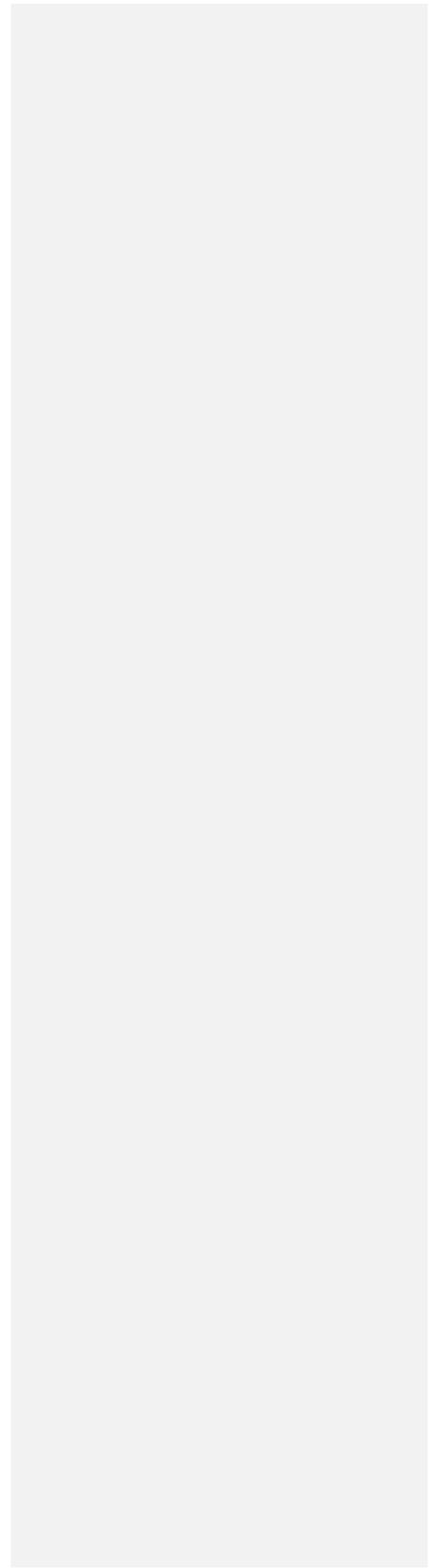


The Entean Saga
Episode 4: Vision Dreaming

C.B. Williams



Vision Dreaming, the final adventure of the Entean Saga ...

One planetary Sister has died, Her life force drained away by what the Sisters have named Something That Comes.

Time is of the essence.

Eloch and his crew must travel as quickly as possible to the neighboring galaxy of Vela Kentaurus and stop whatever the death-bringing Something That Comes is.

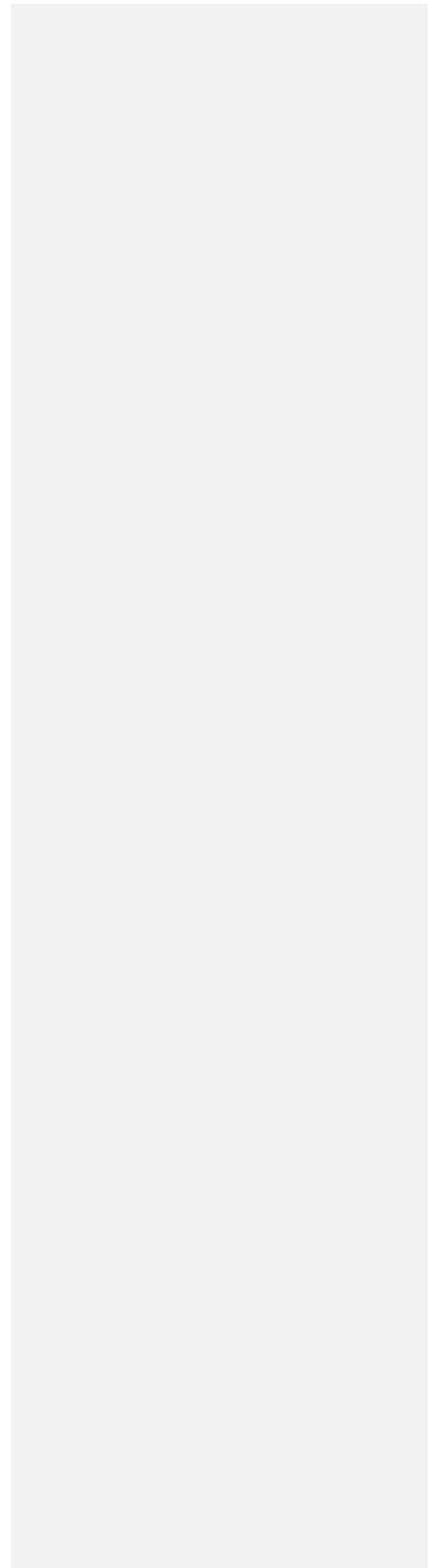
They wait only for their final crew member—a gift from the planet Talamh—the young woman Perin, a Seer, who interprets her True Dreams and Visions to provide wisdom for a safe passage across galaxies.

