



Chapter 1: The Star Born

Champion! Something comes!

Eloch shot bolt upright from a deep sleep, Entean's fear burning cold through his veins.

"Where?" he asked, peering into the dark night.

Entean sent him a series of visions.

He cocked his head, not sure what he was seeing. From above? What was coming from above?

It is not Mine. I fear. Hurry, Champion.

He leapt up and threw his pack together while the bedroll disappeared and the circle of fire vanished. Relieved the rain had stopped, Eloch ran to his skiff and flung his pack into the front, then carefully leaned his staff against it. He splashed water on his face before he untied the little boat, grabbed his staff, climbed in, and pushed the boat into the current.

Hurry! It has arrived. It burns. A metal dragon. Hurry, Champion!

Entean's fear was intense, and the clouds roiled and churned, covering much of the night sky while the river flowed faster and faster. Eloch did not even need to steer his skiff. He just had to hold on tight.

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There were only three in the landing party. They fanned out, keeping their backs to their shuttle so they could escape quickly if necessary. But Aiko, the leader, didn't think

it would be necessary. From what she had observed while she circled to land, this was a very pleasant little planet with few inhabitants.

She pushed back her helmet, shook out her straight black hair, and filled her lungs with the moist, sweet air. It had been a long flight to get to this small, watery planet the Ring had targeted for colonization. It was the farthest planet on their itinerary, some twenty light years away from Spur. It had taken them just over a year to travel this far. Aiko had volunteered so she'd have the time to think through her domestic problems. If the rest of planet A349 was as serene and peaceful as the landscape before them, she may not ever want to return to the conflict and turmoil of her home life. The meadow was quiet and serene, with wisps of morning fog. And the air! Aiko sucked in another deep breath, savoring the sensation of such beautiful air filling her lungs.

"This is a lovely place," she heard herself say. It surprised her. She had been trained to keep her personal thoughts to herself.

Etsuo grinned in agreement. "The Ring will want to colonize ASAP."

Aiko studied the lush green foliage and the blue of the river rippling past. "Pity," she said. "I wish they could keep it as it is." As soon as she thought of how crowded and dirty Spur was, with its masses of people, she shuddered, remembering the stink.

Not the Above, the City, where the elite lived. But Sub-City, where she'd grown up. She didn't think she'd ever get the Sub-City stink out of her nose. She swore she would have seduced the fat, greasy recruiter during her last Cull just so she could join the Service and get out of Sub.

She was glad she hadn't needed to resort to that, though. Glad she was smart and things came easy. Glad she had the knack and could fly ships. Lots of Subs became pilots. Lots of Subs who were born with the knack, combined with the will they had to develop to survive in that cesspool. Without the will, there was no managing the knack.

Was that why the government kept Sub-City around? No, Aiko decided, the UpperUppers who lived in the highest echelon of the City wanted the Subs to stay where they were – out of sight.

Aiko sucked in some more air. "What's the readout, Genji?" she asked the third in the landing party.

"Not much activity," he replied. "There are sentients to the north and the south, but there's no movement."

"It's early still," Aiko said, curious to find out what the inhabitants were like. If they were peaceful, the Service would capture them, train them, and send them back to Spur, where they'd eventually find their way into Sub-City, no doubt. But it was better than the alternative. If they were warlike, they would be destroyed. The Ring did not take kindly to hostiles. It was better to find an uninhabited planet. Less costly. Less trouble. But Aiko knew once the Ring got her report they'd colonize this beauty, inhabitants and all.

Fortunately, Aiko's mission was to gather facts and report back to the Ring's Board of Colonizers on Spur. She didn't like having to make the life-and-death decisions.

"Movement, ma'am," Genji said, just as the scanner in his hand chirped.

“On guard, you two,” Aiko said, checking behind to confirm the way back to the shuttle was clear. She unhooked the safety on her holster, just in case.

A being, male humanoid in appearance, stepped out from dense foliage, the branches parting to make way for him, barely brushing his leather garments as he strode past.

Aiko heard Etsuo’s gasp mirror her own gulp at the man’s size. Etsuo was one of the Service’s biggest warriors, yet this man in front of them had nearly six inches on Etsuo, which meant, Aiko guessed, he was at least six foot four. And broad! Such strength in those shoulders. If the other inhabitants were like this one and not hostile, Aiko mused, Spur was on its way to mustering quite an impressive new military. She could practically hear the Service drooling now. No Sub-City destination for a man like this.

