



Capture of Capricorn

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Description: He was captured by the enemy, but his heart belongs to her.

I'm gonna lose my warrior card.

Capricorn can't believe he's been ordered to hand himself over to the enemy. Exactly how is being experimented on supposed to help save the world? He meets the reason while strapped to a bed.

When Zora finds a metal orb that she can't identify, despite her experience as a welder and metallurgist, she posts about it online. Big mistake, as she, and the mysterious sphere, end up being abducted in the middle of the night and relocated to an underground cell in Area 51. There she meets Capricorn; hot dude, also a captive, and supposedly some kind of astral warrior. Laughable, right? That's what she thought, until they busted out and teleport to a tower halfway across the world!

Before Zora gets fully comfortable in a place where magic and science collide—and the sexy Capricorn seduces not only her body, but also her heart—the enemy attacks. It will take courage and quick thinking to keep the tower from falling into evil hands and unleashing a force imprisoned for millennia.

Will Zora and Capricorn survive long enough to give love a chance?

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PROLOGUE

What a beautiful day. Zora tapped her hands against her steering wheel as she drove to the grocery store. The sunny Saturday morning—yay, the weekend—had her in high spirits. After she completed the adulting tasks, like getting food for the week and doing a bit of a tidy-up, she could hit the garage to start work on her next project.

During the week, she worked as a metallurgist at a company researching ways to combine and use metal. In her spare time, she indulged in her side hustle of creating metal art, which she charged prime prices for. Who knew there was such a big market for owls made out of bolts and nuts, or novelty lawn ornaments?

A sign on the side of the road drew her eye. Garage Sale, AKA used junk no one wanted. However, given the cost of metal, sometimes garage sales could be good for finding scraps for cheap that she could use. Cast iron pans, any kind of copper, even old tools and metal-based odds and ends could be repurposed.

On a whim, Zora veered, following the arrow on the sign, and headed down a residential road. She easily found the place by the number of cars lining the street. She parked and walked to the driveway crowded with items and people. Tables had been lined up and held heaps of household items; dishes, glasses, stacks of books, and a bunch of eclectic items that all had one theme in common.

Zora's brows rose as she noticed the seller apparently had a fetish for all things stars and Zodiac. A quick peek at the books showed them either relating to the constellations in the sky or pertaining to the symbolism, from the history to the mysticism around them.

“My uncle was a bit of a nut,” a woman with curly hair and rosy cheeks confided as she sauntered over to Zora’s side.

“By the looks of it, he was really into astrology.”

“Just a bit. When he died, I couldn’t believe the amount of stuff he had stashed.” The woman sighed. “We hadn’t talked in decades. My mom, his sister, says he wasn’t the same after returning from a trip in Australia. Whatever he experienced over there led to his obsession.”

“What’s this?” Zora’s attention was caught by a metal egg-shaped sphere sitting between a large ceramic mug and a vase carved with symbols.

“No idea, but he must have prized it since he had it sitting on the fireplace mantel by itself.”

Zora grabbed the object and frowned as a tiny shock went through her fingers. She turned it over in her hands. “It’s not very heavy.” She hefted it. “Wonder what it’s supposed to be.”

“No idea, but if you want it, I’ll sell it for a buck,” the woman offered. “I want to get rid of as much of this as possible, else it will cost me a fortune hauling it to the dump.”

A dollar? She’d have gone up to five. “Sold.” Zora paid for the metal egg and tucked it under her arm as she kept browsing for other items she could use. She spent another five bucks on a box with some old rusty tools that could be cleaned for use. She almost bought a painting, too, which surprised, as she didn’t usually give a shit about that kind of stuff. However, the canvas, painted by hand and signed by the artist, caught the eye. The image of a very muscled dude, facing away, holding a sword, with a tattoo of the libra scales on his back did intrigue. Seemed like something you’d

see on the cover of a romance novel, not hanging in some guy's house. While intriguing, she couldn't imagine displaying it, though, and thus chose to leave it behind.

Zora loaded her car with the stuff she'd bought, finished running her errands, and headed home. While she ate a sandwich, she eyed the sphere sitting on her counter. The smooth surface didn't reflect anything, nor did it glint with the light no matter how she turned it.

What was it made of? Perhaps, despite its metallic appearance, it was painted plastic. Given its light weight, if the shell actually was metal then it would most likely be hollow. She'd soon find out.

The garage attached to her house had been converted into a workshop that included a welder, workbench, mini forge, basin with a faucet that she could fill for cooling, and a pegboard on the wall holding a variety of tools.

She set the sphere in a vise before grabbing a knife with the intent of peeling the surface. The tip of the blade slid across the orb without leaving a scratch. Hunh. Unexpected. Applying the drill to it to create a hole also failed. She took a reciprocating saw to it next, the jagged carbide teeth sharp enough to cut through anything.

The saw whirred, the blade screed, all to no effect. She blinked at the unmarred object. Definitely not plastic, but what kind of metal could withstand what she'd done thus far? None she could think of off the top of her head but she wasn't giving up. On the contrary, the mystery intrigued.

Zora put on her welding mask and fired up her torch. A white-hot flame jetted from the nozzle, and she ran it over the orb, back and forth, before holding it in one spot.

The metal didn't melt. Hell, it didn't even change color. She held a hand over it, expecting to feel radiating heat off it, but instead felt nothing. When she poked it right after, preparing herself for a singed fingertip, the surface temp of it remained the same.

Definitely strange. She didn't recall ever studying a metal that didn't heat. As she ate some lunch, she pored over textbooks left over from her years at university. She went through the index, seeking out metals with the toughest properties. Tungsten, which had a crazy high melting point, titanium, chromium...

In her attempt to identify, she tried everything she could think of, even swung at it with a mallet!

Boing.

Her arms trembled from the reverberation, and the unmarred orb mocked.

What the ever-loving fuck?

Zora went to bed that night completely puzzled and woke in the morning determined to figure out the mystery. She logged onto some of her forums, the small community of metalsmiths always eager to help each other—and show off their talent.

She posted an image of the sphere and detailed her issues in identifying it.

Most of the comments that poured in over the course of the day proved unhelpful.

Alien artifact. Bury it deep! She doubted it was ET-crafted. However, it did make her wonder if it came from some kind of meteor. It would explain why she couldn't class it.

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Anyone can tell that's not metal, claimed another comment. She, and her expertise, begged to differ.

Probably an ancient dragon egg. Try dropping it in a lava stream to see if it will hatch. Given she'd roasted it hot enough to melt rock, she doubted the suggestion would do anything.

How much for it? A direct message from Seeker419.

Sell it? She wasn't averse to making a few bucks. Before she could reply, the next DM stated, I'll give you a thousand bucks.

The offer raised her brows. That was quite the chunk of change for something that had cost her a dollar. Tempting, but at the same time, it made her wonder, what did Seeker419 know? And would they offer higher?

She replied with, Not for sale. Just looking for ideas on how I can use it.

It's useless to you. I'll give you ten K for it.

Ten! Holy fuck, the shit she could buy with that. But why, if it was so useless, would they be wanting to spend that much?

Is this some kind of ancient artifact? That might explain their eagerness to claim it.

Twenty thousand. Final offer.

Zora stared at the screen in disbelief. Twenty fucking thousand. Their desperation shone through. Would they offer more?

Let me think about it.

She logged off and leaned back in her seat, contemplating the sphere. She grabbed it, her fingertips tingling each time she touched it.

“What are you?” she murmured. Did it really matter? Even if she could figure out how to use it, she’d never make that much money selling whatever she created with it. Perhaps she should tell Seeker419 she accepted before they changed their mind.

In the morning. Perhaps by then, they’d have sweetened the deal a bit more.

For some reason, she took the metal ball to bed with her, and had a dream of a dark place with a voice that yelled, Wake up!

Zora’s eyes shot open just as someone slapped a damp cloth over her mouth and nose. The acrid stench of whatever coated it made her eyes water and close.

She woke—who knew how much later—in a locked room that looked an awful lot like a cell with its concrete walls and a thin pad on the floor. No window, just a single metal door that wouldn’t budge, no matter how hard she yanked.

Fear had her heart pounding, and panic had her screaming, “What the fuck? Let me out.”

To her surprise, she got a reply.

“You should have accepted the offer.”

CHAPTER 1

Capricorn crouched behind a wooden crate, waiting. He kept his breathing shallow lest it be heard. Hunting took patience. The slightest movement, sound, even a soft exhalation, could give away his position.

The sword in his hand fit comfortably. Some of his brothers liked to rely on firearms. Capricorn tended to choose what fit the situation. A gun could be practical in some fights, the long-range missile giving a kill without getting close, but sometimes silence was needed, and for that, a sharp blade did the trick.

The hairs on his nape lifted, and without even turning to look, Capricorn whirled and swung, scything his sword across the creature that crept up behind. He took it out just above the joint for its leg, toppling the oversized hairy beast. Another twirl took its head.

Victory!

The training simulation suddenly faded to show a flashing message midair. Aries wants you in his office asap.

The boss must have a new mission. Sweet. Training in the safety of Tower was all well and good, but Capricorn preferred to be in the field actually making a difference. As a Zodiac Warrior, he had a duty to protect Earth and its inhabitants from the monsters that human law enforcement was ill-equipped to handle.

He exited the chamber they used for battle simulation and headed up the stairs, wondering where he'd be going next. Hopefully, somewhere warm. While the cold didn't affect the warriors, he preferred the freedom of movement that came with having to wear fewer layers so he didn't stand out. People tended to remark on a guy standing out in freezing weather wearing only a T-shirt and shorts.

A brisk knock on the bossman's door led to a shouted, "Come in."

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Upon entering the office, Capricorn noticed Aries sitting behind his desk looking grim. Then again, the man rarely wore a different expression. The sight of Sage, Aries' wife, sitting in a chair, hands resting over her rounded belly had him tingling in anticipation. Only one reason she'd be present. Looked like it was his turn to be sent on a mythic quest.

"So, we have a mission for you," Aries started to say.

"Hell yeah. My turn to Indiana Jones the shit out of the next artifact. Yeehaw." Capricorn rubbed his hands together. He'd heard the stories of how his brothers had found some ancient relics. Locating long-lost caverns, evading traps, solving puzzles... Capricorn couldn't wait to crush his mission.

"Not exactly," Aries replied. "Seems like Cetus already has it in their custody. Your job is to extract it from their secret base in Area 51."

The statement raised Capricorn's brow. "Um, isn't that an old military installation, meaning I can't beam in—or out." Something about the underground base prevented them from using their starbeaming power, a fancy word for essentially dematerializing in one place and ending up in another—hopefully with everything intact.

"Yes. Plus, it's going to be guarded to the nines," Aries added, steepling his fingers.

The info brought a frown. "Then how exactly am I supposed to retrieve it? We going in with the whole gang?"

“No, just you,” Aries stated.

It was Sage who next murmured, “I’m afraid, for this next task to work, you’ll have to be captured.”

His jaw dropped. “You want me to lose on purpose?” The very idea made him cringe.

“It’s the only way to win,” Sage replied. “Yours is the most important task, because if you fail, the world dies with you.”

No pressure.

Fuck.

“Are we sure about the captured part? I mean, surely there’s a backdoor I can sneak in, locate the relic, and then hightail it out. Soon as I get it outside, I should be able to beam my ass and the artifact out of there.”