But all Perin sees for Eloch is death.

Although this is the final adventure of the Entean Saga series, it can be read as a stand-alone.

Dedication

For Michal, with love and gratitude
Our brainstorming sessions helped more than can you know.



Prologue

Across light-years, the Planetary Consciousness of Longwei reaches out.

Entean!

(A pause.)

Longwei, my Planetary Sister.

Did you feel it?

(A pause.)

Yes. Our Planetary Sister in the Vela Kentaurus galaxy has ceased to exist. She is gone from us.

How many more, Entean? How many more?

(A pause.)

Our Champion. He must save the remaining. He must leave now.

Yes. It is time.

(A pause.)

It is past time.

Yes.

(A pause.)

I fear.

Chapter 1 ~ Letting Go

Grale stormed into the science labs, nearly colliding with Spider, who was unpacking a container of test tubes and putting them away.

"Hey!" Spider scolded as he dodged out of the way. "I nearly dropped these. These tubes are glass. Very fragile and hard to come by. And expensive. You should know."

Grale ignored him and charged over to where Genji sat, bent over his info-console. He whipped Genji's chair around, gripped both armrests, and leaned over the startled science officer. "Where is it?" he growled.

Genji's nostrils flared and he shoved at one of Grale's arms. "Where is what? Calm down, Grale." Genji narrowed his eyes, looking somewhat predatory.

Grale repositioned his hand on the armrest and leaned in closer. "Aiko and I just spent three days dirtside," he said between gritted teeth. "Three effing days haggling over your precious state-of-the-art instruments that you couldn't travel without and needed *yesterday*. And what do you do in those three days?" he yelled, his face red.

Genji frowned when flecks of spittle landed on his cheek.

"I'd be careful, there, Grale," Spider warned. "You don't want Genji going all Nuri on you."

Grale locked eyes with Genji. "I don't care if he turns into a bloody sniffer," he growled. "This module stuff stops," he stated, poking Genji's chest.

Genji hissed and half rose from his seat. "And if it doesn't?"

"What's going on, boys?" Wren asked mildly, leaning against the doorframe. Little Sister, her sniffer, hovered at Wren's side, the huge carnivore's smooth black head at waist level.

Aiko stood behind the pair scowling, hands on her hips.

The two men looked up.

Wren crossed her good leg over her animated limb and cocked a brow. "Care to share?"

"I told you to wait," Aiko said, glaring at Grale. "Why couldn't you wait just ten minutes, so I could get Wren down here before you went all macho?"

Grale glared back. "Well, Kitten," he drawled, "I guess I just wasn't in the mood to wait, now was I?"

"So what's up?" Wren asked again. "And Grale, I think it'd be wise if you give Genji a little space."

"Fine," Grale said, pushed himself away from the chair to whirl and slam his fist against a cabinet door.

Something inside tinkled.

"Test tubes!" Spider snapped. "Hard to get and costly, remember?"

Grale ran his hand through his already untidy hair and stared at Spider. "Oh, fuck it," he said, shaking his head as he shoved past the lab tech. "I can't deal with this right now."

He began to push past Wren.

The giant sniffer rumbled a warning from deep in her chest. "Hush, Little Sister," Wren said and rested her hand on Gale's arm. "I know you're tired, Gale," she said softly, "and I have an idea what might have set you off. Aiko mentioned —"

"We couldn't find the bloody Navigation Bridge," Gale roared, "We're gone for three days, and they go move it on us. No warning. No courtesy call. Nothing. We had to wander the whole circumference of this rust bucket —"

"We could have asked someone," Aiko interrupted. "There are com links all over the place."

"We shouldn't have had to ask someone, Kitten," he growled. "That's the point. It's the Navigation Bridge! It's *our* domain. They should have asked *us* if they could move it. It's not right."