His face, when he threw back his hood, captivated her with its intensity, the intelligence she saw in the eyes, and its perfect features. . His hair was dark, already damp and clinging around his face from the morning mist. Tendrils of it hung over his eyes, which were deep and green like the forest behind him. They glared at her from under slanting, dark brows. His full mouth was set in a hard line. His jaw tensed, emphasizing high cheekbones and a pointed chin. Power emanated from him. If he didn’t have a whole load of knack, she thought, she was a blind-bitched whelp.

The man continued to move purposefully toward them, carrying his heavy staff as if it was a twig.

He spoke in a deep, rich voice, the words rumbling from his chest.

Aiko switched on her translator, noting that Etsuo and Genji did the same. She decided to approach him as one in authority, since it was quite apparent it was what he believed.

“I am Aiko,” she said with a quick nod, “pilot and leader of this mission. With me are Etsuo and Genji. I did not have the translator turned on when you spoke. Will you please repeat what you said?”

The man frowned, studying her and her two companions. “Your words are strange, yet I can understand you. How can it be?” he asked in that rich baritone of his. It glided over Aiko like smoke.

She held up her device. “This is a translator. It allows us to speak with one another.”

He was quick when he moved, somehow covering the distance between them in a soundless instant. When he stepped back, the translator was in his hand.

Aiko closed her mouth and swallowed. “It isn’t a weapon,” she said, nodding at the translator in his hand. “It merely helps us understand each other.”

He nodded, studying the device. Then he smiled slightly and stepped closer to hand it back to her.

“Easy,” she whispered to Etsuo when she saw him move. “I don’t think he means to harm us.” She nodded her thanks when the translator was placed gently into her outstretched hand.

Their fingers brushed.

*Oh yeah, he's got the knack in spades.* Her hand felt like she'd been burned, his power was so intense, and from the merest of touches! This man was not one to be trifled with. This man was extremely dangerous. Aiko swallowed again, suddenly longing for the safety of the shuttle.

She stole a glance behind her and started. The shuttle was covered with vines, which were now sinuously curling into all its openings.

"Captain—" Genji blurted. She heard real fear in his voice. "What's happening?"

"Stay calm," she ordered, banishing her own fear with the will of a star pilot. She slowly turned her head to look back at the man, and her eyes widened when she saw a translator in his hand. "Where did you get that?"

He held up his own device. "It is helpful to speak with you," he explained.

"What are you doing to my shuttle?"

"Shuttle? The metal dragon is called a shuttle?"

Aiko nodded slowly. "What is happening here?" she asked, willing herself to calm down.

"Fear not," he said. "We will not hurt any of you."

*He was commanding them!* Shouldn't it be the other way around? She reached for her weapon, only to feel the metal dissolve in her hand like grains of sand. *What was this place?*

"We have no desire to hurt any of you," the man said again. "We just want to understand why you are here, where you have come from, and when you will go away."

Aiko swallowed again.

"Ma'am?" Etsuo said. His voice shook. "My weapon is gone."

Aiko nodded to him. She had to remain calm for her men. "So is mine," she said, keeping her eyes fastened on the strange man.

He was watching her calmly, translator in one hand, staff in the other, waiting for his answers.

She cleared her throat. "Stay still," she ordered her two men, holding up a staying hand. "Who *are* you?" she asked the stranger.

"I am called Eloch. I am the Champion of Entean."

"Who is Entean?" she asked.

He made a sweeping gesture with his staff. "This is Entean. You stand upon Her."

Aiko heard Genji gasp. "The planet is called Entean?"

Eloch nodded. "She is our home, our mother. I am Her Champion. I go where She needs troubles soothed." He nodded to the shuttle, now engulfed with vines. "That was a trouble. It is not a part of Her, and She wants it gone. She wants you gone."

"But," Aiko said, "it cannot fly the way it is. We can't leave."

Eloch's grin transformed his face. "When you are ready to go, it will be ready to fly. Where are you from, and why did you come?"

Aiko shook herself. His power was a heady thing, especially when he smiled. "We come from Spur. It is the capital of the Ring of Colonization, the government seat of the colonized planets. Spur is quite far from your world, the furthest we've ever been."

He nodded, apparently aware there were other planets populated with intelligence. "And why are you here? I have never heard of inhabitants visiting one another."