Aries glanced at Sage, who shook her head. “Attempting to enter via subterfuge will fail.”

“But I’ll succeed if I let them nab me?”

“Maybe.”

He arched a brow. “That’s not exactly reassuring.”

Sage waved her hands. “The future is murky beyond your capture. I don’t see if you succeed or not. All I know is, it has to be you who attempts to retrieve it.”

“I have every faith in you,” Aries added. “After all, weren’t you bragging just the

other night about being the best on the team?"

He had. In Capricorn's defense, he'd downed a few shots of whiskey. "How soon should I leave?"

"In the morning," Sage declared. "But I wouldn't recommend starbeaming too close to the site."

"Let me guess, you saw that going bad."

"Well, you'd still end up where you should be, but how do you feel about a new scar?"

"Chicks dig scars."

"This one would run from jawline to eye socket and you'd lose part of your left ear."

Mar his pretty face? "Guess I'm taking a portal then. Anything else I should know?"

Sage stared at him with eyes that swirled with freakiness. "This mission will either make or break the world."

"In other words, don't fuck up," Aries growled.

"Who, me?" Capricorn exclaimed. Then grinned. "Don't worry. I got this." Because failure wasn't an option.

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Despite being told he should hand himself over to the bad guys, Capricorn spent some time looking for another option. A warrior did not simply give up! Although he couldn't help recalling Sage's conviction that capture gave him the best shot. Handing himself over to the bad guys would certainly get him inside, but still, knowing Cetus—a company with nefarious dealings that on the surface appeared to be all about the climate and fixing it, but they were actually seeking the same artifacts as the Zodiacs and had tried to kidnap some of his brothers—he worried about what they'd do once they had him in their clutches.

With the help of Aquarius, their tech guy, they took a peek at Area 51. Aquarius pulled up satellite images of Area 51, of which there were only few because, imagine that, the government didn't want plebes spying on their super-secret site. Although there were plenty who tried via all kinds of means. Renting a plane to fly over and take pics. Using drones fitted with cameras. Plenty of shaky video of folks trying to climb the fence and getting caught right away.

What he did learn was the site comprised a few buildings and hangars, but everyone knew the true facility was underground. While they could find no schematics for the base, Capricorn did get a feel for the terrain surrounding it.

Area 51 resembled a barren-ish wasteland. Scorching heat during the day led to hard-packed dirt and scrubby plants. Despite its less-than-hospitable climate, the area was popular enough to support a variety of alien-themed restaurants and stores selling related merchandise. People trekked to the spot from around the world in the hopes of catching a glimpse of something they could post about online.

When it came to infiltrating, Capricorn could easily evade the checkpoints manned by

soldiers by climbing the chain-link fence plastered with Restricted Area signs. However, those weren't the only protective measures being used to keep people out.

Aquarius zoomed in on an image of the perimeter and pointed. "Seems like there are sensors for motion detection not just running along the fence line but also sporadically placed within the secured area. I see cameras as well."

"What if I starbeamed right outside a ventilation shaft to avoid them?" Capricorn asked, even as he recalled Sage's warning. He wasn't keen on a disfiguring scar.

"One, we'd have to find one. Their vents are camouflaged pretty well. Second, I would wager all ingress points have, if not cameras then, most likely, alarms."

"Can't you remotely disable them?" Capricorn asked.

"If I had access to their network, yes, but it appears they run everything internally, meaning no one can do shit from the outside. Even if I could divert the cameras and motion sensors and entry point alarms, there's the AI drones."

"Bah, drones are easy to shoot down, and given they rely on someone controlling them, surely you can intercept the signal."

"Not these ones." Aquarius pulled up some videos he found on the dark web, which showed a dark-colored, military-grade drone. "They've got Skynet two point oh's roaming the sky. They don't require a human operator, as their AI programming has them smart enough to fly themselves. They are also unhackable, at least according to my hacker peers, as well as bulletproof. I don't see how you can avoid being spotted by one."

Capricorn sighed. "So what you're saying is, I'm either going in guns blazing and shooting the fuck out of everything, or I'm letting them capture me."

“You know Sage wouldn’t have suggested it without reason.”

And usually, the warriors listened. After all, she was rarely mistaken in her advice.

Still, Capricorn couldn’t help but whine. “It just feels so wrong to hand myself over to Cetus. I thought that was the last thing we wanted, given they’ve been trying to get their hands on us to do some sciency shit.” AKA, Cetus wanted to dissect and analyze what made the Zodiac Warriors special.

“I doubt they’ll figure out what makes us special. It’s more than genetics.” A reminder that their powers, given to them by the stars themselves, were astrophysical in nature. Or, as outsiders called it, magical.

“You think it’s true they have the third artifact?” Aquarius asked.

“Sage claimed they do, and she also keeps muttering about a thirteenth Zodiac,” reminded Capricorn, and that wasn’t the pregnancy hormones talking.

A previously blank medallion in the portal room—which until now had only twelve spots for the dozen warriors—was two-thirds full. What would happen when it became whole? Would a new warrior suddenly join them?

“You know, there is some historical basis for a thirteenth, called Ophiuchus, the serpent bearer.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Me neither, until I started researching, and oddly enough, my information didn’t come from Tower’s library, but the internet.”

The revelation brought a frown. “Since when doesn’t Tower have the deets on

something with historical basis?”

Aquarius shrugged. “Dunno. Kind of weird, right? But then again, given how that thirteenth dais in the portal room was blank until we started finding the artifacts, I am thinking the thirteenth Zodiac must have been wiped.”

“For a reason, one would suppose.” Capricorn pursed his lips. “Do you think his return is what will cause the world grief?”

“What did Sage say?”

“Nothing. I mean, she did say this mission was do or die for everyone. I have a hard time believing a Zodiac Warrior would turn to evil. We were chosen specifically because we’re heroes.”

“Anti-heroes,” Aquarius corrected. “Supposedly the true ones don’t kill.”

“Which is dumb,” Capricorn retorted. “Defeated bad guys don’t suddenly become good. If you don’t end them, then they’ll just start their shit again.”

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“Agreed. Preaching to the choir, bro. I’m just saying there’s a fine line between the anti-hero and villain. I mean, look at Leo. He was borderline for a while there. I know Aries was watching him close to make sure he didn’t end up on the dark side.”

“Leo’s too noble to ever do anything that would merit discipline.”

“All it takes is the right push.”

“Well, the man is right as rain now that he’s got his kid back and his hot doctor girlfriend.” Lucky bastard. Capricorn would admit to being a bit jealous seeing all the happy couples. Aries and Sage had been together forever, but the recent hookups of Leo and Sagittarius with some chicks had him wondering if he’d ever find the right gal to settle down with. Hopefully one with a juicy booty.

“Still can’t believe Leo’s ex-wife fucked him over like that.”

Capricorn could. He’d seen the calculating look in Kylie’s eye the first time Leo brought her to Tower. The Tower of Babylon held untold riches and could do literal magic. He was sure more than a few outsiders brought here by circumstance had wondered how to exploit it. In Kylie’s case, it turned out she used Leo to birth a kid. A kid who ended up with powers like Sage. A child used by her own mother to try to bring the Zodiacs down. Only, in the end, Kylie’s plot failed because her daughter—Olivia—caught on and managed to orchestrate her own rescue.

The reminder of what Olivia could do had Capricorn dropping by Leo’s place for a quick visit. The big man answered the door wearing the little girl on his shoulders.

“Wassup?” Leo asked, letting Capricorn in.

“Just getting ready to go on a mission.”

“He wants me to tell him he doesn’t have to be captured,” the sweet—and much too perceptive—Olivia stated.

“Is there another way?” he asked, much too hopefully.

“No.” Olivia cocked her head. “It won’t be so bad, Uncle Corn. Zora’s going to be there too.”

“Who’s Zora?”

“You’ll see,” the child sang.

“Did you just come to grill my kid?” Leo growled.

“I was hoping for a second opinion, yes.” Capricorn sighed. “Guess I’m off to be captured.”

“Don’t worry, bro, if you get stuck, I’ll come rescue you.”

Capricorn’s lips twisted. “And never let me forget it.”

He left with Leo’s booming laughter following.

There seemed little point in packing much, seeing how he’d have it confiscated soon as he turned himself over. Capricorn just grabbed a few basics before he portalled out to the WestCoast and rented a motorcycle for the drive to Nevada. Nicer than starbeaming, if he was going to be honest, the biggest downfall being the long drive

gave him time to think about what might happen.

Would those guarding Area 51 shoot him on sight? A possibility.

Did his capture entail getting stuffed into a cage and having parts of his body trimmed off? That would really suck.

What about being forced to run on a treadmill like a hamster? They'd get bored before he got tired.

Subjected to electroshock therapy? No big deal. He'd once grabbed a whipping live wire to prevent it from electrocuting a bunch of people.

The absolute worst thing they could do to Capricorn, other than killing him of course, would be to have him fail his mission. He'd hate to end his winning streak.

Once he reached Rachel, Nevada, the town closest to Area 51, he stopped in at a trailer modified to appear like a flying space saucer. Edge of the Galaxy Curios and Gadgets, a store catering to certain types, not that Capricorn paid much mind to the posters and alien plushies. He browsed the rack of T-shirts in search of the perfect one.

He swapped into his newly purchased "I Believe shirt" before finishing his trip, driving right up to the entrance of Area 51. A pair of soldiers, holding guns, emerged from a shack.

Capricorn parked his bike and got off it, using a slow saunter to approach the men, one of whom barked, "Turn around, sir. This is a restricted area."

"I'm pretty sure your bosses inside will want to see me. Name is Capricorn."

“Sir, you need to get back on that bike and leave, now, before we’re forced to take you into custody.” The man with a stripe on his arm pointed up the road.

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Capricorn held out his hands. “Go ahead. Arrest me.”

“Fuck off. We ain’t got time for this,” snapped the soldier with the patchy mustache.

Capricorn glanced around. “Yeah, I can see you’re real busy guarding against the invisible horde storming this place.”

“It’s like you’re cruising for a bruising,” snarled Patchy.

“Go ahead and hit me, but I warn you, no crying when you hurt your hand. Leo says I’ve got a jaw of stone.” Which Capricorn considered to be the highest compliment.

“You’re starting to piss me off.” Patchy bristled and lifted the barrel of his weapon, leading to his partner putting a hand on his arm.

“You can’t be shooting civilians.”

“Then why give us a gun?” Patchy argued.

“Hello, still here, waiting for you to arrest me,” Capricorn interrupted. “I promise, your boss will be happy you brought me in.”

“We don’t arrest folk. We send them on their way,” explained the calmer soldier.

Beep.Beep. The walkie at Patchy’s waist went off, and he held it up, clicking the button to mutter, “This is Exit One. Copy.”

“Bring that man to Zone 3,” said a crackling male voice.

“Looks like you’re getting your wish,” the nice soldier said. “If you’d give us your hands.”

“Ooh, you’re going to cuff me. Now we’re talking.” Capricorn held out his wrists and fought to not move as they placed the zip ties around them. This felt so wrong. Willingly submitting to capture.

But the embarrassment of it didn’t kill his humor. On the contrary, he had the biggest shit-eating grin as he said, “Take me to your leader.”