Aiko threw up her hands, "Hey, don't get all shouty at me, Cowboy," she said, her voice rising, "I'm on your side over this."

"And you're not on the Committee," Genji called from his chair. "We don't need to ask you."

Wren squeezed Gale's arm. "That's enough!" she commanded, her voice slicing through the cacophony of raised voices. "Gale, unclench your fist. Genji, stop with the lizard eyes. And you, Spider, for the love of God, close that cabinet and quit inspecting the test tubes. It's not helping."

She released her hold on Gale's arm and waited for two beats. "Thank you," she said. "Now then, here's what we're going to do. I will personally take Aiko and Gale to the Navigation Bridge. Then they will freshen up, and we will all meet in two hours at the usual place." She glanced at Gale and Aiko, "No, the galley module wasn't moved this time. It's still near our sleeping modules."

"Be still my heart," Gale scoffed.

Wren ignored him. "We will all sit down and have a civilized conversation. In the meantime, Genji, will you round up the rest of the crew and tell them to come to the meeting?"

Genji nodded, his pupils having returned to normal. "Eloch too?"

Wren hesitated. "I'll touch base with Eloch." She shrugged. "He'll either be there or he won't. But either way, we're going to resolve this situation."

"Thank the stars," Gale said. "I am so sick of this bloody Module Migration."

"Hey!" Spider said, "We just want it right."

Wren held up her hands. "Boys," she warned, "we'll all talk this through in two hours." She looked up at Gale, then glanced over at Aiko. "Let's go."

The corridor snaking around the perimeter of the *Valiant*, their interstellar ship, was wide enough for all three to walk abreast as Little Sister trotted ahead, her paws clicking in rhythm with her trot. "I really need to file those claws again," Wren said, making small talk. "She is starting to skid around corners during my morning runs."

Aiko nodded. "Can't get enough of a grip."

"So, when you're doing your running thing, how come *you* don't get lost with all these migrations going on?" Gale asked.

Wren laughed. "But I do. As soon as I get it all sorted out, something gets moved. I suppose I could look at the new schematics Spider always posts, but where's the fun in that? It reminds me of my days in Sub-City when I learned all the tunnels in my KinLands."

"I'm telling you," Grale said, "they really need to stop."

"Yeah," Aiko agreed. "This Navigation Bridge thing has finished it for me."

"I couldn't agree with you two more," Wren said. "Speaking of which, here we are." She came to a halt beside Little Sister, who stood waiting, "Your Navigation Bridge."

Grale glanced at the sniffer. "How did she know where it was?" he asked.

"Smell," Wren said. "Little Sister informs me it smells like the two of you."

Grale lift a brow and shrugged.

"I wish Spur had gifted me with a keener sense of smell," Aiko said, "like She gifted you with the ability to communicate." She glanced over at Grale, "But then again..." she drawled.

Grale scowled at her. "I smell just fine."

"I beg to differ," Aiko said.

"Don't you two want to go in now you're here?" Wren asked.

Grale swept his hand over the door panel, which slid open. "After you, ladies."

Aiko raised a brow before she strode into the module. Little Sister followed Wren in and began to nose around.

"What is it?" Wren asked just as Aiko gasped.

Grale came up alongside the two women, took one look inside, and wheeled around. "That does it," he said. "I'm not waiting no two hours. I'm dealing with this now."

"Stop!" Wren barked.

Grale stopped.

"You are going to wait, Grale," she said quietly. "You're going to go to your room module and clean up, and then we'll all meet as planned."

"I don't need to clean up," Grale scowled.

"Yes, you do," Wren said. "You smell like dirtside."

"*Dirtside?* What does that mean?"

"It means," Aiko said, "that you smell like cheap alcohol and women. And nobody needs to be gifted with a keener sense of smell to notice it."

Grale lifted his eyes heavenward, "What did I ever do to deserve this?" he moaned. "Just because I know how to have a little fun while I can," he muttered. "Fine. I will see you in two hours, smelling blossom sweet," he said, making his way to the exit.

He paused and glanced over his shoulder at Wren, "Uhhh, which way?"

"To the right."

"The right. Okay."

Wren waited until the sound of Grale's footsteps had faded. "Grale seems more out of sorts than usual," she said to Aiko.

Aiko nodded. "It was a rough three days. Lots of price gouging going on." She turned to Wren. "Just make sure Genji and Spider thank Gale because he worked hard getting that equipment for them. I gotta hand it to him."