"I am on a scouting mission. To see if this planet supports life."

"It does. Now you may go," Entean's Champion told her.

"We will go," Aiko said. "But others will come."

"Whatever for? This is not your home. There is no place for you here."

"Our home is crowded, and we seek new worlds for our people. Yours is not the first planet we have colonized. It won't be the last."

Eloch frowned again. "Others are not welcome. You must stay here so others will not come," he decided.

Aiko shook her head, suddenly afraid. "It will not matter. They will come even sooner to discover our fate."

Eloch sighed and leaned on his staff, studying each of them in turn.

"What right do you have to take over another world? What authority has decided this is how it should be without any sort of negotiation? To whom must I speak to make sure no more will come?" he asked, watching the shuttle expectantly, as if someone else might appear.

Aiko shook her head. "You would have to go to Spur to find anyone who has sufficient power to halt the colonization of your planet."

The man paled. It was the first time Aiko had seen any uncertainty.

"I must think about this," Eloch said. "You will remain here."

As he spoke, thick branches thrust themselves up from the earth and surrounded the three off-worlders. Within minutes they were completely caged.

"You can't do this!" Aiko cried.

The Champion gave her a dismissive look. "It is already done." He turned and headed back into the forest. "Eat," he called over his shoulder before pocketing the translator.

"Hoi!" Genji said, looking down at his feet.

Aiko followed his gaze, dumbfounded to see a feast spread before them.

"Can we eat it?" Etsuo asked, eyeing it warily.

Aiko shrugged. "If he never lets us out, we'll die anyway," she said, squatting down and reaching for a piece of fruit.

"Okay, then," Etsuo said, lifting a flagon of ale. "Here's to yer knack," he said and took a healthy draught.

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Eloch had not gone far, just far enough away from the distraction of the off-worlders. As Champion, he knew what he had to do, and it terrified him.

I will be with you, Entean reminded him, Her energy swirling around him, offering comfort.

Eloch smiled and relaxed. He knew She was curious. The translator and the — what had the woman called it? — shuttle? Yes, the shuttle. Entean was fascinated with them both, and after quickly absorbing their essence, nature and functions, She had shared the information with Eloch.

He crouched down, drawing circles in the dirt to help him think. Such a dilemma. As Champion, it was his duty to speak with this Spur authority the woman had referenced and demand that Entean remain untouched. And as Champion, it was also his duty to stay on Entean to do Her bidding. She required his presence in both places. If only he could be! Eloch paused, as he looked at the two figures he had drawn. His face lit up and he laughed. "All I need do is ask," he said, rising to his feet.

Producing a knife, he sliced his palm and allowed his blood to drip on the ground. It stung, but he knew Entean would heal the cut quickly. Already the pain was lessening as he felt the wound close. He asked Entean to create his twin using his blood as a blueprint.

A man rose from the earth, large and broad-shouldered, with dark hair and green eyes. They stared at each other. Then Eloch smiled, and saw his twin smile back. It was like watching himself in a mirror. They both laughed with delight. Eloch reached out, as did his twin, and clasped the man's head between his palms, drawing him forward until they stood forehead to forehead.

"I give you all I know," he told his twin.

"And I willingly receive it," his twin replied.

With the power bequeathed to him by Entean, Eloch shared his knowledge with his twin until they were one and the same, perfectly identical.

"You will be safe now, Entean," he told his planet. "One of us will go speak to the people in power, and one of us will remain."

The energy flowing through him confirmed Her pleasure.

Eloch and his twin walked to the skiff, where Eloch lifted his backpack, pulled out a change of clothes, and offered them to his twin. He'd never been able to watch himself in action, and he was pleased to note his twin's smooth, efficient, and athletic economy of motion. He nodded in satisfaction when his twin pushed the skiff into the water, settled into the seat, and used the paddle to hold the little boat in place. Slinging the backpack over his shoulder, Eloch gently placed the staff in the bow. After a moment's hesitation, he handed the translator to his twin. The shuttle had others, and if not, Entean could make him a new one.

"Say hello to Thaif and his milkmaid for me," he said.

His twin grinned.

"Return soon," the twin replied before setting off to the east, where a herd of wild beasts was causing trouble near where Eloch's old mentor, Thaif, lived.