CHAPTER 2

“I hate you.” Zora glared at the sphere that landed her in her shitty situation. It sat there on the metal counter, mocking her with its refusal to cooperate.

Usually, metal spoke to her, showed her what it could become, had her imagining the transformation from mundane to fantastical.

Until now.

The orb didn’t speak to her. On the contrary, it did absolutely nothing but piss her off. By now, she knew everything about it. A metallic-seeming sphere, slightly smaller than a football. It weighed eighteen ounces. Measured ten inches long with a diameter of five and a half inches. That was the extent of her knowledge, and not for lack of trying.

She’d run every single goddamned test she could think of.

Submerged it in water. It sank.

Threw it inside a kiln, applying heat enough to melt even the most stubborn metal. It remained the same temperature. Like, literally, the moment she removed it from the hot oven, she could immediately touch it.

Dunked it in some ice and, heck, even blasted it with liquid nitrogen. It remained consistently seventy degrees Fahrenheit.

Forget scratching the surface. She'd tried every tool known to man and some supplied to her that she'd never even heard of. The smooth sheen remained unmarred.

It emitted no frequency that could be detected. She tried bouncing different ranges off it for shits and giggles. Ended up with shit, not a single giggle—but a lot of cursing.

Acid? Might as well have doused it with water.

Nail polish, paint? Nothing stuck to it.

Zora sighed as she leaned back in her chair. Another week, another failure. She could only imagine what the asshole would say once he read the report she'd dispatched detailing all she'd attempted—and failed. A list that kept growing and added to her frustration because it had been made clear to her that she wasn't leaving her prison until she cracked the mystery.

Yes, prison. Kidnapped and held against her will because she'd greedily held out for more money instead of selling it to the fucker who wanted it. Zora wished she'd never stopped by that garage sale. Wished even more that she'd taken the offer from Seeker419 because then she'd be at home puttering happily in her garage instead of being held prisoner in a super lab where she couldn't escape. Couldn't call for help. Couldn't do fuck all but what Mr. Crius—AKA the asshole who had her kidnapped—ordered, which was to crack the sphere's—or, as he called it, the relic's—secret.

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By now, she'd run through all kinds of theories as to its origin. Given its behavior, she'd come to the conclusion it wasn't of Earthly origin, not something her science-loving butt—large and round from a diet of lattes and chocolate treats—would usually even contemplate. Zora did not believe in aliens. However, what other explanation could there be? Nothing affected it, and yet something obviously managed to shape it. No way it originated in nature to be so perfectly smooth and symmetrical. Then there was the fact its physical properties didn't match any of the known elements. Could it be some hybrid alloy no one knew about? Possible, but given how every single attempt to examine it more deeply failed, she doubted it. At least it didn't appear to be dangerous. She remained healthy, if a few pounds lighter, given the lack of snacks and her well-balanced meals. Would it kill them to give her a greasy burger and fries?

Sigh. For some reason, she thought of the moment she first woke there. Lying on a thin foam mat, in a depressing concrete room that measured eight of her giant feet by eight. When Seeker419 had taunted her about the fact she'd not accepted his offer, she'd pounded on the locked door and had a complete and utter meltdown using language that no lady should ever utter.

“Listen up, motherfucker, you'd better let me out of this room or you will regret it when I shove my foot up your ass!”

Mama always said violence wasn't the answer, but then again, Mama never dealt with Larry Finch at school. That boy was constantly teasing Zora, calling her names, yanking on her braids, until she turned around and decked him. Knocked out his two front teeth, gave him a black eye, and a healthy respect for girls who said no.

Problem with being good with her fists? She needed someone to use them on. Luckily, she'd gotten her chance a few hours after waking—pacing, worrying, cursing.

The door had opened, and Zora didn't hesitate to act as someone entered. She launched herself and tackled, only to be promptly tasered into a quivering jelly mass that pissed herself on the floor.

Not one of her finer moments, and it resulted in punishment. She spent the next few days alone. Didn't see or hear a soul. Her food came via a slot in the door that opened at the same interval each day. No books, no television, not even a deck of cards meant by day three, when the intercom crackled, she was ready to beg.

"Hello, Zora. Now that you've had time to reflect on your situation, are you prepared to listen and be rational?"

Nope. She instantly began to boil. "Listen to what? Your justification for kidnapping and locking me up?"

"That was not part of my initial plan. I simply wanted the artifact. I am curious. What motivated you to purchase it?"

"I'm a metalsmith and metallurgist. Weird shit like that interests me."

"Have you run any tests?"

"With what? My home doesn't have a lab, and the one I work at would fire my ass if I used their equipment for personal research."

"What if you had access to a state-of-the-art laboratory where you could test to your heart's content?"

“Is this some kind of fucked-up job interview, because I’m not interested.”

“Are you sure about that?”the voice queried.

“What’s in it for me?”Because her mama didn’t raise a dumb chick. If this person wanted to negotiate, then maybe she could bargain for her freedom.

“You get to keep your life.”

For some reason, the icy proposal didn’t have her telling him to fuck off, mostly because, in that moment, with a certainty of ninety-eight percent, she believed him.

He continued on as if he hadn’t threatened to kill her.

“When you first saw the relic, did you feel a connection to it?”

“What the fuck are you smoking? It’s just a metal ball.”

“Just?”he’d mocked.“We both know it’s much more than that.”

“Listen, you crazy fucker, I don’t know what game you’re playing, but I’m not interested. Let me out!”

“Only once you’ve cracked its secrets.”

A reply she’d not reacted well to; however, in the end, she had no choice. And so Zora ended up studying the sphere in the most modern lab she’d ever seen. Not that the fancy equipment helped. She’d yet to figure out what made the metal hunk special.

By her count, she’d been here two weeks. Two weeks of being forced to work for free

for an asshole.

Zora spun in her chair, hoping for inspiration, and almost fell on the floor as the phone bolted to the wall—the old-fashioned kind with a handset attached to a cord and a plastic circle with numbers for dialing—rang. It had taken her aback the first time she saw it.

“What the fuck is this retro shit?” she’d asked when Mr. Crius, AKA Seeker419, had first given a tour of the lab—with her hands bound so she couldn’t damage his smug face.

“Given the delicate nature of our work, we are very stringent about technology. Hence why cellphones are left at reception and placed in a Faraday box to block signals, and none of our computers can access the internet. All communication is done in person or via our internal phone system.” Internal, as in no outside dialing.

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As Crius gave her the tour, he detailed her new reality. “Do not think of trying to escape. You won’t get far. Nor should you bother asking for help. Everyone here is loyal to the company. And before you think you can somehow smuggle a message out, all employees are subjected to a thorough search before leaving the facility. Any questions?”

“When can I leave?”

“As mentioned before, when you solve the mystery of the relic.”

“Why me?” She hated that she sounded whiny.

“Because our last metallurgist had to be let go, and rather than interview someone new, why not conscript the person who found the relic we’ve been seeking? How fortuitous that you happened to blithely post about it.”

“As if you’d have actually paid me,” her sour reply.

“Initially, I’d planned to, but once I realized you specialized in metal, why not kill two birds with one stone?”

“Surely you can find someone higher up in my field.”

“Why bother when I have you?” He then went on to detail the tests he wanted run with the threat of, “And don’t think you can lie about the results. I’ll be watching, and any attempt to obfuscate will be punished.”

As were apparently any tantrums and random acts of rebellion, like holding up the flame from a torch against the sprinkler head, hoping to cause an emergency that would unlock the electronically controlled door.

It failed, and she got a taste of what Crius meant when he said cooperate or else. The laxative in her next meal had her curled in the fetal position for hours.

Given her lack of choices, she studied the fucking relic. Did everything Crius asked, even though nothing made a difference. In return, she received three healthy meals a day—so healthy she might kill for chocolate—got to sleep in a room with a real bed instead of a thin mat on a floor, and in the evening, when she was done for the day, could binge Netflix—and plot her escape. It wouldn't be easy, between the locked doors, patrolling guards—who escorted her from room to lab—and the electronic monitoring bracelet that couldn't be removed, Zora had yet to find a single crack in the security that she could exploit. But she wouldn't give up.

The phone she'd answered hummed with static before Criusspoke.

"Zora, proceed to lab ten with the relic."

"What for?"

"A new test."

"Did you get that new plasma laser I was asking for?" Having run out of ideas, she'd been asking for new tools, things she could never dream of accessing in her old life but wasn't a problem for Crius. The man had the funds and the pull to get her anything she wanted.

"It will be arriving next week. But hopefully we won't need it by then. Please take the relic to lab ten."

He said please, but she knew better than to fall for his politeness. Crius was a sadistic bastard. The laxative had only been the first of his tortures. She hung up the phone and sighed as she mentally prepped herself for the next test.

The door to her lab unlocked, and Zora scooped the relic under an arm and headed out into the corridor, a concrete space lit by harsh fluorescent lights and lined with locked doors with numbers painted on them. She worked in lab thirteen. Lab ten wasn't far from hers. Still, she wondered what to expect. Last time she'd taken her metal football for a walk, they'd had her bring it to lab one, where they kept primates and rats. She'd been ordered to rub the orb against them. The dumbest test ever that achieved fuck all. Then there'd been an earlier excursion to lab three with strobing lights that kept changing hue. She'd left that room feeling utterly out of sorts and seeing bright dots for hours afterward.

Lab ten's door clicked as she reached for the handle. Bloody people watching her every move on camera. She entered to find a space more suited to a hospital. Ultrasound machine, EKG monitor, IV poles lacking bags, a mechanized medical bed—and someone strapped to it.

She blinked. Yes, there was another person. A novelty after weeks alone with almost no human contact. If it weren't for the occasional footsteps in the hall, the grim-faced soldiers, and Crius' voice, she'd wonder if the world outside still existed. Other than Crius, the only other human conversation she'd had was with a lab technician who'd been ordered to take blood and tissue samples from her. She'd tried questioning him and kept pestering despite his tight lips, which only parted to tell her to breathe deep and to not move while he poked. Her attempt to subvert led to her getting literal gruel for dinner that night.

The man strapped to the bed had a sheet pulled to his neck. Was he dead? His eyes were closed, but they opened as the door clicked shut. Brilliant blue, which offset his dark, oddly white-streaked hair and tanned skin. Tanned by sun, and not genetics like

her.

“Hello there, gorgeous.” He offered a bright smile. “Here to take another sample? Were the liters of blood stolen by your coworker not enough?”

Someone sounded as salty as her. “I don’t do bodily fluids,” she replied with a grimace. Although she did like his use of the word gorgeous.

“Pity. I know what kind of sample I’d like to give you.”

Wrong time. Wrong guy. Wrong place. Tell that to her body, which flushed at his innuendo. “Not here for that, either.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Dunno. I was told to come.”

“I see. I don’t suppose you’d loosen my restraints. They’re awfully tight.”

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At his words, she noticed the cuffs holding him in place. Wrists, legs, torso. He'd been strapped down.

"You're a prisoner." She blurted out the obvious.

"No shit." He didn't hide his disgruntlement.

"Who are you?"

"Who are you?" he countered.

"Zora, and I'm a prisoner too."

At her reply, his brows rose. "Says the woman wearing a lab coat carrying the artifact I seek."

"I was kidnapped and forced to work all because of this stupid hunk of metal that doesn't do shit!" The last part she yelled at the ceiling.