She swept her hand around the room. "Then all this, and especially that." She pointed at the pilot chair. "I'm pretty livid myself, truth be told."

Wren linked arms with her, "Come on, then. Let's get you smelling like a blossom, too, and then resolve our problems."

~~~

They sat on separate sides of the table. On one side Kalea sat beside Genji, her hand on his arm. Mink was wedged between Spider and Wade. On the other side of the table sat Aiko and Gale.

Gale leaned over to Aiko, his thick hair still damp from his shower. "Do I smell blossomy enough for you, Princess?"

"Ugh." She pushed him away.

"Eloch won't be joining us," Wren said as she took her place at the table's head, a mug of tea in her hand. "So let's begin." She glanced around the table and grinned. "You know, you might be a little more comfortable if you all spread out a bit."

"But we're the Committee," Genji said solemnly.

"And I need to be by Genji to help him calm his Nuri," Kalea explained.

Wren's grin widened. "It's okay for the Committee to be split up. We know who you are." She sobered, "Look, this isn't an 'us versus them' thing. Mink, you and Wade move over to the other side. Get comfy."

"We've showered," Gale said, waving them over "We smell all blossomy over here. Hey, Wade, can you bring me whatever you're having?" he added as Wade moved to the beverage unit with an empty glass in his hand.

"It's just H2O," Wade said.

"Sounds perfect, thanks," Gale said. "I'm buying."

Wade snorted and shook his straight dark hair out of his eyes. "Be right back," he said.

Wren caught Gale's eye and nodded.

He winked.

As Spider, Genji, and Kalea rearranged themselves, Mink took a seat by Aiko. She leaned over and sniffed. "Blossoms!" she said, her green eyes dancing.

"I think we need to get a new fragrance of washing liquid," Aiko laughed.

"Dirtside might be nice," Gale offered.

Wren chuckled.

Wade returned, handed Gale a glass of water, and sat.

"Everyone comfy?" asked Wren.

"Very comfy, thank you," Spider said dryly.

"Okay, then," Wren said. "Gale, I believe you have an issue?"

"We both do," Aiko said before Gale could respond. "Where is the second pilot's chair?" she demanded, fixing her gaze on Genji.

Genji cocked his head at her. "We didn't think it necessary since you two will be taking shifts."

Aiko went very still. She fisted her hands. "Put the chair back, Genji," she said slowly.

Genji blinked. "But why? There was only one on the *Stardust*."

"The *Valiant* is a modular ship," Grale said hotly. "You can't compare it to the *Stardust*. And that's not the issue here. The issue is," he counted on his fingers, "first you moved the Navigation Bridge without consulting us, and second, you took out the other pilot's chair—again, *without consulting us*. And third, why are you constantly moving modules? Leave them alone. The ship is fine the way it is."

"It was lopsided."

"Lopsided?" Grale slammed his palms on the table. "*Lopsided*? You're moving it all around because it didn't look pretty enough for you? We're in space! Who cares whether it's lopsided! It's going to fly right just fine."

"Eloch wasn't happy with it," Wade said quietly.

Wren straightened. "Eloch? What? When was this?"

"Three days ago," Wade said, "Eloch came to us and asked us to make the ship more symmetrical. He wanted it ovoid."

Wren sighed and ran a hand down her coil mats. "And is it ovoid now?"

Spider nodded. "It is."

"And can we stop moving modules around?" she asked quietly.

Spider shot a glance at Genji. "There's one more move."

Grale groaned.

"And what would that be?" Wren asked.

"The galley," said Genji. "It's too close to the med and science labs. As we travel, we will be capturing and studying various organisms. We don't want our food supply to accidentally come in contact with a foreign contaminant."

Aiko glanced at Grale. "He makes a point."

Grale nodded, "But if the Galley is moved, then all our sleeping modules will need to be relocated too. Mine will, anyway. I'd die of starvation before I could find the galley again. This ship is a monster, even without the modules we sold off."

Genji looked over at Wade. "We hadn't considered that."

"What, Grale dying of starvation?"

Genji frowned.

Mink giggled.

Aiko leaned over to Grale. "I'd still make them put back the other pilot chair, Cowboy, even if you did die of starvation," she told him.

"That's a relief. You're a real peach, Kitten," Grale said.

"What hadn't you considered, Genj?" Wren asked.

"It is much more convenient to have the sleeping modules close to the galley."

"Let's take a vote," Wren said after taking a sip from her mug. "Who agrees that it's a wise decision to separate the galley from the labs?"

All hands raised.

"And who wants their sleeping modules near the galley?"

Again, all hands raised.

"Okay then. Committee, make this final Module Migration and be done with it. No more after that," Wren said.

"But—" Genji began.

Wren raised her hand. "Not another module move after you move the galley and rearrange the sleepers, Genji. That's final."

"And put the pilot chair back," Gale said, glancing at Aiko.

"Definitely," she said. "And never, ever do anything to the Navigation Bridge without first consulting us." She sat back and crossed her arms. "Ever."

"And you might want to thank Gale, Genj and Spider, for the equipment he worked so hard to acquire for you," Wren said.

"Of course," Spider said. "Thank you, Gale."

"Yes," Genji said. "Thank you."

"I want to thank you too," Kalea chimed in. "I'm going to be learning how to use it."

"I'll toss in my gratitude," said Wade. "I'll be using it."

"As will I," Mink said. "You worked hard, Gale, and it's appreciated."

Wren smiled when she saw Gale's deep flush of pleasure. "Meeting's adjourned then. Put that pilot chair back first thing you do, Genji." She stood. "I'll be with Eloch in the Solar Farm."