Pleased with his cleverness, Eloch shouldered into his backpack, which held his personal belongings and went to rejoin the landing party. He frowned, already missing the familiar weight of his staff. Before he could request a replacement, Entean produced a perfect replica.

"Ready to go to Spur?" he asked Her.

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His connection with Entean was fading!

It happened so suddenly Eloch was caught off guard.

Once the probing vines had withdrawn, the shuttle took off without mishap. He and Entean, through Her connection with him, had been fascinated with the docking process as the shuttle was absorbed within a larger orbiting vessel.

But while Aiko and the others busied themselves with preparations, Entean was transfixed by the sight of Herself floating in space. Just as Eloch had been delighted with watching his twin, Entean was getting a breathtaking, all-encompassing view of Herself. He felt Her pleasure like happy little flutters, flitting and dancing down to a cellular level.

And when they changed course, heading out into deep space, Entean's delight was palpable.

The stars blurred and the ship jumped.

Eloch felt the severing.

"No!" he shouted out his agony. "No! Please!"

But after a final burst of images and instructions, all traces of Entean's consciousness vanished.

Eloch groaned so loudly that Aiko shot a worried glance in his direction.

"The shuttle!" he shouted, catching her eye. "Take me to it."

At first she refused, thinking he would attempt to escape, but then she realized it was impossible while they were in hyperdrive, sluicing through a wormhole. Her craft was sealed shut. Locked down.

"Take him," she nodded to one of the crew who stood idly by. "Find his translator. Make sure it's turned on and working," she added. The man was babbling like a lunatic.

When they got to the shuttle, Eloch shoved past the crew member.

She shouted.

He paid no attention.

The crew member shrugged and trailed timidly after her charge.

Eloch went directly to where Entean had left the gift She showed him in that final burst of communication. There it was, tucked deep within the wiring for the landing gear. It was a seed, which Eloch promptly swallowed. He choked when it stuck in his dry throat. He swallowed again, and kept swallowing and choking until he felt the seed reach his stomach. He sank into an available seat and glanced at the bemused crewmember.

"Leave me now," he told her, his voice hoarse. "I crave solitude."

She nervously shook her head. "I can't keep the shuttle open. You must come with me. But first..." She reached into the shuttle's small galley and handed him a container of water.

He nodded his thanks and drank it all, sighing his relief.

"Keep it," she said when he tried to return the container. "Now, come with me. I know a place."

In spite of his need for immediate solitude, Eloch followed the girl out and watched, fascinated, while she locked down the shuttle.

She glanced over her shoulder, making sure he followed, before she left the shuttle bay and headed to the crew's galley. Until the next shift, he would have his solitude. She pointed to a table. "Sit there. I will tell the captain where you are, and someone will retrieve you when we've got a berth ready." She didn't know what the plans were for their guest, but she felt she had to tell him something. She stood watching him a moment longer, a little disappointed to realize this very handsome man had already forgotten her.

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The seed was sprouting. It left Eloch deaf and blind to the outside world while it took root, grew, and flourished within him, pushed and thrust up and out to fill him. The pain was so intense it was a blessing when he lost consciousness, leaving the growing plant to surge unimpeded up his central nervous system, into his brain, winding within the soft, spongy folds, where it fastened onto the neurons and spread through the connecting dendrites.

As he slumped to the floor unconscious, information flooded him—terms, functions, labels, languages, names of places and titles of people, mathematical equations, measurements of distance—all spiraling out of the seed, into the plant, and into Eloch's mind, all the information Entean had absorbed from the shuttle while She explored it with Her vines.

But the seed didn't merely transfer the collected information. Throughout his whole body, the plant pushed and coiled, redesigning Eloch's senses, attuning him to the natural world in a way he had never known before, but in the way Entean knew, allowing Eloch to interpret the subtleties and nuances of his natural surroundings as Entean would.

When the shift changed and members of the crew entered the galley, they found the strange man sprawled on the floor, his legs tangled in chair legs. Thinking he had died, Aiko ordered the fallen Champion to be taken to Sick Bay, where he was laid on a pallet. Someone draped a sheet over him.

Aiko reported the incident in her log, disappointed she would not witness his confrontation with the Ring Colonizers. She also instructed Genji to report in his science journal the possibility that, if removed from their planet, the inhabitants would die. The Ring Colonizers would like that.

While they flew onward to Spur, Eloch dreamed an endless stream of dreams, memories orchestrated by Entean as final instructions to Her Champion.

