

Chapter 1 Rules and Guidelines

The knife was in her hand even before she was awake.

Something was off.

She *knew* it.

With the barest whisper of noise, Mouse slipped out of bed, and went to her bedroom window, blending with the shadows, to peer out.

The view from her window was quiet and peaceful. Street lamps flickered, illuminating the fountain in the square, its dark waters dappled by the lights. It was a pretty little town, a town fast becoming a teeming metropolis, and the hub of what was once Rubble.

For several moments Mouse scanned the view for anything out of place. She found nothing. The only movements were the Night Eyes, strolling the plaza, keeping watch.

And yet something was off.

The creak of a floorboard outside her door galvanized Mouse into action. Knife ready to throw, she streaked to the door and flung it open.

"Mouse!" Flick said, throwing up his arm in defense. "Easy, there. It's me. Flick."

Appalled, Mouse quickly lowered her weapon and scowled. "You know not to sneak around like that," she scolded while she set the throwing knife on her dresser table and reached for her robe.

He looked sheepish. "Sorry. Still learning to override some of Spur's impromptu nudges. She really wants me to get on the move this morning."

Mouse secured her robe about her waist. "S not even light out." She rubbed the grit from her eyes. "What's the hurry?" She shook her head to clear it and focused on Flick's rounded features.

"I'm heading south. Now. There's a group of troublemakers trying to get into Rubble from the south."

She nodded. "I sensed something wasn't right. It woke me. Maybe that's what it is."

Flick studied her. "It's possible. You've always had amazing intuition."

Mouse shrugged and smoothed her hair back. "You just got back, Flick," she said. "Can't this wait? I can't run this whole place alone. There are new people coming in daily, and they all need to be placed. I need to talk with you about them," she paused, feeling the familiar knotting in her stomach as she thought of the long list of things waiting to be discussed with Spur's Champion.

"Among other things," she added.

Flick sat down on the edge of her bed. "Cricket's still here, and you've got your Eyes. They don't miss a thing. And don't forget about Max."

She sat next to him. "Max is in the City. He can't help here."

"But he can give you counsel. He knows how to get people to do exactly what he wants." Flick snorted. "And without them knowing it, too."

"You, too?"

Flick grinned and shook his head. "Spur can see right through the man." He nudged her. "Max likes you, Mouse. He'll teach you some tricks."

"You're crazy. Max likes only Max."

"Perhaps, but he likes you, too. Spur told me. He'll help you."

Mouse watched Flick go distant, the way he did when he was listening to Spur. "Boss lady wants you to hurry it up, I take it?"

He refocused. "'Fraid so." He reached out and gently grasped her shoulder. His hand was warm and reassuring, the heat radiating through the fabric of her robe. "It's good, here. Spur wouldn't allow me to leave if anything was wrong." He released her shoulder and stood.

Mouse stuck out an arm to keep from toppling off the bed. She hadn't realized she was leaning into his hand.

"I don't know," she said. "Something still feels off to me, and I can't seem to shake it."

"I think what's off is you're overtired. Relax a bit. Get in touch with Max."

Mouse nodded and sighed. "You're probably right. I'll talk with Max. Take care, Flick. Hurry back."

"I'll be back soon. I promise." He adjusted his hood over his head and grasped the staff he'd leaned against her doorway. He paused and gave her a mock salute before he left.

As Mouse watched the Champion of Spur leave her room, she wanted to smile. Flick dressed much like Eloch these days. In fact, he was a shorter, more-square version of the Champion of Entean. And he reeked of knack. It enveloped him like the cloak he wore. And he was right. She was tired.

But she wouldn't be sleeping any more tonight. She was already too awake. With a sigh, Mouse eased herself from the bed and immediately tidied it up, giving her pillows an extra plumping.

She took pride in her new room. Wanted to keep it neat and clean. It felt so wonderful to be clean all the time. She turned the water on to fill her bathing pool.

Now Spur had regained the control of Her planet, all Her creatures had the opportunity to earn the comforts of the UpperUppers. Comforts Mouse had rarely seen before, yet she had earned them by simply knowing Spur was the source of those comforts.

As she waited for her pool to fill, she gazed out over the quiet town, watched her Eyes making sure everything was safe, and allowed her thoughts to ramble.

It amazed her how quickly the world could change in a mere twelve months. Made her head spin. Wren was off with Eloch exploring planets.