"Then you won't mind handing it over."

"I could give it to you, but I doubt they'll let you keep it. The fucker running things is pretty obsessed with it."

"By fucker you mean..."

"Crius, the asshole behind our abduction."

“Oh, I wasn’t kidnapped. I handed myself over to Cetus willingly.”

The claim widened her eyes. “Why the fuck would you do that?”

“Because Sage told me to.”

“Does your wife not like you?” she blurted out, making an assumption about this Sage.

“Sage isn’t my wife.” He chuckled. “She’s a seer, and according to her, I needed to be captured. So here I am.”

“You dumb fuck.” She shook her head. “Sounds like this fortune teller fucked you over.”

“Guess time will tell. What about you? You say you were kidnapped.”

“Yeah. In the middle of the night while I slept. Cowards.” She glared at the camera on the ceiling. “All because I picked up this boring metal ball at a garage sale.” She held up the relic.

His eyes widened. “You found it at a garage sale? Do you know what it is?”

“No, and I don’t think they do either, seeing as they keep having me run tests on it.”

“What kind of tests?”

“Anything and everything. You name it, I’ve probably done it.”

“I take it the white coat means you’re a scientist.”

“Yeah. Used to work as a metallurgist until I ended up here.”

“Have you tried to escape?”

“Nah, I just rolled over and said spank me harder,” she drawled. “Course I tried, but they got this place locked down tighter than Mama’s candy stash. But I haven’t given up. If there’s a way out, I will find it.”

“I’m surprised to hear you admit that, given they’re watching and listening.”

“Those fucks know what I think about them.”

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“That is enough, Zora.” Crius spoke, his voice emerging from a speaker in the ceiling.

“Why not come tell me that to my face?” she grumbled.

“Place the sphere on his chest.” Crius ignored her challenge.

“Why? You hoping he’ll absorb it and become Relic Man?” muttered as she placed the orb on his belly.

“Pull down the sheet first.” Her captor huffed with exasperation.

“If you wanted him naked for it, then you should have said so,” she snapped, grabbing the orb, yanking the sheet, and then dropping it back on the stranger’s belly, flat and ridged with muscle. “Happy now?”

“Tell me what you see.”

“Other than a metal egg on a half-nekkid man? Nothing. Are we done?”

“Lose the tone,” Crius ordered.

“Or what?”

She shouldn’t have pushed so hard, because next thing she knew, her wrist monitor jolted and everything went dark.

CHAPTER 3

The woman who'd been arguing with the voice in the speaker—her dark eyes flashing and her tone spitting with attitude—hit the floor fast and hard. Capricorn would have caught her if he'd not been manacled.

Yes, manacled. Like some kind of dangerous patient, he'd been strapped to a bed. Couldn't really blame them. After all, a Zodiac Warrior was worth like a dozen regular men.

He craned to see the woman drooling on the floor but no sign of blood, although she'd probably wake with some bruises.

The door opened, and a man with graying hair, wearing a suit, entered, along with two men in uniform.

The suit pointed. "Put her in her cell. Apparently, someone needs to reflect on her attitude again."

The soldiers grabbed hold of the woman and literally dragged her out of the room.

When the man in the suit glanced at Capricorn, Capricorn arched a brow. "Do you shock all your employees?"

"Only the rude ones, and she's not an actual employee but rather someone we acquired due to her skillset and the fact she stumbled upon the final relic." Speaking of which, it rested on Capricorn's belly still. So close, and yet he couldn't touch it and run.

"One does not simply stumble across them," Capricorn pointed out.

“She did. Bought at an estate sale of all things.” The man grimaced. “It would explain why we couldn’t find it.”

“Who are you?” Capricorn asked.

“I am Adam Crius, owner and CEO of Cetus.”

“Ah, the devil himself.”

Adam smirked. “I prefer to term myself a revolutionary.”

“Pretty sure you’re not the first dick with delusions of grandeur who thinks he can kidnap and intimidate people.”

“You forgot the part where I execute those who no longer serve a purpose.”

Damn. The guy didn’t even deny his cold side. “I don’t suppose you’ll be a good villain and launch into a monologue explaining how your fucked-up childhood led to you having to murder and steal as part of some manifesto that only crazies would understand.”

Laughter burst out of the man. “Sorry to disappoint. Normal childhood. Loved by my parents. Good grades. Popular amongst my peers. I graduated college with a degree in climate science and worked for many years for nonprofit groups until I founded Cetus.”

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“And used it as a cover for your dastardly activities.”

“Initially, no. I truly did want to make a difference, and it was in investigating unusual phenomena and trying to find the correlation between those events and the climate that I discovered the world had some secrets.”

“Such as?” Capricorn prodded.

“That the monsters in storybooks did exist and there were warriors whose sole task was to fight them. As to how I found out, in investigating a swamp that suddenly began taking lives, I happened to see a bright streak of light, and when I blinked, a man suddenly appeared, bearing a sword. He fought a creature of nightmare that rose from the bog, a battle that didn’t last long. And when it was done, the man grabbed hold of the creature and, in another blinding flash, disappeared.”

“You saw a Zodiac Warrior.” Capricorn knew it happened, despite their precautions.

“I did, although at the time I lacked a name. But that incident led me to searching, seeking out who and what he was. What I discovered...” The man shook his head.

“Let’s just say my mind was blown.”

“So where do the artifacts come into it?”

“I have Olivia to thank for that.” Leo’s daughter, who had spent her early years with the enemy after her mother absconded with her. “She’s the one who told me to seek them out.”

“You used a child.”

“Barely. She was too young to really properly inform us. Although, she’d been getting better at guiding our movements when she was unfortunately lost.”

“You mean reunited with her dad.”

“Which, in retrospect, Olivia obviously maneuvered.”

“She played you.” Capricorn snickered. “How’d it feel to be outsmarted by a little kid?”

Adam shrugged. “Mistakes happen. When she’s returned to us, we will take better precautions. With my wife gone, Olivia should be more amenable.”

“Wait, when you say wife...”

“Was the woman you knew as Kylie.”

“You’re the dude who forced her to have a kid with Leo?” The story had shocked them to the core. What husband did that to this wife?

“Hardly forced. Once I explained what meticulous years of research revealed about the Zodiac Warriors, Kylie understood the end goal. We needed a child of certain abilities, and so she volunteered to produce a child with a Zodiac warrior. Olivia proved to be more than I could have hoped for. A seer of the future. Someone who guided me toward a greater destiny. Of course, once she returns, there will be a stern discussion and penalty for her having misled us.”

“I doubt Leo’s going to hand her over, and you’ll never find her.”

Dude smirked. “I already know where Olivia is. The Tower of Babylon. Fascinating structure with magical properties. Kylie claimed it might be sentient. I can’t wait to make it my new headquarters.”

“Like fuck is that happening.”

“Who will stop me? And before you mention the other warriors, remember I’ve been researching your kind. Learning how to nullify your powers.”

Doubtful, but Capricorn wouldn’t bother debating it since there was a bigger reason invaders never succeeded. “You can try, but you’ll fail. Tower don’t like strangers.”

“It is not a mind reader, or else Kylie would have never been allowed inside.”

His counter led to Capricorn huffing, “Tower made a mistake thinking it could trust Leo’s wife, but you won’t get the same benefit. You’ll never find it or get close.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I will get inside, after all, the tower’s purpose is to serve the Zodiac.”

“Exactly. You’re not one of us meaning Tower will repel any attempt to infiltrate.”

Adam plucked the orb from Capricorn’s belly. “That’s where you’re wrong. Once I unlock this relic, I’ll have all the permission I need to enter.”

“Wait, you think that metal football is going to make you one of us?” Capricorn snorted. “Dude, not even close. The constellations choose who will represent them.”

“The twelve that are active might work that way, but the thirteenth has been locked away, and I mean to free it.”

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With that ominous announcement, Adam left and Capricorn understood Sage's concern for the future. What kind of damage could a man like Adam Crius do if he had the power of the stars to call upon?

CHAPTER 4

Zora woke in the punishment cell, a by-now-familiar eight-by-eight cement box where Crius always sent her when she misbehaved. Along with the confined area, she could expect slop for her next meal, and a sore body, as the thin mattress did nothing to cushion. No television. No window. Nothing to distract. Usually.

The one difference this time? She wasn't alone.

"About time you woke, Sleeping Beauty," the man from the hospital bed drawled.

The comment startled her into rolling over and popping to her feet, where she blurted out, "What are you doing here?" Zora noticed he didn't wear any restraints. Hopefully, that indicated he wasn't a danger. Then again, if he tried anything, good-looking or not, she'd slug him.

"I assume our good friend Adam is hoping we'll become fast friends given our shared dilemma. He's probably listening to see if we spill any secrets." He glanced at the camera inset in the ceiling.

"Adam?" She didn't recognize the name.

"The guy in charge. Wears a suit. Salt-and-pepper hair. Looks like a dick."

“Oh, you mean Crius,” she exclaimed, recognizing the description. “He’ll be disappointed since I don’t have any secrets, or pockets,” she lamented as her tummy growled. She missed the snacks she usually kept stashed in her cargo pants.

He stared at her. “You know most people would be complaining about their captivity, not their clothing.”

“I can bitch about whatever I like. After all, I’ve been here longer than you.”

“We weren’t properly introduced at our last brief meeting. I’m Capricorn.” He held out his hand, and she pursed her lips before gripping it and giving it a firm shake.

“Zora.” She didn’t bother with a last name since he hadn’t, but she did question, “What kind of hippy-dippy parents name their kid after a Zodiac sign?”

“They didn’t. I used to be called Chester.”

She snorted. “Damn, never thought I’d say Capricorn is probably the better choice.”

“Right?” His grin took an already good-looking face and turned it into something that sent tingles throughout her body. Apparently, her libido decided to wake at the most inopportune moment.

“As I recall, before the whole getting-tasered thing, you claimed to have handed yourself over to Crius because some chick told you to.”

“I did.”

“Bet you’re feeling pretty dumb now,” she blurted out. Figured the hottest guy she’d spoken to in ages would have a few screws loose. That, or this Sage broad must be smokin’ hot.

“Sage wouldn’t have told me to do it if she didn’t think I’d succeed. Apparently, my capture was necessary for me to beat Cetus.” He glanced at the ceiling. “Hear that, Adam. I’m going to dismantle your operation, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

“It’s like you have a death wish,” she muttered.

“Says the woman who intentionally pissed off Mr. I’m-so-important and got zapped into la-la land.”

Her lips twisted. “Mama always did say I was stubborn and mouthy. But back to this chick who convinced you she sees the future. How much does she charge an hour? Because damn, I never knew people could be so easily suckered. I could make a fortune convincing idiots to do dumb shit.”

“Sage tells us what she sees for free and is usually right about her predictions. Which means my new friend Adam better watch himself.” Once more he shot a feral grin at the camera.

“Pissing him off will only make your punishment worse,” Zora said with a shake of her head.

“Bah. I’m a big boy. I can handle it.”

“Hope so, because I see you’ve got some new jewelry.” She indicated the bands around his wrists. A pair to her one.

“I noticed. Any idea what kind of range they have?”

She shrugged. “Don’t know because I’ve only ever gone from this cell to the lab. Or, when I’m not being punished, my room to the lab.”

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“This isn’t where you usually stay?” He glanced around.