~~~

Wren passed a hand across the door panel, which slid open to reveal the midsection of the *Valiant*—the Solar Farm, a vast array of greenhouses named for their ability to capture and store the energy of any passing star to provide light and energy to grow enough food to service some 15,000 souls.

Since there were only nine people going on their mission, Mink suggested they off-load some of the greenhouses and use a smaller module for the ship's middle area, turning that area into a courtyard with intersecting crossroads so people could take shortcuts from one side of the ship to the other. But Eloch insisted they leave that inner space alone.

Little Sister, never far from Wren's side, slipped past her in search of Eloch. Wren followed, allowing the panel door to quietly slide shut behind her as she paused to get her bearings before following Little Sister.

At first glance, Eloch's domain was a warren of plant life. But closer scrutiny revealed a convenient web of pathways much like a spider's web. The paths crisscrossed from a central hub to all points of the ship, allowing everyone to take shortcuts through Eloch's domain.

Eloch and his Solar Farm. It was here where he unleashed the creative force gifted to him by the planets he championed, and the Solar Farm had become his private domain, where he spent most of his free time.

Ahead, Little Sister let out an excited *woof*.

Seconds later Eloch joined her, matching his long strides to her shorter ones.

"Hey there," she said.

He shot her a grin. "I was inspecting the growing things and felt you nearby."

Wren nodded, relieved to find him focused and alert. Alert enough to sense she'd just been thinking about him and decide to join her. When he was present, they were that attuned with each other. She laced her fingers with his.

"You missed all the drama with the crew," she said.

"I knew you could handle it easily." He squeezed her hand, then turned to face her. "I have some drama of my own to share."

She scanned his face. "That bad?"

He nodded. "One of the Sisters in Vela Kentaurus has died."

Wren gasped. "We need to get out there, Eloch!"

"We will, but we need to wait a few more days. The Lady Talamh visited me," he explained. "She has a gift for us, a Seer who will accompany us."

"A Seer? What's a Seer?"

"One who dreams the future. One who gazes beyond normal reality."

Wren quirked an eyebrow. "You sound like you're quoting someone."

Enoch smiled, taking her hand. "I was. The Lady."

"So you really don't know what this Seer is, either."

He shook his head. "I have no idea. But she will be coming with us, so we should make a room for her."

Wren stopped with a groan. "Which means the *Valiant* is going to undergo another change," she cried in mock dismay.

Eloch chuckled and pulled her to him to rumple the top of her head, sending her coilmats swinging. "I'm afraid so. But as soon as our Seer arrives, we depart."

She gave his waist a quick squeeze and stood back to look up at him. "Walk back with me?" She whistled for Little Sister.

Eloch nodded and took her hand, lacing their fingers.

"So it's happening. We're actually leaving," Wren said.

"Should be very soon now," Eloch agreed. "Time to tell the crew."

"Yeah. I'm going to meet Mouse in about an hour down dirtside. I'll let her know." She grew thoughtful. "Now I know we're leaving, I'm feeling greedy for her company."

"You know you could remain here," Eloch said tentatively.

She pulled her hand from his grasp and turned to look up at him. "Why would you even suggest that?" She punched his arm. Hard. "As if I would ever think of leaving you, Eloch."