Spider, her once-lover, was with them. She understood why he wanted to go, but it still hurt. And angered her. Flick was counting on them both, and Spider upped and left on his little "I want to see the Universe" excursion. She took a breath and centered herself. It still made her angry to think about Spider.

Flick was right. It was good here in Rubble. Just busy. On a daily basis she was faced with the minor squabbles and disagreements of people trying to find their place in this new society they were creating

together. From scratch. There weren't any rules to go by. She and Flick were making them up as they went along, using most of the rules Wren had already set in place when she was their Sub-City KinLord.

Only it was different now. They didn't need to focus on merely surviving. And it brought up new decisions. Like who farmed, and who wove cloth, and who built buildings. Fortunately, several architects who'd designed some of the newer buildings of The City arrived recently. But even they had to look at their building practices in a new light.

When you respected your planet, you built differently.

Mouse was never good at administration, but that's what was required, an administrator or KinLord to govern and guide the people into a new way of living. She never wanted to be a KinLord like Wren had been, never wanted the responsibility of a leadership position, yet it's exactly where her life was heading. She preferred to be the support and work on her own. Being Wren's Eyes and Second had felt good. But now? How was she going to make it all work? She felt out of her depth and she hated it.

Her bathing pool chirped, signaling it had reached the preferred level and temperature, and shut off.

Mouse took off her robe and placed it neatly on her bed, then drew her sleeping shirt, a delicate, flowing garment, over her head and waded in. With a sigh, she let the warmth surround her, and sank back to lean her head against the rim. She remembered how often she'd yearned to have a pool like Wren's. And now she had an even better one. With a sigh of satisfaction, she washed herself and then leaned back again to enjoy a few moments of peace.

Noticing the water temperature cooling, Mouse opened one eye to glance out the window and gauge how much time she had left before she needed to act. Dawn was beginning to make itself known.

Not as much time for relaxation as she would have liked.

Thirty minutes later, her dark hair still damp in its smooth braid, she exited her room and headed down the wide stairway to the house's main level. At the bottom of the steps, Little Brother emerged from the shadows to join her. He slipped his muzzle into the curve of her fingers. She smiled down and scratched his ears. "You on guard duty, my friend?"

The sniffer raised his feline gaze to her and blew into her fingers.

*Why couldn't Spider have looked at me like that?* Again, she caught herself. Spider had been gone a year, and she was being ridiculous, she told herself angrily. It wasn't so much the fact that Spider left her, she mused. She had never thought their romantic relationship would last. They were too different. He never had looked at her with Little Brother's devotion, and she never expected him to. If she were honest, what she missed was his company. With Flick gone so much of the time she had no confidant, no one to bounce ideas off of.

No confidant and lots of responsibility.

How had that happened?

The kitchen was already teeming with life, the heavenly smell of baking bread making her stomach grumble. "Morning, everyone," she called.

A few glanced at her with a smile. Others barely waved. Some frowned when they saw Little Brother at her heels.

Mornings were busiest in the kitchens. Even if she was the only one actually living in the private section, since there were merchants coming and going, there were numerous mouths to feed. Numerous beds to keep fresh. Numerous rooms to clean. It was like living in an inn.

The thought made her feel suddenly edgy. Anyone could sneak into the dwelling's private section, into her home.

Anyone.

She would have to do something about that.

Mouse rummaged around the mammoth refrigeration unit and found something to eat for herself and Little Brother. On the way out the door, she succumbed to temptation and snatched a couple of sweet rolls cooling on the racks, which she wrapped and pocketed for later.

While she walked, she tore off hunks of meat for herself and Little Brother, giving the sniffer most. At the fountain in the middle of the town center, they paused to wash down their breakfasts before continuing to the shuttle station on the town's outskirts.

It still amazed Mouse to realize she was actually living in a town with a center, and streets radiating out like spokes on a wheel. The huge Champion's home, where she lived, was also the government seat for the Territory of Rubble. Even though it no longer looked like Rubble, the name remained. It was a reminder of how bad things had been.

Just like the beautiful park in the Territory of Flick, which was called Sub-City Park. They'd renamed Above and UpperUpper to *The City in the Territory of Flick* in honor of the first Champion of Spur. Only two territories, but the rate things were going, the whole of Spur would be carved into several different territories within the next thirty to fifty years.

Things were happening fast.