“Nope. When I’m a good girl,” said sarcastically, “I get a real bed, television and food I recognize. I should probably add I’ve spent more time in this cell than the other room. Apparently, I have a bad attitude.” She rolled her eyes, and he laughed.

“Your frankness is refreshing. I hate people who pretend and bullshit.”

Speaking of being forthright... “I’m curious. If Crius knows you’re here to take him down, then why the hell would he keep you?”

“As opposed to killing me? Because I’m special,” said with a wink.

“Did your mommy tell you that?”

He snorted. “Not exactly. Let’s just leave it at I’m not like other men.”

“Said every megalomaniac before going on a manifesto-inspired murder spree.”

“If it makes you feel better, you’re not on that list.”

She blinked. “Hold on. Are you planning to kill people?”

“Only those that deserve it and get in my way. Please don’t tell me you’re a bleeding heart who thinks everyone deserves a second chance.”

“Fuck no,” she huffed. “I think the laws should punish little shits harder. This catch-

and-release stuff they've been doing is annoying as hell. Do the crime, do the time."

He clutched his chest. "A lady after my own heart. Now that you've grilled me, your turn. You found the relic at a garage sale."

"I did. Biggest regret ever. At the time, I thought the sphere might provide me with some good scrap metal for a project." At his puzzled look, she added, "During the week, I work as a metallurgist, but I also dabble in my spare time as a metalsmith." Given he still had a constipated expression, she explained. "Metalsmiths basically make art with metal."

"Ahh. Very cool. So you found the artifact, but I'm struggling to understand how you ended up on Cetus' radar."

"Because my dumb ass posted about it online. I couldn't figure out what the orb was made of, so I asked around on a few forums," her disgruntled reply. "No one recognized it, but I got a message offering me some dough in exchange, to which I said no. Next thing I know, I'm woken in the middle of a night, drugged, and ended up here."

"Bummer."

Understatement. "It blows. Especially since I get the impression Crius ain't ever intending to let me go."

"Guaranteed he won't. He's not the type to tolerate possible loose lips."

Her lips turned down. "He's going to kill me."

"Don't be so sure of that. When I blow this joint, I'll take you with me."

His claim arched her brow. “And how do you plan to do that? This place is locked up tighter than Fort Knox.”

“Actually, Fort Knox isn’t that secure. The factory where they work on new Apple phone prototypes, though... Now that place knows security.”

Strange guy. Still, it was nice having an ally, and someone to talk to that wasn’t Crius. “Do you know where we are? I’ve seen nothing but concrete walls since I got here.”

“Nevada. Area 51.”

“As in the place where they dissect aliens?” she blurted out.

“The one and only.”

“Should have known the government was behind this. Fucking assholes,” Zora grumbled.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that. On paper, it simply appears as if Cetus rented the underground military installation to do their research. No indication the government has a clue what they’re doing.”

“You seem better informed than me. What are they angling to find out? And why is that stupid metal ball so important?”

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“From what Adam said, he wants to harness the power it holds and, from there, like every villain with grand ideas, wants to become Earth’s Overlord.”

Laughter bubbled from her, and she didn’t bother stemming it. “That is probably the craziest thing you’ve said thus far.”

“It’s the truth,” his serious reply. “You’ve gotten embroiled in something very complicated and dangerous.”

“No shit.”

“The relic they have you studying is special.”

“Again, no shit. I’m thinking it’s alien in origin because it certainly doesn’t behave like any Earth metals.”

“Not so much alien as astral. There were three originally, but two appear to have, for lack of a better word, transformed.”

“Into what? Are they eggs of some kind?” she asked, remembering the comment in one forum about it being dragon ova.

“I’m not quite sure what they are, or what they’re capable of. I only know that it’s dangerous in the wrong hands. Hence, why I’m here. My mission is to extract the artifact.”

“Seems like a lot of trouble for a ball of metal. You want it, Crius is obsessed with it.

He told me I'm stuck here until I figure out how to crack it."

"I doubt that's possible. The previous two required starbeaming to unlock them."

"Star what?" She didn't recognize the word but chalked it up to more of his crazy talk.

"You really know nothing about what's going on, do you?"

"I don't, and it's really fucking annoying," she grumbled.

"Ever heard the term Zodiac Warrior?"

"Isn't that a video game?"

He chuckled. "Nope."

"Funny you mention the word Zodiac because the guy who used to own the sphere was a huge collector of all things Zodiac. He had all kinds of books on the subject, a telescope, all kinds of star shit. Even some painting of a guy with a tattoo of the libra scales on his back."

"Did it look something like this?" Capricorn turned around and lifted his scrub top to show a muscled back covered in a massive tattoo, only instead of scales he bore a goat across the entire expanse of flesh.

She whistled. "Damn, that must have hurt."

"Didn't feel a thing."

"Is the giant Zodiac tattoo some kind of cult thing?"

“You might say that. What else did you see at this garage sale?”

“Just a lot of junk, unless you’re into that shit. The fellow was obviously obsessed. The orb was pretty much the only thing for sale that didn’t have a Zodiac symbol carved onto it.”

“I wonder where and how he found it,” Capricorn murmured.

“I am not seeing or understanding why it’s so important. I mean I bought it for a buck.”

“Because the person selling it didn’t understand its value.”

“But you and Crius obviously do, since you both want it.”

“I want it so I can protect the world, but Adam’s plans are more sinister.”

“I fail to see how a metal ball can be dangerous unless it’s some kind of bomb or contains a virus.” She sure hoped not the latter since she’d been handling it with her bare hands.

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“I’m thinking it’s more dangerous than that.”

“Only if I lob it at someone’s head,” she quipped.

He laughed. “Have you tried that?”

“No, but not for lack of wanting.”

“How long will we be kept in time out?” he asked.

“Depends. Sometimes a few hours. The longest was two days.”

“Two days?” he grimaced as he glanced around. “I might die of boredom.”

“Or embarrassment. That’s our toilet.” She pointed to a hole in the floor.

“Like fuck,” he swore. “I am not squatting over a hole to drop a deuce.”

“Then you’d better clench tight.”

At her rejoinder, he chuckled again. How novel. Most people didn’t appreciate her brand of humor.

“What do you say we blow this joint, Beauty?”

“Would love to, but not sure how you’re going to manage that. Locked room. No key. We’re stuck unless you can walk through concrete walls.”

His lips quirked. “Not quite, but I do have an idea.”

While she remained fairly sure it would fail, she already had nothing to lose. “Go ahead, pretty boy. Dazzle me.”

CHAPTER 5

Thus far, Capricorn’s capture hadn’t gone the way he’d expected. For one, from the beginning when he’d handed himself over, no one roughed him up. The soldiers who took him into custody simply zip-tied his hands and told him to wait, which he did, leaning against his bike in the scorching sun. Within ten minutes, a Jeep had arrived. He was loaded into the passenger seat and zoomed to the entrance to the underground bunker.

No one important came to greet him, although the soldiers did keep their weapons trained on him the entire time. They’d led him inside and, with a brisk pace, delivered him to the bowels of the installation to a room with a few chairs, where he was told to wait.

Wait for some gas, apparently. The room had filled with a fog that put him to sleep, and he woke strapped to a medical bed in time for the first set of needles. Those taking samples wore hazmat gear, making them faceless. Also voiceless, since not one would speak to him.

“Hey, so who’s in charge?”

No reply.

“What’s your name?”

Nada.

They had taken blood, hair, and tissue samples, as well as measurements. Circumference and length of his limbs. Blood pressure. So boring, but also a tad worrisome. Would they discover anything of import? Capricorn wasn't entirely sure how his genetics would appear if analyzed. He left the sciency stuff to other people.

After spending a few days as a guinea pig, he really questioned why Sage advised him to be captured. He also behaved, being the model prisoner, running on the treadmill when asked, doing chin-ups over and over until the guy with the clipboard sighed and said, "How many can you do before tiring?"

"How many do you want?" he'd replied.

Things only finally became interesting with the introduction of Zora, who arrived with the artifact he sought. A woman with a sassy attitude, the fullest, most kissable lips, and an ass he totally wanted to grab.

Why had Cetus nabbed her? By her own admission, the discovery of the orb happened by accident. The fact she specialized in metal proved interesting, but surely, Cetus had their own specialists. Yet, they'd taken her, tasked her with studying the artifact, and now had her locked in a cell with him.

Was she a plant meant to seduce him into telling secrets? They'd chosen well, as she was certainly his type. However, he got the impression she truly hated the situation. But that wasn't why he planned to take her with him when he left. For one, the fact she'd found the orb did make her a person of interest, and secondly, if she truly were a victim of circumstance, most likely she'd be killed by Cetus once they had no use for her. For some reason, he didn't want that to happen.

Escaping, though, wouldn't be easy. He couldn't starbeam until he exited the concrete installation and had access to the open sky, which required him extricating himself from the cell. Alas, he didn't have a magical power that could unlock doors.

Nor a weapon to fight the soldiers that surely waited outside. Minor details like that wouldn't deter him. The time had come to act.

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The relic was here, and knowing Adam planned to use it meant no more pretending to be weak. Capricorn had been playing those keeping him captive. Faking the fact their sleeping agents wore off more quickly than they expected. Letting them strap him down, even as he knew he could snap the restraints.

The door, inset in concrete, did prove problematic, and when Zora challenged him to escape, he smiled, because he had a plan.

“Prepare to be free, Beauty.”

She arched a brow. “Got some C4 packed in your prison wallet?”

It took him a moment to understand her reference, and then he laughed. “Not quite, but I like the way you think. Stand back while I handle the watching eyes and listening ears.” The moment she stepped away from Capricorn, he leaped into the air and punched up with a close fist. It took three solid shots before the camera broke. That should cause some panic in their monitoring room.

“Damn. That was some impressive jumping,” Zora exclaimed. “You ever play basketball?”

“Not really. Wasn’t really popular when I was growing up.” In his day, a stick and a hoop were all the rage.

“Not sure what that accomplished, though. I doubt you can pummel your way through the door.”

“You’re right. I can’t, but having taken out their spying device guarantees they’ll send someone to check on us.”

“Your plan is to piss them off so they’ll come and smack you around?”

“Who says they’ll be doing the smacking?”

“Because you’ll be jiggling like a bug on a hot plate. Or did you think your new bracelets were just for show?”

He glanced at the snug bands around his wrists. “I’ll be fine. I’m tougher than I look.”

“Tough won’t stop a bullet.”

“They won’t shoot me.” Spoken with confidence. He doubted Adam would want his prize to die.

“Hope they don’t, because I ain’t wasting my daily cup of water rinsing off blood splatter,” she grumbled.

Her dark humor almost had him laughing again, but he held in his mirth, hearing the thump of boots in the hall.

“They’re coming. You might want to give me some space, Beauty.” A nickname that rolled from his lips easily because, when she’d lain on the floor, her expression soft in repose, those lips begging for a kiss, he’d, for some reason, been reminded of the fairytale princess. Although he doubted Sleeping Beauty cursed as much, not something that bothered him. Capricorn loved the word “fuck.” Adjective, verb, noun, act. It was multipurpose.

Zora moved to the farthest corner and crouched, muttering, “Don’t be crying later when you’re pissing blood.”

Such sweet concern but for naught. He wouldn’t be the one bleeding.