Eloch's skiff bumped gently against the mossy bank. Murmuring a word of thanks to Entean, the planet Who loved him, he slid his paddle under the wooden seat and climbed out.

With the towrope in his hand, he stretched the kinks out before fastening it to a low-hanging branch, and swore when it sprayed icy water down his exposed neck. Droplets slid down his back, adding to the chill and discomfort. It had rained unceasingly for days, and he was sure moss would begin sprouting from his sodden clothes any moment now.

Eloch adjusted the waxed-soaked canvas sacking he used to cover his meager supplies. He didn't need much when he served the planet Who loved him, he thought. The essence of a planet, he corrected himself.

When he was satisfied the canvas would keep the dampness at bay, Eloch straightened. He stomped and shook the water off and, rubbing his hands together, looked around, squinting into the gloom.

He knew his mentor was somewhere nearby. He felt his presence.

After five years of traveling the face of Entean, wending his way through Her waterways – for the voice of Entean, when She whispered Her wisdoms to him, was female – he was eager to talk to Thaif. He had many questions for his mentor, and even more adventures to share.

The scent of wood smoke and something else that quickened his hunger caught Eloch's attention. Taking careful note of where he left his skiff, Eloch wended his way through the thick foliage and finally spied a small campfire with a blackened kettle hanging over the flames. A familiar figure rested beside it, smoking a long-stemmed pipe with his legs stretched out toward the warmth.

"Thaif!" he called.

His mentor straightened, peering into the gloom. "That you, Eloch?" he asked before taking another puff from his pipe. "Took your sweet time getting here. The porridge is near burned. I've been keeping it warm."

Eloch chuckled. "Burned or no, it's a welcome sight," he replied as he stepped into the circle of light created by the fire.

"Well, come in. Sit down," his mentor said, making room. "Hang that sopping wet skin you call a coat on that branch there," he added, gesturing with his pipe. "Don't want it to drip on my sweet fire."

Eloch did as he was told. Shivering from the wet and cold, he hastily moved closer to the fire, immediately feeling his muscles begin to relax when its warmth greeted him. He sighed with pleasure and sat down across from his mentor to pull off his boots.

"You don't know how I've yearned to be dry," he told Thaif while he arranged his boots by the fire. "She's not taught me this trick yet." He looked up and saw the rain was still falling...everywhere except within the fire's circle of light.

"Not a trick, Boy," his mentor said, watching Eloch tug off his socks and wring them out. "'Tis a gift from Herself. All you needed to do was ask."

Eloch snorted, shaking his head as he draped his socks over his boots and watched the steam rise when they began to dry.

Thaif barked out a laugh. "You didn't think to ask, did you, boy? Thought all things were done with a command, didn't you?"

Eloch looked up at his mentor from under the shock of thick black hair clinging and dripping onto his forehead and neck. "I did, I suppose," he answered sheepishly.

"Oh, boy!" Thaif chortled as he tossed a bowl to Eloch. "Fill your belly and tell me some of your other crazy mistakes. I know I trained you well, but Entean has Her ways to keep you humble, and it looks like She's found an easy target in you, all right." He laughed merrily as he watched his student tuck into his meal. "You've not thought to ask for food, neither, I suppose."

"I've asked for game and grain," he replied, his mouth full. "I've asked for a safe and easy journey and a dry place to rest," he continued after he swallowed. "Thanks," he said, accepting ale from his mentor, the ale that had magically appeared in the old man's hand. "But I never thought to ask for a meal. Nor for a warm, sweet fire. And to be sure," he said, after taking a swallow of the smooth, bitter draught, "I'll be asking for some ale now I know."

"As Her Champion, lad, all you need to do is ask," the old man replied. "You already do much for Her, and will do far more in time, and She loves you for it."

"I'd do it for Her anyway," Eloch replied.

Thaif smiled softly. "Aye, we all would, and She knows it, too." He lifted his pipe to his mouth, "That's why all you need do is ask," he said before he drew in the aromatic tobacco.

Eloch set down his bowl and leaned back against a log. He smiled with contentment while he watched his old mentor blow smoke rings as the rain continued to pour down outside their circle of warmth. "I've missed you, Thaif."

"Have you, now? Well, I'm here. Why don't you tell me what you've learned since last we met?" Thaif blew another set of rings, watching them expand and dissipate.