The nagging feeling of something not quite right was back. Mouse's shoulder muscles tightened, and she studied the faces of the few who were up as early as she. They looked sleepy yet content, going about their business. She spotted a couple of men she didn't recognize and touched one of the knives she wore. They glanced at her disinterestedly in passing. Merchants, she decided.

At the shuttle station, she approached the guard standing with his sniffer, whose ears pricked forward when it saw Little Brother.

"Heading over to Flick?" the guard asked, recognizing her.

Calling the land beyond the mountains *Flick* still caught her off guard. Her first thought was always of Flick, her friend, not the city bearing his name. She probably would never get used to it. She preferred just calling it *The City*.

Mouse nodded and smiled. "How's it going, Blade?"

"Fine," Blade answered reddening slightly. "By the gods, Mouse. Nobody smiles like you," he said.

She frowned. "Not professional, Blade. I know you've pulled all-night guard duty, so I'll let it slide. Nearly off?"

Blade's face reddened further and he averted his eyes. "Yeah, in ten."

To show she wasn't angry, she reached up and clapped him on the shoulder as she walked through the gates. "Have a nice day, Blade. Get a good rest. You deserve it." She paused. "Who's the pilot on duty?"

“Manabu.”

“Manabu!” Mouse started toward the waiting shuttle with a sudden spurt of energy, then paused. “Notice anything off, Blade?”

The guard frowned. “Off?”

Mouse nodded. “Like strangers lingering where they shouldn’t be.”

Blade shook his head slowly. “Not that I can think of. Not that anyone has mentioned. Why?”

Mouse shrugged. “Dunno. Just a feeling. Can you ask the guards to spread the word to be extra-observant? Report to me if anything seems strange.”

“Yes, Mouse, of course.”

Mouse smiled. “Thanks. I could have this all wrong, but I would rather be cautious than sorry.”

Blade nodded. “Caution First. It’s what KinLord Wren always used to say.”

“Exactly. ‘Bye, Blade. Come, Little Brother.”

Little Brother, having made his acquaintance with the sniffer on duty, trotted behind her.

Manabu must have been watching her approach, because the shuttle door slid smoothly open and the stairs unfolded just as she arrived. She took the small steps two at a time, Little Brother close on her heels. “Manabu! I’m heading over to The City. Up for a lesson?”

The on-duty pilot chuckled. “Little Mouse, it’s good to see you, too.” He glanced at Little Brother. “Make your bodyguard stay in the back. This cockpit is small enough as it is.”

While Mouse got her sniffer settled, Manabu moved into the copilot seat. He grinned when Mouse eagerly strapped herself into the pilot seat.

“My morning just got better! Here!” She tossed him one of the sweet rolls from her pocket. “It’s still warm.”

The grizzled old man took a bite and closed his eyes to savor its buttery sweetness. "Keep bringing these," he told Mouse, "and I'll give you a lesson whenever you want."

"Deal." She grinned and took a large bite of her own, then tossed the rest to Little Brother so she could focus on flying.

"Heard from Aiko?" Manabu asked between bites and instructions on how to ready the shuttle for flight. When he was still flying for the Ring Colonizers, he'd taught Aiko to fly. Over the years, they had remained close friends. She was one of the few people who didn't judge his flying by his drinking habits. He could fly dead drunk, she'd say, just as well as he could fly sober as a holy man.

Mouse nodded. "They're still on Longwei, trying to get a modular ship to fly. It's been buried for a 1000 years."

Manabu's brows lifted. "You don't say? Mining vessel?"

She shook her head. "Colonizer."

He choked. "Impossible," he said after he recovered. "There's a reason those monstrosities are built in space. They're too heavy to get off planet once they land."

"Genji's working on it and some others I haven't met." She shot him a look, "Know Genji?"

"Sure I do. He's been with Aiko for years. Quiet fellow. Kind of doughy as I recall."

Mouse grinned. "Not anymore. Longwei did something to him. Don't know much about it but when I see him over the vids, he's so much more than dough these days. Ready to lift off?"

"What's the fuel gauge tell ya?"

"Full. We've got plenty."

With a nod Manabu radioed to the tower, got the okay. "Time to lift this bird." He pointed to the throttle and sat back to observe.

Mouse was always a fast learner. The shuttle shook a little as it whined into action and lifted gently off the ground.

"Well done, girl," Manabu said.

Mouse flashed him a grin, feeling the shuttle through her hands as Manabu had taught. The still morning air made for a perfect flight. She relaxed her shoulders and stole a glance through her side window as they sailed over the jagged peaks Spur had created to contain the people she deemed unworthy of a new life. "Beautiful."