Capricorn stood by the door, waiting. When it opened, he dove through before anyone on the other side could react. A guy in uniform grunted as Capricorn slammed into his midsection and took them to the floor. He quickly grabbed the guard by the head and slammed it against the ground as the other men shouted and aimed Tasers at him.

The electrical current tingled, and his tattoo pulsed. “Thanks for the tickle, boys,” Capricorn said as he rose and gave them a grin.

Thrown off-kilter by his reaction, they fumbled to unholster the weapons strapped to their hips. One shouted into a walkie. “The Tasers didn’t take him down.”

“Who’s next?” Capricorn asked, even as he lunged for the next target, wrestling away the gun. Might have had a chance to use it, too, if his wrists didn’t suddenly go numb. The muscles in his hands stopped working, and he dropped the weapon.

What the fuck? He had no injury to account for the sudden paralysis, but the bracelets at his wrist did vibrate. Well, damn.

The soldiers regrouped a few paces away and kept their weapons pointed. Interesting how they didn’t shoot. It indicated they had orders to keep him alive.

“Anyone here bowl?” Capricorn quipped before rushing them, intent on being the ball that knocked down like pins. His shoulder took the brunt of the hit, plowing into a midsection that took down the man. Amidst the yelling and zapping and his headbutting, since his hands still refused to work, a new sound arose.

A siren wailed, accompanied by a red strobing light in the hall.

The provided distraction allowed Capricorn to roll and tangle himself in some legs, dropping some more guards. As one of those still standing shouted, “Fuck this, I’m shooting the bastard,” his hands tingled as feeling returned.

Hell yeah. Capricorn kicked his feet and knocked aside the barrel of the gun, causing it to shoot the wall, the slug spraying cement chunks. He sprang to an upright position and delivered an uppercut that knocked the guy out before he could fire again. A sound from behind had him whirling in time to see Zora swinging her hands, the pair of them linked together like a club, at the last guard standing, about to shoot.

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Thud. The fellow's eyes rolled up, and he dropped hard just as the walkie at his waist crackled, with Adam shouting, "Whatever you do, don't open the door. Wait for the gas to take effect."

At the words, Zora spun and hauled the door shut before the wispy fog could reach them.

Capricorn crouched and snagged the walkie, clicking the button to say, "Too late. I'm out, sucker. See you soon." Let the man simmer and stew while he waited for his comeuppance. He'd wait a while because Adam wasn't Capricorn's primary goal.

Zora glanced at the bodies groaning on the floor, and the few that didn't move. "Not bad."

"Not bad?" He huffed. "I took out six armed soldiers."

"Five. That one's mine." She pointed to the body at her feet.

"You might get a chance to catch up to my count since I'm sure more are coming."

"I wouldn't be so sure, actually. Sounds like there's been a security breach." She glanced at the strobing light.

"Which works to our advantage. The guards will be distracted."

"Assuming it's not a false alarm. If it isn't, then I guess Crius will have to decide what's more important, the sanctity of his installation or recapturing us." She grinned

suddenly. “Nice job getting us out of the cell. Got any other bright ideas now to get off this level?” Her head tilted toward the locked door at the end of the hall.

He snagged the keycard clipped to a guard’s waist and held it up. “We should put this to use before someone thinks of revoking access.”

“Those only work on the more commonly used doors,” she remarked as she followed him, stepping over the littered bodies and kicking at the hand that reached for her ankle.

“Let me guess, they’re using palm or facial scanners, too, for the more secure spots.”

“Yup.”

“Good thing I have a lockpick then.” He patted the gun he’d tucked in his waistband. “Stick behind me, Beauty.”

As they hit the end of the hall, and before he could unlock the door, it opened. He couldn’t have said who was more surprised, the guard about to step in or his buddy who caught him when Capricorn punched him hard enough to make him pass out.

“Move out of the way, or else,” Capricorn barked to the guards clustered.

They chose the latter, fumbling for their holstered weapons. Before they’d cleared a single gun, he’d gotten off five shots with his stolen firearm.

And what did Zora say?

“You should have kept one alive so we could use their face for the scanner.”

He hauled the nearest body up and shook it. “Hence, why I didn’t shoot them in the

head.”

“Pretty sure the scanners will notice a lack of body temperature.”

“Well fuck.” He dumped the corpse. “I’m sure we’ll find a kicking one we can use on our way.”

He didn’t have to look far. The elevator opened just as they reached it. Bang. Bang. Bang. He shot three guards, leaving one to stare wide-eyed and trembling.

Capricorn pointed and growled. “You’re coming with us, unless you want to end up like your coworkers, understood?”

The man nodded his head, trembling in fear.

“Shall we, Beauty?” Capricorn kept his eyes on the guard as he beckoned his cellmate.

Zora sidled into the elevator. “There will probably be a welcoming committee on the main level.”

“They’ll be waiting a while, since that’s not where we’re going. Where did you last see the relic?”

“In my lab.”

“Which is where?”

“Two down from this one, but you can’t be seriously thinking of going after it. I thought we were escaping?”

“We are, but we can’t leave without it.” He just hoped Adam hadn’t moved it from the lab because he’d hate to have to go through this entire installation seeking it.

“For fuck’s sake.” She jabbed a button on the elevator’s panel and sent them down.

“Thanks.”

“Fuck you. I can’t believe I’m helping you,” she muttered.

“Don’t worry, Beauty. I promise the plan is still to blow this joint.”

“You can’t guarantee that.”

“I’m a man of my word.”

She rolled her eyes. “Can’t keep it if you’re shot.”

The elevator slowed. “Then I shall do my best to remain bullet-free. Ready?”

“No.”

“How about a kiss for luck?”

He received a dirty scowl instead.

With a firm grip on his silent prisoner, he prepared for battle.

CHAPTER 6

Zora couldn't believe she led Capricorn to her dreaded lab rather than hightailing it for freedom. While the alarms blared, distracting everyone, would have been the ideal time to run. Instead, she risked recapture because he insisted on completing his so-called mission. Then again, if anything Capricorn told her was true—which she struggled with because it sounded preposterous—then perhaps removing the sphere from Crius' possession should take precedence.

The elevator door opened before she could change her mind about the kiss for good luck. She'd save it for later as a thank-you if they actually made it out of this shitstorm alive.

The lab level had extra layers of security, starting in the vestibule where they exited the elevator, the compact room full of guards who'd remained at their posts.

Four against the two of them—well, technically, one, since Zora didn't have a weapon. Capricorn didn't appear to care about being outnumbered. He threw the guard they'd brought in front of him, startling the waiting group. The man yelped as four Tasers discharged against his body. Needless to say, he hit the floor unconscious. Before the guards fully registered the real threat, Capricorn began shooting. The man was a crack shot and didn't miss his targets. However, he only dropped two before running out of bullets, leaving a pair.

Capricorn threw his gun in their direction, and while the men dodged, he lunged for the closest guard, the problem being both of them were already aiming their weapons. He'd never manage to take them both out. Good thing she was a fast thinker.

She screamed, loud enough to wake the dead, the distraction enough for Capricorn to get within reach and knock the gun from the man's grip while, in the same motion, spinning and extending his leg to kick the weapon from the second fellow's hand. A few hard punches to the heads and they were out cold. It would have been a victory if not for the coward they'd dragged along, who apparently recovered more quickly from the Tasers than expected.

He popped up suddenly and wound an arm around Zora's neck and dragged her back, exclaiming, "On your knees or she dies." His voice cracked with his demand.

Capricorn rose slowly, fresh gun in hand, a deadly look in his eyes. Even sexier than his usual dark humor. "Let her go," he growled.

"I don't think so." Using Zora as a meat shield, the trembling guard dragged her into the elevator.

The doors shut, but the guy miscalculated since he couldn't press the button without releasing her. He also mistakenly assumed her easy to handle. A common misconception. When he unwound an arm to lean forward to choose a floor, her elbow came back and rammed him in the gut. As he bent over and grunted, she slipped from the other looping arm, whirled, and rammed a knee into his balls. He collapsed, whimpering.

Annoyance running high led to her giving him a kick in the ribs. "Use me as a shield, will you? Jerk." The doors slid open, and Capricorn stood framed.

"Oh good, you kept yours alive. We might need his face since I might have hit the others a tad too hard." No mention of how she'd freed herself. No "good job." He simply plucked the moaning man from the floor and carried him out.

"So glad you were worried," she huffed with a hint of irritation.

“As a matter of fact, I was. Why else would I have been coming after you? And don’t you dare spout some feminist bullshit about you can save yourself.”

“Well, I did.”

“And quite well,” he added. “Remind me to stay on your good side.”

“Who says I have one?” she retorted as he kept a grip on the guard with one hand while using the other to tote a chair to the elevator. He plopped it on the threshold, making it so the doors couldn’t fully shut. Smart. It would prevent anyone from using it and sneaking up on them.

“You’re too beautiful to be mean all the time,” Capricorn stated as he dragged the man, who wisely didn’t fight, to the locked door for the labs. He held his face up to the scanner.

“Flattery won’t make me like you.”

“What will?” he queried as the door opened.

“Helping me escape here alive, for one.”

“Was already planning to do that.”

“Care to share the rest of your plan?”

“I don’t have one,” he replied. “I’m totally winging this.”

“Of course you are,” she muttered as she followed him into the corridor lined with doors that led to labs.

“Which one has the relic?” he asked with a frown.

“Assuming they placed it back in mine, then number thirteen.”

“And if it’s not there?” He hauled the guard by the collar of his shirt and began walking.

“Then I guess we check them all.”

Luck proved to be on their side. As soon as the door to her workspace opened, she saw the sphere sitting in its cradle.

“We’ll need something to carry it in,” he suggested. “Preferably with a strap so I can wear it and keep my hands free.”

“Who says you get to carry it? It is technically mine,” she retorted just for the sake of arguing.

“You want to carry it, go right ahead.”

Zora scrounged in the cupboards under the counter. She already knew there was no satchel. However, a lab coat, combined with the soldier’s utility belt, allowed her to fashion a sling of sorts, which she wore.

“Ready, Beauty? Because it’s time to blow this joint. But let’s skip the elevator and use the stairs.”

“Assuming there are some.”

“Oh, there’s stairs. A place like this wouldn’t risk becoming inaccessible in a power failure.”

“I wish the power would go out,” she grumbled. “That siren is annoying.” It hadn’t stopped blaring, and her head pulsed with the shrillness of it.

“Just a bit longer, Beauty. Freedom awaits.”

Capricorn exited the lab, still dragging the guard, and headed back for the chamber with the elevator. An unmarked door to the side simply required a swipe of the key card they’d stolen.

He stuck his head for a peek before stating, “Found the stairs and they appear to be clear.”

Surprising, or, then again, maybe not. The sudden silence as the alarm abruptly cut out left her ears ringing, but she still heard Crius shout through the intercom, “All available units to the main entrance. Intruders inside the perimeter. Do not let them inside.”

Capricorn raised his brows. “Sounds like someone’s getting raided.”

“Their timing is impeccable,” she remarked as they began ascending—the resigned guard thumping and grunting at each jolting step. At least he got a free ride. Zora’s thighs protested the climb.

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“Do you think we still need him?” she asked.

“Guess we can always grab a new one.”

Before she could suggest tying him up, Capricorn heaved the guard over the rail. He plummeted long enough they didn’t hear the landing thump.