The two talked long into the night while Eloch told of his adventures. He'd visited every village and city along the lakes and waterways of Entean. He described the wonders of all Her peoples, the diversity of lifestyles. He spoke of the marvelous animals, plants, and trees, and how they arranged themselves along the latitudes and longitudes according to their preference. He spoke of the bounty everywhere, and then he was silent for a while, deep within his memories.

"I almost caught up with you a couple of times," he told Thaif.

Thaif lifted an eyebrow. "Indeed?"

"Yes. At Thule, and then again at Falk. Both times they said the Champion had just passed through. At Thule you created a dam. And at Falk you discouraged a dragon from feeding on their livestock. At Falk you had turned east, they told me. I tried to catch up, but I couldn't find you."

"It was not yet time for me to be found, boy. But now's the time."

"I'm glad, too. I've grown weary of traveling alone."

"But you're never alone, Eloch."

Eloch ran his fingers through his hair, which had finally dried. "Aye, I know. But, you know what I mean."

"I do, boy, I do." Thaif replied, relighting his pipe and puffing till the dottle glowed. "But ye best get used to it, although 'tis better when you truly step into my place. Your time is nearly here."

Eloch sat up. "Me? Champion?"

Thaif grinned. "I've only a few things left to teach you. And then I will be leavin' to set down my roots. I'm thinking about Vernoch. I like how lazy the river is there, and the milkmaids are all rosy-cheeked and willing. One once promised to wait for me," he mused, taking another puff. "She would be nearing her twilight years by now. Perhaps she'd enjoy ending her days with the likes of me. And if not?" Thaif shrugged.

"But Master, I'm not ready. Not nearly," Eloch exclaimed. "You've only just told me. These past five years, especially when I heard about your deeds – the things you have yet to teach me," he shook his head. "Not nearly ready."

"Eloch," Thaif said quietly. "It's not up to me to determine your readiness. It's up to Her. And She says it's now."

Thaif produced two bedrolls and tossed one over to Eloch. "Get some sleep, lad. We will discuss it some more in the morning." Thaif put another log on the fire and then squinted up at the rain. "I suspect it'll dry out now you've learned to ask." He chuckled as he settled himself on the ground, laying his pipe near the Champion's rune-clad staff.

Between the constant stream of other dreams and memories, Entean continued to remind him, "When you awaken, my Champion," She said, "remember the many lessons you have learned. They will serve you again."

Chapter 2: Sub-City

Flick snickered and Wren kicked him out of their bed.

He landed on his backside with a curse. "Aww, Wren, there's no call for that," he complained, his grin twitching to life at the corners of his mouth.

She glared at him until his grin faded again.

"All right, I apologize," he said, hoping her good nature would bubble up again.

Wren continued to glare, her grey eyes flinty. "I'm serious, Flick. If we are to become like them," she jerked her chin upward, to Above, where the ruling classes lived, "we are going to have to behave like them all the time. And," she pointed a finger at him, "no wind should ever come out of your ass in the presence of a lady. Ever."

"Ass?" he asked, rubbing the offending bit of his anatomy. "You mean where I just landed? You can still call it an 'ass' up there?"

"Bottom," she amended. "You just landed on your bottom. Or backside. We don't say 'ass' either. Argh!" she sighed, scrubbing both hands over her long mop of coil mats. "It's so hard to remember all these futing *niceties*."

"I don't think ladies are supposed to swear, Wren," Flick commented, accepting when she held out a helping hand.

She grunted as she hauled him up. "If the lady is a leader, she is permitted to speak in a manner her subjects will understand," she told him. "And you understand, me, right? No. More. Bottom. Wind. Or I will be forced to find someone else to share my bed."

"No more, I promise," Flick replied.

Such a little, thing he thought, their leader. Wren claimed to have no knack, but he was pretty sure she was wrong. She had the knack of leadership, and a powerful good leader she was, too.

Her sparkle came back. "Good. I'd hate to lose such a cuddlesome bed warmer," she replied. "Let's begin the day, shall we?"

Not waiting for his reply, Wren left Flick's room and walked down the short hall to her own. They weren't lovers. She didn't have a lover. Didn't like to be touched that way. But she hated to sleep alone. After the childhood she suffered, nobody blamed her, especially Flick, who had watched it all.

