

Chapter 01 – Ren

“Try again, Ren. You can control this.”

His voice was as calm as it ever was in these sessions. Ren looked down her arm, holding her hand outstretched. At the tips of her fingers, silver sparks jumped and popped, arcane energies building upon her digits. She closed her eyes, and her head lulled forward a bit, the sparks fading. She took a few quick breaths, each a bit longer than the last. Her eyes flashed open again, lit with a glowing silver flame. She tightened her arm. Her elbow popped as she locked it in place, her fingers stretching out towards a lone plastic bottle sitting across a small, empty patch of grass from her, a scant few meters from a tree line and scarred and burnt fence just behind.

Her fingertips sparked again, silver flames engulfing her palm in a flash. Across the yard, the bottle filled with silver flame, and then there was a loud, crackling pop. The bottle flew apart in a small explosion of arcane fire, plastic bits burning up in the heat as they scattered across the grass. Her face immediately soured, disappointment falling over her like a crashing wave, and she let her head lull forward again.

She let out a long and frustrated groan and leaned against the railing of the porch she stood on.

“Well, that’s progress,”

“Dad,” She let her head hit the banister and sighed, mumbling out a quiet, “How is that progress?”

Her father stepped up behind her and put a hand on her back. “We haven’t had to use the fire extinguisher once.”

She didn’t look up or show her face. She just groaned again. “Not helping.”

“I know this is frustrating,” Her father started to speak, but she turned her face to him, a small scowl in his direction as he stepped around her towards the stairs. He held up his hands and jogged down to the yard. “Okay, fair. We won’t have that discussion again.” He said as he stepped out into the yard and carefully moved about, patting down small silver flames with his foot.

It was clear from the state of the yard that this was not the first time she had tried this. Not the first time today, and today marked yet another day in a long cycle of trying to practice. Small burnt patches from earlier in the day still smoked lightly, some bare patches marked larger fires from days past, and the damage to the fence behind all told the same story.

“I should just admit I’m a Wylden and quit trying,” She mumbled, still laying against the railing.

“Ren, you aren’t a Wylden – you know you have a connection to your Familiar,” Her father explained from the yard, tapping on a stubborn bit of burning plastic and grass. “You’ve seen it.”

“Maybe – what I just thought I did? Maybe I was just hoping that I’d have a Familiar like you and Mom.”

“Ren,” Her father stopped and took a breath, looking across the yard at her. He adjusted his glasses and sighed, “You’ve spent your entire life around Skara and Calsith. It is only natural that you expect your Familiar to be like them, but your descriptions were very different than what I felt when I first called Calsith.”

As if on cue, there was a flicker of shimmering dust, and a small translucent being appeared perched on the railing next to Ren. It appeared mostly like a little owl, but its face was more foxlike, and spine-like feathers ran back along his head and neck. It made a sound somewhere between a hoot and yip. Its head tilted towards her father – and then to her, and back to her father again in rapid succession.

Ren sighed, and her head thumped against the railing.

“I just said your name, Calsith. I didn’t...” Her father said quietly.

The Familiar made a confused noise and tilted its head far to one side before stepping to the side and rubbing a wing against Ren’s head.

“It’s so easy for you to summon him. He mistook you saying his name for a spell,”

“Ren, I’m nearly fifty. Calsith’s been tethered to me for nearly three decades,” He spoke as he finished tapping out a fire. He shook his head. “I know I’m not the best at helping you with this. You weren’t blessed with powerful Magus parents. But, whatever Familiar you have, it’ll be the same for you when you get to this age. I’m sure.”

Ren just grunted. She took a breath and stood back up as her father reached the stairs and bounded back up them. She sighed as Calsith bounced away from her and fluttered up onto her father’s shoulder, “Thanks, Dad. I know you’re trying.”

“We can keep going if you,” He reached out to put a hand on her shoulder but stopped short. The sound of his phone vibrating on the table inside the house caught him, “Shit. Let me get that,” He said before he unceremoniously darted into the house, calling back after her a second later, “Just a second.”

Ren took a breath. She had been at this for almost a year now. Like most people, her connection to her tether fully matured around her twentieth birthday. She had been able to do little bits of magic as a child – pulling items towards her or making small flashes of light. It was nothing special, she wasn’t unique, but the older she got, the harder it had become for her to control things. Standing alone on her parents’ back porch and staring at the scarred yard, she could only think of one thing. What if she was broken? The thought of being a Wylden terrified her. People who couldn’t control their magic were cast out beyond the city walls, left to try to survive in the Wilds. They were too dangerous to have in the cities, after all.

But her parents were convinced that she had a Familiar. They talked about dreams she would have as a child, her imaginary friend that seemed to be constant until she was old enough to start thinking of things in more educated terms, and the idea dropped off. The truth was, she did feel something there. Every time she tried to use magic now, she could sense it just beyond her grasp. Something lingered there on the edge of the veil, in other realms precisely as her parents described their feeling with their Familiars. But

maybe it was just hopeful thinking? Maybe there was nothing there but the feeling she convinced herself should be there.

The thoughts caused her to zone out for a moment, staring into the forest beyond her little world. She didn't hear the man enter the backyard until he was already approaching the porch. Her ears had perked up to something, and when she looked to her side, she saw him. He was an older man, a skeletal and ethereal serpent coiling around his forearm as he approached her. Behind him, she saw another man, a taller man with long and tapered ears, skin as pale as snow, and solid black and unchanging eyes.

"Eryn Avari?" The older man spoke, and as he did, the skin on his jaw pulled taught – a flash of a nearly skeletal appearance fading back to the older man for a moment after. His voice was cold, unfeeling, and deeper than it should have been. His very presence made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, and the voice only pushed her body further into a defensive mode.

She didn't respond. She just stepped back quickly and tried to figure out what was going on. Her eyes scanned the two men again. Fight or flight instincts leaped to the forefront of her mind, and she steadied herself and watched them closely. Her fist clenched, though she didn't realize it. When it did, silver flames jumped from her fingertips again. Molten silver droplets of magic dripped from her hand to the deck below – the hiss of small flames bursting to life and fading away almost as soon as they hit the porch's surface. Each left a little scar on the wood, but none did more than that.

"Ren!" Her father barked at her as he came out of the house, putting himself between her and the newcomers. Calsith let out a howling caw; spines bristled towards the intruders as it darted into the air above her father. "Calm down," He spoke to her first, waving a hand down, "Don't let your magic engulf you," His eyes fell on the older man. "What do you want with Ren, magister?"

The older man let a smile cross his lips. For a split second, Ren thought that this situation would turn violent. Her father was defensive of her but no match for a single Magister, let alone two. But the older man raised his hand without the coiled serpent. "We are here to help, Mister Avari. Your neighbors said to follow the puffs of smoke..." He motioned towards the front of the house. "We knocked, but no one answered. I will admit, I may have overstepped. Allow me to start over."

The older man cleared his throat. After a moment, his eyes widened, and he nodded towards her father, who gave a small nod. "Fine, start over."

"I am Magister Gullermo Tezar, and I am looking for Eryn Avari. From my understanding, there is a rumor that she may be a Wylden,"

"She is not..." Her father clenched a fist as well. His movements echoed her own. It was clear where she had learned them.

"I agree," The Magister spoke quietly, "I believe she almost certainly has the capacity to become a geminate magister."