Her brow arched. “Was that really necessary?”

“Yes. A real man doesn’t threaten a woman or use her to protect himself. Besides, can’t be sure he wouldn’t have tried to attack us from behind.” While his ease over using deadly violence did bother, he made good points.

The makeshift sling holding the sphere bounced against her hip as they ascended, the many stairs causing her to pant with exertion. She paused on a landing, trying to catch her breath.

“We have to keep moving,” Capricorn reminded.

“I’m. Aware.” She huffed. “But not all of us have bionic legs.” Like seriously, the man didn’t show any sign of exertion.

“Come here.” He beckoned.

She hugged the lump of the orb against her. “No. You are not taking it and leaving me here.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, but we really need to move faster.”

“And how do you propose we do that? You’re the one who vetoed the elevator.” She didn’t hide her irritation.

“Get your sweet ass over here, Beauty, so I can carry you.”

She blinked at him and then laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“You thinking you can carry me around like some dainty— Eep!” As she mocked, he’d closed the distance between them and scooped her into his arms. He then proceeded to take the stairs two at a time.

While holding her.

Ridiculously impressive, especially considering Zora wasn’t a lightweight. While not obese, she had more pounds than her doctor liked. Heck, even some of her ex-lovers had commented on her curves.

You should have a salad instead of the pasta. Do you really need to order dessert? Hell yeah, she did, since those fools wouldn’t be getting any after-dinner sugar.

Capricorn carried her with ease. It led to her remarking, “How often are you pumping iron in the gym?”

“Often. My job requires me to be fit.”

“How long can you do this for?”

“As long as it takes, Beauty.”

“Sweet, because you’re right, this is much faster.”

His energetic stride moved them from floor to floor, and when they accidentally came across some folks in white lab coats on a landing, those folks wisely scurried back to their level rather than confront.

Of the guards, they saw nothing until they spilled out of the final door. The men in uniform—wait, they had one chick with them as well—had their backs to them and appeared intent on being the line against whoever pounded for entry outside.

“Now what?” she whispered, still cradled in his arms.

“We need another way out.”

Motion from the corner of her eye turned her head in time to see two white coats scurrying through a door on the far end with no signage. She nudged Capricorn. “Just saw some doctors going that way.”

“Rats fleeing the ship,” he murmured as he headed in that direction, only to grumble as they realized it led to a cafeteria, where a bunch of people huddled in the corner by a door marked Exit.

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At the sight of them, one of the whitecoats yelled, “The prisoners are escaping. Someone call the guards.”

“You go ahead, big boy,” Capricorn replied, his gaze zeroing in on the exit door, which had a chain running through its push bar, which explained why none of the whitecoats used it.

“I’m gonna shoot the lock,” he remarked, striding for it.

“You might want to deal with the company,” Zora replied, pointing to the guards suddenly spilling into the cafeteria.

As bullets fired—badly enough to give a Storm Trooper a run for the title of worse shot— Capricorn snagged Zora and threw her behind the buffet counter before joining her in a leap. They crouched behind, protected from the hail of missiles, but also trapped.

“Now what?” she huffed.

“Don’t die?” he quipped.

She snorted and squeaked as bullets showered their hiding spot. Chunks of food rained down, and Capricorn grumbled. “So mean, taunting a hungry man.” He peeked just enough to aim. Bang. Bang.

“Two down,” he remarked, ducking back beside her. “But there’s more arriving.”

And they were determined. Zora heard someone shout, “Boss says don’t let them get away.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know.” He checked the magazine on his gun. “I’ve got five bullets left.”

“And how many guards?”

“Eight, plus we still need one for the chain on that door.”

“Then you’d better make each shot count,” she pertly replied.

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered with a wink and a grin. Capricorn rose and fired only once before ducking again. “I missed,” he grumbled. “They’re hiding behind a table they flipped over.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Zora stated, having had time to peek around at the kitchen. She scuttled over to a cabinet and had to practically climb inside to grab at a handle.

“I don’t think you’ll fit,” he observed, “although I am enjoying the view.”

The view being her ass. Probably the wrong time to flush with pleasure.

“I’m not hiding,” Zora grunted as she scooted backwards out of the cupboard, dragging two jugs of cooking oil.

“Making French fries?”

“I wish. Cover me,” she demanded, abruptly popping to her feet and using that momentum to swing the containers of oil, launching them in the direction of the

guards. The impact against the floor cracked the plastic containers, spilling oil.

Amidst the hail of ensuing bullets, Zora dropped down and blew out a breath. “That was close. Good thing their aim sucks. Now to light shit up.” The gas stoves had been left lit, and Zora snared a bun and held it to the flame long enough for it to catch fire. She flung the burning toast, but it fell short and missed. But Capricorn understood her plan. He stood, took aim, and fired.

The oil slick ignited with awhoosh.

CHAPTER 7

The fire spread quickly, feeding on the oil, but while the hot flames provided a barrier to prevent the guards from approaching, they didn’t do much to obscure—until Zora began flinging bread buns at it. Little yummy balls of gluten that burned and emitted smoke, providing some measure of concealment, which increased once the concrete floor began to bubble, the paint on it succumbing to the heat. The emitting choking haze brought a tickle to the throat.

Capricorn glanced at her. “Time for us to make our escape. Keep close.”

As if she’d do anything but. The man had proven to be more than capable. Not only had he devised a way for them to escape the cell, retrieve the sphere, and make it to the main level, but he’d also shown not an ounce of hesitation when it came to using deadly force.

Exactly who was he? Because he had the skills of a mercenary or even a possible CIA agent. She didn’t really care which, since he was her ticket out of here.

They headed for the exit, the doors in their white coats pounding and rattling it, as if that would get rid of the chain holding it shut. Talk about a fire hazard.

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“Move out of the way, you morons,” he barked. At the sight of him raising his gun to take aim, the whitecoats scattered.

Hopefully, Capricorn could break the chain because, by her count, he had to be close to or out of bullets. Luckily, he had one left.

The padlock shattered at the impact, releasing the chain, which he yanked from the handle before shoving the door open. Smoke billowed through the opening, and Zora darted into that billowing cloud, followed by Capricorn.

Zora took a moment to breathe, heaving in the fresher outside air, but didn't enjoy it for long, as a doctor shoved past her, almost sending her to the ground.

Rude.

The next whitecoat fell face-first onto the ground. Blame the foot she stuck out to trip him. She didn't feel bad about it one bit since he'd been the one to poke her with needles and ignored her every attempt to talk.

Capricorn grabbed her by the hand. “We need to move before they realize we're outside.” A reminder the smoke and fire screen wouldn't hold the guards for long.

“Where to?” she asked.

“Apparently, not home,” he grumbled. “These fucking bracelets need to come off.”

“Good luck with that. I searched for a seam but couldn't find one. It's like they

welded them on.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me. Adam was more prepared than expected.”

“If we can make it to a town, or even someone’s house, we should be able to find a tool to remove them.”

“Meaning we need to find a ride out of here.” He grabbed her by the hand, and she let him lead.

As they moved away from the smoking building, her head swiveled sideways to see a crowd of people pressing against the front of the main building. Dressed in black combat gear, wearing head coverings and balaclavas to conceal their features, several carried placards that she had to squint to read.

No more secrets.

Release the aliens.

The truth is in Area 51.

She almost laughed to realize their distraction came from activists. How fortuitous.

To her surprise, Capricorn dragged Zora at a fast run in their direction, leading her to huff, “Why. Are. We. Going. That. Way?”

“Because they obviously came here by car or bus, or something that we can most likely steal.”

Good thinking, because she’d been dreading the thought of trekking through the arid desert. When he’d told her where they’d been taken prisoner—Area fucking

51—she'd wondered how far she'd get on foot if she ever managed to escape. Probably not far, since she tended to wilt in extreme heat.

Rather than merge with those rushing the installation, and trying to push against the tide, they kept to the outskirts of those yelling. Her heart pounded and her lungs screamed with each ragged breath. She didn't protest when Capricorn, in a move she didn't think possible outside a movie, smoothly scooped and tossed her over a shoulder.

Bouncing on his brawny shoulder might not be the most comfortable thing, but he made much better time without her lagging steps, and the view of his ass was nice.

She didn't know they'd reached vehicles until he slowed and let her slide down, his arm around her keeping her snug to his frame. A very solid frame, and as she stood pressed against him, she noticed his height. She was a good five foot nine, but he had several inches on her.

"Any preferences?" he murmured as he stared down at her.

Was he asking her favorite sexual position? Hardly the place, but tell that to her suddenly sizzling blood. "Uh..." She, the person who always had a come-back, faltered.

"Guess rather than go with a particular style we should see which one has keys."

Wait, he was talking about a car? Damn.

He stuck his head in a battered Volkswagen. "Nothing in the ignition." He moved to a Honda Civic next and crowed. "Fuck yeah, we have keys. Get in, Beauty. We are getting out of here."

Some might have been appalled at how easily she agreed to abet his grand theft auto. They could stuff it. Given what she'd been through, there was nothing too extreme when it came to escape.

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He spun the car around, and gravel spat from the tires as he shot in the direction of a broken gate flanked by a flattened fence. Some vehicles had slammed into the sections of chain link, allowing entry to the agitators. A few cars and trucks had been abandoned, leading Capricorn to weave through them to get past. As they cleared the barrage of vehicles and began to speed down the road, they passed more people arriving, flags waving from their car and truck windows, making her snicker.

“What’s so funny?” Capricorn asked.

“These folks thinking there are actually aliens inside there.”

“You don’t think space has intelligent life?”

“If aliens existed and were capable of space travel, indicating they were smart, why would they come here? Humanity can barely accept each other. I can’t see them being welcoming to actual ETs.”

“Good point. But you didn’t answer my question. Do you believe there is something beyond our world?”

“Most likely. It’s rather arrogant to think Earth is the only planet that spawned organisms.”

“You sound skeptical.”

“I’m a person who likes proof. Hence why I’m an atheist. Show me a god and I’ll believe in religion, but of course, no one can ever show proof. It’s always ‘the Bible

says...' And to that, my response is the Bible was written by men. Men who lived in a time where superstition ran rampant. Everything that couldn't be explained back then was attributed to some magical being in the sky. Since then, science has explained much of what they considered miraculous."

"What if you came across something science couldn't explain?"

"I'd say it requires more study because everything has a cause and effect. Lights in the night sky are caused by charged particles colliding with gases in the atmosphere. Eclipses aren't some mystical events, but a predictable alignment of the moon and our sun. Tsunamis, once considered a wrath of god, are the aftermath of earthquakes. Everything has a logical scientific explanation."

"If you say so," he stated with amusement. "But what about the relic?"

She'd almost forgotten about it. She eyed the bundle of fabric in her lap. "Is simply a mystery I haven't yet cracked. Most likely it's comprised of a new super alloy that would have given Crius power in the sense that if he knew how to make more of it, he could design things that could withstand just about anything thrown at it. Can you imagine a fortress built of this material?" She patted the bundled sphere.

"Somehow I don't think that's what Adam was after."

"Guess we'll never know, since we escaped that twat waffle. Good job, by the way."

He snorted. "I could say the same. Smart thinking using that fire to cover our escape."