He smiled and pulled her to him. "That's good because I would miss you." He paused and rested his chin on her head, then buried his nose in her hair and breathed deeply. "I need you to keep me here, keep me present."

She nodded and nuzzled his chest. "I know, Eloch," she said softly.

"And I need you because I love you and don't want to be apart from you."

"I love you too, Eloch. Always. Now, time to let me go. If I don't hurry, I'll be late to meet Mouse."

He kissed the top of her head before he released her.

~~~

Wren walked beside Mouse along the wide, chalky path leading to Hern, the village closest to the walled city on the planet Talamh. It had been a year since the old government toppled and Max took over leadership of the city dwellers, those who had settled from Spur.

Negotiations between the indigenous people—Talamh’s people—and the settlers from Spur were going well under Max’s skillful guidance. The Lady, the Spirit of the planet, approved of Max and instructed Her people to trust his goodwill.

At first, distrust was prevalent, but curiosity on both sides began to erode the skepticism and Max was encouraged.

“There’s no longer a guard at the city’s wall,” Wren commented when they paused and looked back at where they started. “And the city is looking much prettier now you’ve taken over its design.” She glanced at her friend. “Who knew you had all this talent? You’re amazing.”

Mouse smiled, transforming her face from ordinary to extraordinary. “It’s what happens when you’re not fixated on keeping yourself and others alive.”

“Still have nightmares?” Wren asked when she saw a shadow skim across Mouse’s expression.

Mouse nodded. “I think I always will.”

“Yeah,” Wren agreed. “I know I will too.”

They shared a glance, one filled with a sorrowful wisdom.

“We did what we needed to do,” Wren said.

“And we’d do it again.”

“Yes.”

The shadows of two winged creatures swept over them, and Mouse looked up. “That just isn’t natural,” she commented as she watched Genji and Kalea, in their Nuri forms, spiraling above them on a wind current. “I just can’t get used to them being able to transform from people into those creatures.”

“Yet they do,” said Wren, her eyes twinkling. She followed the pair’s flight. “Beautiful,” she murmured.

“They do it a lot, too,” Mouse said and shivered.

Wren sighed. “They know we’re leaving soon. I don’t envy them being cooped up in a ship for who knows how long. Sure, they’ll be able to shift and fly in the Solar Farm. Eloch made sure of that. But it certainly won’t be the same as this.” She swept her hand in a gesture, which included the sky and the vast meadow stretching to the horizon.

“All this natural space, it is beautiful, isn’t it?” Mouse said. “Talamh was wise to keep the Spur colonizers behind a wall. We would have ruined it.”

Wren nudged her friend. “But no more. With you and Max in charge, we ignorant Spurians will learn how to play well with others.”

They began to walk across the meadow toward a leafy grove surrounded by chalk hills.

“Spurians?”

"My nickname for us 'cuz we came from Spur."

Mouse snorted. "Sub-Citians would be more like it."

Wren grinned and called to Little Sister, who was straying away, captivated by the strange scents. The enormous sniffer came bounding closer, her sleek, dark fur catching the sunlight.

Mouse smiled. "Never thought there'd come a day when I would actually love sniffers." She reached out her hand, and Little Sister bumped it with her huge head, nudging Mouse until she stroked behind a silky ear. "Remember Little Brother?"

"Your sniffer back on Spur, right? The one who has stolen Ingot's heart?"

"That's the one," Mouse said with a grin as she watched Little Sister go trotting off to explore again. "I'm having him shipped here. I can't wait."

"Mouse?"

Mouse glanced at Wren. "What's wrong?"

Wren shook her head. "Nothing's wrong. I have a favor to ask, is all."

"Okay, what's the favor?"

"Could you keep Little Sister here with you on Talamh?" The words came out in a rush.

Mouse slowed to a stop so she could study her friend. "You sure?"

Wren watched the sniffer playfully batting at a flying insect. "No. I love that beastie. I'd love to take her along, but it's just not fair to her." She turned to Mouse. "Who knows how long we'll be gone or whether we'll ever set foot on a planet again? It's just too much to ask of Little Sister. Genji and Kalea know what they're getting into. But Little Sister? She'd follow Eloch and me anywhere, but she would be so unhappy, Mouse. I can't do it to her."

"But you're her pack. She loves you two."

"You're part of her pack, Mouse. She knows you and Max. And Little Brother will be arriving soon."

Mouse's face lit up with a smile. "Little Brother would sure love a playmate. But two sniffers..." her voice trailed off.

"Two very well-behaved sniffers."