"Yes," Manabu agreed. "This planet is finally looking like a planet and not all city and rubble."

Mouse slid a glance at him. "I wouldn't know."

"Never been off planet?"

"Nope. Not sure if I want to, either."

Manabu grunted.

They flew in silence, enjoying the freedom in the skies. Twenty minutes out, she swapped places with Manabu. No one was to know she was learning to fly. Manabu had offered to teach her. Said her questions were driving him crazy and he might as well just teach her. She jumped at the chance. Learning to fly helped fill a little of the emptiness she experienced without her friends nearby. She never said anything, but she suspected Manabu had been just as lonely.

When your whole world changes around you, and everything you thought was true, wasn't, you have to find something useful that you also enjoy to cling to, Mouse reasoned. For Manabu, teaching was like breathing to him. Mouse wasn't his only student, just the only one nobody knew about. She wanted to keep it quiet since it served no purpose other than a moment of distraction from her responsibilities.

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Max was just drinking his first of many cups of tea when Mouse was announced.

"I can make her wait," Ingot, his trusted assistant, offered.

Max retied his robe. "No, send her in. Bring another cup of tea and some breakfast foods."

"She's brought her sniffer."

Max grimaced. "Well, bring something for the sniffer, too. Never liked those creatures," he muttered as he rose and checked his appearance

in the mirror. His hair looked ruffled, which he could fix. The circles under his dark eyes, he couldn't. He scowled at himself, then grinned suddenly, "You're going to be doing some growing," he told his brows, remembering when they were white and bushy before Eloch, as Spur's Champion, gave him back his youth. Returning to the deep, plush chair in his morning room, Max sat and waited for Mouse.

Shortly after, Ingot showed her to the door.

Max studied her as he rose. It had been nearly two months since he'd seen her in person. She seemed thinner, if that was even possible. Her eyes, usually bright, were wary. *Haven't seen that look in her eyes for some time.* Her dark hair—which had grown he noted—was scraped back from her pale face in a severe style.

"Mouse! You must excuse my lack of dress. Had I known you were on your way, I would have been more prepared." He reached for her hand, and the sniffer at her side growled deep in its throat. He quickly retracted his hand and gestured to his chair's twin. "Please, have a seat. Ingot is bringing breakfast."

He sat and watched Mouse settle her slight form into the chair, tucking her legs underneath her like a small child. Wordlessly she nodded to the sniffer who lay between their two chairs. "He doesn't like me much," Max said, eyeing the sniffer.

"It's because he knows you don't like him." Mouse replied.

Max opened his eyes and spread his hand across his chest. "Am I *that* obvious? I was going for subtle."

Mouse chuckled and Max basked in the light of her glorious smile, gratified he was the cause. "I've missed you Mouse!" he said, surprised at how true it was. "Why don't you come back and work for me? Like the old days."

The *old days* consisted of several months when Mouse had offered her skills as payment for acquiring identification for her Kin after they'd been forced to flee Sub-City. She frowned and shook her head. "Never in a million years, Max. I'm through with killing."

"Well, you know what they say, *never say never*," Max replied lightly. "You were quite skilled. It'd be a shame if you lost those skills."

"Sniffers are skilled, too. That way, I don't have to be."

Max laughed. "Touche! Ah, here's Ingot." He inhaled deeply, "And whatever's on that tray he's carrying smells divine."

It did. He watched Mouse unfold her legs and lean forward, her elbows on her knees. Girl needed to eat, he decided, and was glad she looked interested. But it wasn't the food that had interested her, he noted. She was staring at Ingot's hands, at his chewed fingernails, to be exact.

Interesting.

Ingot set the tray down on the coffee table and lifted the cover to reveal a platter filled with sausages and eggs, plates, silverware, an empty teacup and a pitcher of water.

"Looks delicious, Ingot," Max said happily.

Ingot filled the cup from Max's teapot and handed it to Mouse. "I'll return shortly, sir, with something for the sniffer."

"Help yourself," Max said with a sweep of his hand. "Allow me," he said when he saw the confusion in his guest's dark eyes and filled a plate for her. "Don't wait for me," he told her as he handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said softly...and waited.

Max filled his plate and sat back. He noticed Mouse mimicking his every move as he fed himself and suddenly understood her hesitation.

