everyone's mind and then mental shields snapped into place, effectively barring the couple from all communication. This was not just a measure of privacy for the bride and groom, but a precaution for anyone within mental hearing range. Two telepaths in love had the potential to be very loud.

Dawn wandered back to the dance floor. Despite his paunch, Mr. Pears was light-footed as he and Miss Balcombe circled the floor, Mr. and Mrs. Sart countering them. Tim waltzed with Mrs. Conlyn while Xander conversed with his dad and Professor Galten. Rory, Michael, Rhys, Cole, Izzy, and James were dancing in a big group. Every so often, the Gemini would change, allowing Jamee a chance to enjoy the festivities. She filled out the tuxedo in different ways than James, yet still managed to make it look appealing. Stephen and Emily were sharing a piece of cake in the corner.

"Hey, little one." Kelsey appeared at her elbow. "What are you doing over here? Shouldn't you be dancing and spreading flowers?"

Dawn laughed. "I think I already did the flower part. Now it's fun just watching other people."

"You can learn a lot by watching other people."

Dawn nodded, and they lapsed into silence, each lost in observation. Stephen and Emily had finished the cake and were chatting, their heads close together like co-conspirators. Mrs. Sart kissed her husband and left, heading toward the library. Mr. Pears and Miss Balcombe stopped dancing to say goodbye and Jamee seized the opportunity to engage them in conversation. The song changed to a slower one and the group on the floor paired up, leaving Rory without a partner. Kelsey excused himself and glided over

to intercept her exit from the dance floor. Tim and Xander were now dancing together while Mrs. Conlyn rejoined her husband. Jamee was talking animatedly with Professor Galten, Mr. Sart, and the librarians, though Dawn could not hear their conversation. She observed all with an air of contentment. Everything was as it should be.

Scarcely had she thought this than the malignant presence returned to her mind. She gasped, but the presence locked down on her before she could draw a mental cloak about herself. Her body would not obey her. Scared and angered by her fear, Dawn made a desperate last attempt for help: she called out mentally for the one aunt who would understand, but Dana was unreachable, lost in the throes of love and passion. Panic beat within Dawn's breast as the presence oozed into her mind, securing itself within. She fought, clawing at it, screaming silently, but she had been unprepared for such a direct assault. With cold horror, the Star Child felt herself ousted from her own body.

STAR CHILD TRILOGY

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RETURNING PLANET – SPRING 2012

by JARED R. LOPATIN

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