"Two very well-behaved and extremely large sniffers living with Max and me in our getting-smaller-by-the-minute dwelling." Mouse flashed her beautiful smile. "Sure, why not?"

"Don't you think you should ask Max?"

"No need. Max will say yes."

"You've got him that twisted around your little finger?"

Mouse snorted. "Not at all. But I know him, and he'll say yes because you asked, Wren. We'd both do anything for you."

Wren reached out and touched Mouse's hand before she started walking again. "Thank you."

They walked together in silence.

"So, tell me about this building we're going to see," Wren said.

"In a sec. Wren, is everything okay?" They had stopped again, and Mouse faced Wren. "Seriously, what's wrong?"

Wren looked skyward, her mouth trembling, then dropped her gaze to her friend. "The enormity of it all, I suppose," she replied. "I'm leaving you and Flick, my two best friends in the universe, and traveling light-years—*light-years!*—away. So far, in fact, we're talking about taking turns in the Cryo beds so we don't get too old. Do you know what that means? None of us are immortal, here." She put her hands over her heart in a protective gesture. "It hurts, Mouse. Hurts."

Mouse sighed and cleared her throat. "I know what it means. These last few days may be the last time we'll see each other. So yeah," she agreed. "It hurts. Especially—" she broke off.

"Especially what, Mouse?"

Mouse hesitated. "Can this be in The Narrows?" she asked, referring to their long-ago code word for secrecy.

"Of course."

"I haven't told Max yet, but in a few months I'm going to be making him a daddy."

Wren stilled. "A little Mouse or a little Max," she murmured, then laughed and grabbed Mouse in a hug so tight the other woman squeaked. "I love this! This is the best news! And with vids, I'll be able to watch Little MaxMouse grow up and all the little MaxMouses after that." With another laugh, a little more shaky, she released her friend and steadied her. "Why haven't you told Max?"

Mouse shrugged, her expression softening. "I just wanted to keep it to myself for a span. Get used to the idea. I'm planning to tell him soon, though. I've gone to a med lab, and the baby and I, we're both healthy."

"Mommy Mouse. I'm so happy for you," Wren said softly.

"But what? You didn't have to say it, I heard it in your voice."

"Just makes the hurt worse."

Mouse sighed. "I know. Feeling it too." She paused, "However, on the bright side, I've got Max and my architecture. And don't forget, Flick can keep us in touch through his connection with Spur. And you've got Eloch and the others. We're going to be fine. Just fine," she added for emphasis.

She punched her friend. "And when did I become the one who does the cheering up? There's something more, isn't there, Wren?"

Wren glanced around. "Are we still in The Narrows?" she asked quietly.

"Of course we are."

"Kay, then. I've never mentioned this, and I wouldn't have mentioned it to you, but you've, per usual, called my bluff." She ran a hand down her auburn coil-mats. "I'm worried about Eloch, Mouse."

"Eloch! *Why?* He's amazing. And he's invulnerable. I mean, he saved us from an exploding building...just appeared when you needed him. And he loves you so much, Wren."

"I know. I know all that. But those damn planets broke him down and put him back together again, gave him all that knack..." She paused. "He's doubting

his own humanity, Mouse. And he goes away someplace. In his head. His eyes get all distant, and he's just...gone. A couple of times I noticed him start to fade a bit, like you've seen Spur do. Like I've seen all of them do. Scares the crap out of me. It's like he has to be so focused to stay who he is. And he's not ready to talk about it yet. That's what he tells me when I ask him. The most he'll say is he needs me to keep him present."

Wren shook her head. "And then he'll ask things of the crew without consulting me. This last time, I first heard of it in this morning's meeting. He had Genji and rest of them moving modules around because the ship was 'lopsided' and he wanted it 'ovoid.' That's not like Eloch...or the Eloch I knew, anyway. It's costly to move modules, Mouse. You have to schedule the service cranes, and then make sure everything is sealed up so we don't die when they disconnect and reconnect the parts. That's...I just don't know what to do. I—"

"Stop, Wren. Stop right there." Mouse shook her head and glared at her friend. "Forget about Eloch for a moment. Where did *you* go? Where did KinLord Wren go? This" — she waved her hand at Wren like she was trying to erase her — "Wren person in front of me is *not* the Wren I know. Not at all. This is *your* and Eloch's mission. These planets may have sent Eloch, rearranged Eloch, but Spur sent you. *Your* planet sent *you*, Wren, because She knows what you're capable of. She knows you've got this."