Ingot returned with a haunch of raw meat on a gleaming platter which he gingerly set in front of Little Brother. The room filled with the crunching of bone and massive, resonant purrs.

"Tell me Mouse," Max said as he took Mouse's empty plate and returned it to the tray. "Now that we've broken our fast, why are you here?" He replenished their tea, checking the tea was still hot before he poured.

He took a sip, sat back, and gazed out the window while he waited for Mouse to tell him what was on her mind.

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As she gathered her thoughts, she watched him staring out at the spaceport, watching a shuttle land and another take off.

"Used to be busier," he commented. "That'd be Eloch's doing."

"Why?"

Max looked at her, and she felt the little rush she got when she saw him. Eloch had also given him back his youth. The man looked thirty-five. No longer white, those bushy eyebrows framed dark eyes with just the right amount of twinkle in them. She always found herself returning his smile. Without intending it, she'd feel the corners of her mouth start to tug up, and there she'd be. Grinning away.

"When he demolished the Ring, we lost the seat of power," he explained. "All the other planets became self-governing. It's chaos at best, anarchy at worst and," he rubbed his hands together, "I should be out there protecting my resources and gathering more."

"Sounds dangerous."

He shook his head. "Sounds exciting. What's on your mind?"

*Max is one of the good guys,* Mouse reminded herself. "I need your help," she heard herself say.

He lifted one of his dark brows. "You're asking me for help? This is quite the occasion. I was expecting you to comment on Ingot's nails. I saw you looking at them."

"I was," she nodded. "Ratty nails aren't Ingot's style. Is something bothering him?"

"Other than me pushing him hard these past months since I've become governor of The City? Not that I've noticed," Max replied, then added. "Actually, that isn't quite true. There could be something troubling my second. But I respect the man's privacy. I respect the man. He knows he can always come to me for help if he needs anything." Max waved his hand dismissively. "Which also goes for you, Miss Mouse. Of course I will help you. What can I do for you?"

Relief flooded through her. "Thank you, Max. Flick left again very early this morning, after only arriving home last night. I had a list of issues to run by him, and now I, and the people who depend on me, have to wait for whenever he shows up again. Some of the issues can't wait."

She rubbed her chest where it felt tight. "I can't do this all by myself anymore. It's gotten too big."

"Surly there are others to help you. You know, with the details."

She ran her hand down her braid, absently noting it had dried. "Of course there are people to do what I tell them to do. But without Flick, I don't have anyone to make the rules with. The laws. It's gone beyond what I learned from Wren." She paused. "Truth be told, I think it's beyond Flick, too." She tried to hold her complaints back, but it just felt too good to let it go.

"How long have you been feeling like this?" Max asked. He seemed concerned. No sparkle in his eyes this time when she glanced over at him. Just concern.

She relaxed further. "A couple of months. I've been limping along, but I just can't do it anymore. People want to know how to behave. They want—"

"Rules and guidelines," Max finished for her.

"Exactly. And I'm not a rule maker. Never wanted to be."

Max studied her in silence. "What do you want to be, Mouse?" he asked softly.

Mouse blinked. Nobody had ever asked her that question before. Ever. She wondered why. She willed her brain to think, but it appeared to have shut down. "I-I'm not sure, really. Haven't thought about it." She laughed. It didn't sound like a happy laugh. Too bitter. "For the longest time, all's I've ever wanted was to survive."

"Well you should think about it. Have some more tea." He refilled her cup. "If you don't know what you want, you won't ever get it." He refilled his own and set the pot down. He lifted his cup, took a sip, and sank back into his chair. "What you need, Mouse, is an Ingot."

Ingot's bland, nondescript features drifted through her mind. "Ingot? But he works for you."

"And he always will if I have anything to say about the matter. No, not Ingot. *An Ingot*. You need someone who answers solely to you and has exceptional organizational skills." He leaned forward, set his mug on the tray, rose to his feet and stretched. "Time to get ready. You and

that beast of yours may stay here if you like. Finish your tea. Relax in that chair. Or take a little wander in my gardens. I won't be long."

"Won't be long?"

"Yes, maybe an hour, hour and a half at most." He said as he made his way out of the room.

"An hour? Hour and a half?"

He paused in the doorway and turned. "I'm going with you, Mouse. I'm going to be your Ingot."

He waited for her reaction.

She greeted him with wide-eyed silence.

He followed her gaze and looked down. With a laugh, he re-tied his gaping robe and left the room, robustly calling for Ingot.