Wren shook off the chill of childhood memories and pulled off her nightshirt, stepping naked into her bathing pool. With a sigh, she eased down the two steps and curled into the warm, fresh water.

When the water felt this good, she thought while shampooing her coil mats, gratitude trumped guilt. She knew how hard it was to come by fresh water every other day for her bath. She also knew it was a tribute from her Kin, a way for them to show their respect and affection for her. If she asked them to stop, it would do more harm than good. And did she really want to go without her bath? Decidedly not.

She finished washing and ducked under the water to rinse. Resurfacing, she leaned back against the pool's ledge to think.

Her Folk were in trouble. There would be a Culling soon. She felt it coming. It had been too long since the last one. Maybe she should send Mouse and Flick out to gather information. Maybe she would go on a solo, too. It would be a good excuse to take a little trip Above and get out of Sub-City for a span.

Gods, she hated Sub-City. Hated the stink, the brutality. Hated the fact that no matter how hard she tried, her Folk were never truly safe. So easy to get hurt in Sub. It was why she had decided to try something new – teaching them how to blend in Above and act more like an UpperUpper. If they were successful, maybe they'd finally get off Spur, live on one of the colonies. Wouldn't that be something?

Wren reached for the towel someone had left folded by the pool's steps, climbed out, and dried off before wrapping it around her. With quick strides, she went to where her meager wardrobe was slung haphazardly over clothes pegs, grabbed an undershirt, tunic, vest, and leggings, and pulled them on. Then she crossed over to a tarnished mirror and finger combed her damp locks. Making a face at herself, she turned and headed downstairs.

A few of her Kin still lingered at the table, although most had gone about their business. Some thieved, some begged, while others had honest jobs that unfortunately paid very little, jobs that no one Above wanted to do, such as cleaning the cesspools, dressing the dead for burning, or whoring. People living in Sub-City had to do whatever it took – no matter how unpleasant – to survive.

Flick and Mouse looked up when she entered.

"Morning," Mouse said while she picked at the few remaining crumbs on her plate. Like Wren, she was slight and delicately made, with pale skin and huge eyes. Unlike Wren, her eyes were dark, and her straight dark hair was gathered into a short braid at the base of her graceful neck. She was dressed in grey, a color that helped her move invisibly through the murky streets of Sub-City. Looking at her, it was hard to believe Mouse was one of Wren's most competent assassins, but she was. Wren had two, and she used them both when necessary. She didn't like giving a kill order. But she would. She had.

Wren sat across from them, placed a napkin in her lap, and accepted the plate of bread and cheese Flick handed her with a nod. Mouse poured her a flagon of diluted ale.

"Feel like taking a little stroll?" she asked while she piled a thick slice of cheese on a piece of bread and took a bite. At least the pungent cheese masked the bread's stale taste.

"Where to?" Flick asked. He touched his napkin to his mouth while he watched her with calm grey eyes.

She smiled at her cuddlesome bed warmer, appreciating both his loyalty and his attempt at good manners.

Flick had been with her since the beginning. His round, open face concealed a fluid intelligence and a steady heart. He was large for someone born and raised in Sub-City, with thick, meaty hands that could punch and strike. They were hairy hands, light brown to match the hair on his head. She sometimes teased him that his father had been

some huge, hairy beast his whore-of-a-mother had lain with. She wasn't swearing. Most of the KinFolk's mothers were whores.

"I'm going Above," she answered. "It's been some time since the last Culling. I have a feeling we're due."

"Might be," he replied. He laid down his napkin and stood, holding out a hand for Mouse to hand him her plate so he could take them both to the sink.

"Where do you want us? Above or Sub?" asked Mouse.

"Sub," Wren replied. "But have a care if you go beyond the borders of my KinSpace. Fergus and MacMichaels are talking about banding together again to take me out."

Flick snorted. "I'd like to see them try."

"Yeah, well," Wren replied. "It's hard enough to survive without adding a border war. I'd hate to have to go on a killing spree on account of them hurting either one of you."

Wren herself was the other competent assassin.

"Not to worry, Wren," Flick said. "Mouse and I will take good care of each other — er, one another."

Mouse looked at him and smiled.

"We'll accompany you until the tunnel, then," Flick said.

Wren nodded, washing down her meal with the rest of her ale. "Your company would be most pleasant," she said, dabbing her mouth daintily with her napkin. She rose and carried her plate to the sink to soak with the others. "I'll just fetch my knives."