"But Aiko, Grale—" Wren began.

Mouse clapped her hands once, a sharp sound, echoing across the meadow.

Little Sister's head darted up from her digging.

"Spur did *not* send Aiko!" Mouse stated, her voice rising. "Nor the others. *She sent you, Wren.* You're the KinLord on this journey. They are not, and it's time you recognized that fact."

"Eloch—"

"Eloch is not the KinLord either. Not while he's Champion. He can't be both. It's you, Wren. Own it. Fight for it if you have to." She snorted. "It'll be so much easier than what you did in Sub-City." She paused, breathing heavily.

Wren's eyes widened. "Easy, Mama Sniffer. Calm down. I'm hearing you. I'm listening. You always have been one to tell me truth whether or not I want to hear it."

Mouse took a deep breath and smiled shakily. "Sorry. Hormones."

"No, I'm sorry, and thank you, Mouse. Thank you from my very soul. It's exactly what I needed to hear."

Wren took a deep, calming breath and let it out with a nod. "I'm good now." She hugged her friend. "Thanks to you. You are absolutely right. Spur did send me. I do have this. I am KinLord of that ship. I see it now. I know what to do. Thanks," she said again.

"Just don't ever forget again, promise?" Mouse said.

"Promise."

"Okay, then."

"Yeah." Wren flashed a grin. "What a powerful Mama Sniffer you are." She laughed and brushed the tears off her cheeks as she linked arms with her friend. "And what a lucky baby. Now tell me about this building you've created."

Mouse's face lit up, and she began to describe her latest building, designed to honor The Lady Talamh, inspired by a dream Mouse had. It would be where the two different peoples could gather in peace and harmony, where the new government seat would be, and it was to be built beyond the wall that Lady Talamh had created to keep the colonizers apart from Her people.

As Mouse described the details, they crossed the meadow, following the route through the trees and down a rise. Small thatched homes began dotting the landscape. Seeing the homes, Wren called Little Sister to them. The sniffer ambled docilely between the two friends.

"It was my inspiration, Wren. Max had been wondering what gesture of goodwill we could offer. They were so wary of us at first, and wise to be wary, because you know what we" — she elbowed Wren and grinned — "Spurians are like."

Wren elbowed her back. "That I do. Give us an inch, we'll take a mile and turn it all into rubble." She held up a hand. "But no more. That's in the past."

Mouse smiled. "Yup. In the past, although it's still taking some convincing. Spurians are stubborn too, and slow to change."

"Willful, yes."

"Anyway, it's nearly done, and as soon as we go around this corner, right here, you will see it," she said just as the building came into view.

Wren sucked in a breath and halted, her eyes widening.

The walls were the same chalky stone as the path they were on, quarried from nearby hillsides, cut into blocks, and polished so they were smooth. Low steps, graced by delicately arched pillars, led to the entrance, two large bronze doors which stood open, revealing an inner courtyard where Wren could make out the statue of a woman. Large, arched windows spread in even rows on both sides of the door, flanking both the first and second story. These were embellished with intricately carved stone garlands. The third story windows were small arches forming a scalloped pattern.

"It's beautiful, Mouse," Wren whispered. "It's feminine. How a building can be called feminine, I don't know, but this one is. So lovely. But strong, too, you know?" She looked at Mouse. "It's not going to go anyplace."

Mouse let out a breath she'd been holding. "You like it, then? I've been so close to the project, I just don't know anymore."

Wren glanced over at Mouse, her fingers stroking Little Sister's fur. "It amazes me, Mouse. You amaze me. What did Max say?"

Mouse chuckled. "He called it *exquisite*, but you know Max."

"No, he's right. That's exactly what it is. It's exquisite, Mouse. I'm sure The Lady is honored."

"I wouldn't know. I haven't had the guts to ask Talamh's High Priest. That's what they call their Champion here," Mouse explained. "There are priests and

priestesses, and then there's a High Priest and a Seer. The Seer dreams the future and consults with the High Priest."

"Interesting. Just this morning Eloch mentioned a Seer who will be coming with us, but I really haven't paid attention to how that part works on this planet. I leave that up to Eloch and...well, I've been working on other stuff."

"Like getting the *Valiant* ready for intergalactic travel?"

"Yeah, like that. Getting her ready for Vela Kentaurus. But since we're not leaving until the Seer is ready, will you walk me through your exquisite creation?"

Mouse reached for Wren's hand and tugged her forward. "But of course. This way."