"Team effort." Not a phrase she'd used very often. "Now where to?" she asked. "I could use a change of clothes, but I don't have any money." Which made her wonder how she'd get home. Could she even go home? Crius knew where she lived.

Fuck.

“We just need to find a phone. I have a friend who can help us out with funds, but I want to be farther away from here before we stop.”

They zoomed past Rachel, Nevada, with its alien-themed shops and restaurants. Zora tried to not freak out when they saw a series of unmarked black SUVs whip by, heading toward the base they’d just left. They drove to the next town over called Crystal Springs, arriving just in time, according to the red light blinking in the dash warning they were about to run out of gas.

They ditched the car at the Alien Research Center, a fancy name for a shack selling all kinds of themed stuff. Entering the store, Zora and Capricorn drew a few curious glances, given they still wore filthy hospital scrubs and slippers on their feet. It didn’t help they stank of smoke and probably gunpowder, but then again, they weren’t the oddest folk. The man wearing flashing antennas and contacts that made his eyes a bright slitted yellow took the prize.

Capricorn charmed the tattooed young lady behind the counter into letting him use her phone and soon returned to Zora, who browsed some metal artwork inside a glass display case.

“Get a hold of your friend?” she asked.

“Yup. He’s booking us a room at a motel nearby and making arrangements to get us some cash.”

“Did you call the cops and tell them about Cetus?”

“What would be the point?”

Her lips pursed. “Putting that fucker in jail.”

“Come on, we both know that wouldn’t happen.”

“Maybe not, but I hate letting Crius get off without punishment.”

“Don’t you worry about that fucker. He’ll get what’s coming to him.” A dark promise that gave her a shiver of delight.

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They ditched the stolen car and hiked to the motel his friend rented for them. Capricorn went inside the office and returned with a single key. Guess they'd be sharing, not that she'd complain. Let him handle this part of her escape since Zora dreaded calling her mama and trying to explain what happened. She'd likely show up with a sandal in hand to throw at Crius. The woman had excellent aim but not much spare cash. Zora usually sent her mama a bit each month to help her get by.

The room actually came with two double beds covered in comforters made to look like the night sky.

"Dibs on the shower," Zora crowed, heading for the bathroom.

He chuckled. "Go ahead. I'll be back in a few. I'm going to wrangle us some food and clothing."

Apparently, a lack of wallet didn't impede his plan. By the time she emerged in a thin towel, which she clutched tight over her ample chest, showing a little too much cleavage and thigh, he had a paper bag on the table that emitted a delicious smell, a tray of waxed paper cups, and a pile of fabric sat on one of the beds.

"Burgers and fries," he pointed. "And since I wasn't sure what you liked to drink, I've got Coke, water, iced tea, and coffee. The clothing isn't stylish but better than what we've got. Oh, and I got a bag to carry the relic."

She grabbed a T-shirt and snickered at the message on it. "I survived being probed." She arched a brow. "Guess we both did."

His lips quirked. “At least now we’ll fit in until we get out of here.”

“Which is when?” she asked.

“Soon. Before we go anywhere, I need some tools to get these bracelets off. I’m worried they might have a tracking device.”

Her eyes widened. “Shit. I never even thought of that. Do you think they’re already closing in on us?”

“Possible. But given the clusterfuck we left behind, I’m hoping we have a few hours before we have to worry. Just in case, though, keep an eye outside while I rinse off.”

She quickly dressed in the shirt and track pants, even slid on the flip-flips he’d managed to acquire before she parked herself in the window, burger in one hand, the other stuffing the occasional heavenly greasy fry, sucking the straw of the cola. The food tasted divine.

Capricorn didn’t take long. He emerged with a towel slung around his hips, showing off those insane abs. She stared, longer than was polite. He noticed judging by the sudden lift of the fabric in his groin area. She forced herself to glance away.

“Spot anything suspicious?” he asked as he rifled through the pile of garments.

“A few folks dressed as aliens and a man wearing an intricate tin foil hat, but nobody that seems to be looking for us.”

“Good. Once I’ve eaten, I’m going to track down a hardware store.”

She eyed the bracelet on her wrist. “Gonna be tough snipping these off, given how snug they fit.”

“I’m aware, but we have to do something about them.”

“Agreed.” Her head tilted and lips pursed. “You know, if you grab me a torch, we can probably melt them off.

“Or, at the very least, fuck them up so they can’t be used against us. Good thinking.”

“We’ll have to grab some gloves and try to shimmy them under these bands to protect the skin,” she stated, wiping her greasy fingers on a napkin. Only an idiot would try to melt metal, while wearing it, without protection. “I’ll come with you.”

“Worried they’ll come while I’m gone?”

“No, more that you’ll get cheap on the gloves and I’ll end up getting burned. This is one time when we need quality.” She learned her lesson early on in her welding career.

“Money is no object,” he mentioned as they left the room, Capricorn having devoured his meal even faster than her.

“You rob a bank?” She only half-joked.

“No need. My buddy Venmo’d some dough to the clerk, who was more than happy to hand over some bills in exchange for a generous cut. Speaking of whom, Bobby can probably tell us where the nearest hardware store is.”

Bobby did indeed know. “Yeah, I know a place, but it’s too far to walk. I can give you a lift, though, since I’m finished with my shift in like five minutes. Just cost you a few bucks for gas.”

“Sold.” Capricorn pulled out a few bills and handed them over with a murmured,

“Thanks for your help.”

As they waited outside for Bobby to trade spots with his replacement, she asked, “Why do I get the impression this isn’t the first time your friend has bailed you of trouble?”

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“Who me?” He chuckled. “Let’s just say in my line of work, you need people you can trust. Aquarius isn’t just my friend. He’s my coworker, and this kind of thing isn’t new to him.”

“Aquarius?” She snorted. “Are all your friends named after the Zodiac?”

“They are. You’ll probably meet a few of them of them soon.”

“Why would I meet them?” she bluntly asked.

“I assumed you’d want us to stick together until we know you’re clear of trouble, or would you rather part ways?”

Her hand rested on the satchel by her side, knowing without asking she wouldn’t be allowed to keep it once he hooked up with his friends. “Your buddies as handy as you in a fight?”

“Very.” His lips quirked. “Honestly, you’re probably safest hanging with us for the next bit until we get Adam and Cetus sorted out.”

“They won’t mind me crashing your sausage fest?” Given his alpha-male vibe, she assumed his friends were guys.

He chuckled. “I do believe you’ll get on quite well with them.”

“Sure. Why not? Guess I can’t really go home until Crius is behind bars or six feet under, but I will need to call my mama. She’s probably worried sick about me. I

usually call her every Sunday.”

“We’ll figure something out, but speaking of your mama, if you’re close, and if Adam is looking for you, she could be a target.”

Her eyes widened before narrowing as she spat, “That fucker better not lay a hand on my mama.”

“More likely he’ll have her phone tapped and his goons watching her place to see if you show. On my next call to Aquarius, I’ll be sure to have him surveil and set up protection for your mom to make sure nobody tries shit.”

“Thanks.”

Bobby emerged, swinging his keys. “Ready to go?” he asked.

She took the backseat of his Honda Civic, the space cramped, forcing her to sit sideways. Her lip curled at the garbage filling it, food wrappers and empty pop cans needing to be shoved aside to make room for her to sit. In the front seat, Capricorn questioned Bobby, asking him about the Area 51 base, of which the young man knew little other than it was a popular tourist spot.

The motel clerk dropped them at a hardware store, along with his number written on a French fry paper sleeve saying, “Call me if you need a ride back to the motel.”

As Bobby drove off, Zora glanced at Capricorn. “We’re not going back, are we?”

“Until we get these bracelets off, we have to keep moving lest Adam’s thugs catch up to us.”

“How far a range do you think they have?” she asked, eyeing the band of seemingly

seamless metal.

“Depends. Could be they only emit a Bluetooth or Wi-fi signal, which would mean a short range. But if they’re satellite-linked?—”

“Then they could track us anywhere in the world,” she muttered. The bracelets had to come off.

The store had exactly what she needed: acetylene can, torch head, igniter, and safety glasses, although the welding gloves weren’t as nice as she’d like. Since money was no object, she splurged and bought a welding apron instead. It would be easier to wrap around the flesh on their wrists.

“Where should we go to remove them?” she asked as they exited with her purchase.

“There’s an alley right here,” he indicated. As good a place as any.

Zora wedged the apron between her flesh and the band on her wrist but also wrapped as much of her arm and hand as possible to protect them. A good thing they’d put the bracelet on her right one, because she so happened to be lefthanded. Or as Nana used to call her, the devil’s child. Old-school superstitions that Mama often huffed about whenever they’d visit Nana, who would do things to try to force Zora to use her right hand instead.

The torch ignited quickly, the blue flame a solid jet. She wore didymium glasses as she worked to melt her bracelet, a tad bit worried it would prove to be impenetrable like the sphere. However, the metal of it heated and softened. In under a minute, she managed to peel the thing off and then kept heating it until it was a puddle of slag.

“My turn.” Capricorn held out both his hands since he had one on each wrist. She wrapped them one at a time, the torch making quick work of the bracelets. She

melted them into unrecognizable lumps before turning off her torch.

“Try and find us now, motherfucker!” she crowed.

“Good job,” he praised.

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“Now what? I guess we should relocate since they might have already pinged our current spot.”

“We are definitely moving.”

“Where? We still don’t have a car.”

“Don’t need one to get to my place.”

“You live in the area?” Her brow scrunched.

“Nope. Not even close. But don’t worry, it won’t take long to reach.”

“You’re not making any sense,” she complained, his oblique answers annoying.

“Easier to show than explain.” He held out his hand. “Ready to go?”

She slid her fingers against his, a slight tingling thrill going through her. He drew her close, and she tilted her head. “I thought we were leaving.”

“We are, but I don’t want you to panic.”

“Why would I panic?”

“Because we won’t be travelling by car.”

“Then how? Bus? Train? Helicopter?” She threw out the last on a lark, and it

emerged breathless as his arm snaked around her waist.

“Starbeaming,” he murmured. Then, before she could ask him what he meant, his lips pressed against hers, infusing with her heat.

A heat that suddenly turned to intense cold.

What the fuck?

She knew her eyes were open, and yet darkness filled her vision, along with streaks of light, then...

It felt as if her world tilted. At first, she thought the lingering kiss left her breathless and trembling.

But no. She literally had her world moved.

As Zora took stock of the room she now stood in—room, not the dirty and hot alley—she couldn’t help but screech, “What the fuck?”

CHAPTER 8

Rather than reply to Zora’s shocked exclamation, Capricorn stated, “It’s good to be home.” He still held her close, having drawn her near to facilitate the starbeaming, but he’d not meant to kiss her. Blame the temptation of those lips, and the need to forestall her questions. Pressing his mouth to hers solved both problems.

She shoved at his chest. “Home? Where the fuck am I?”

“Welcome to Tower.” His reply didn’t lessen her glare, so he added, “As in, the Tower of Babylon. You might have heard of it.”

“I’ve heard of it,” she growled. “But how the fuck did we get from the alley to here in the blink of an eye?”

“Starbeaming.”

“Is not a fucking word!” she shouted.

“It is, just one not commonly known. It’s what we Zodiac Warriors call it when we use our constellation to transport us from our current location to Tower. I would have done it earlier, but those bracelets blocked my ability. Good thing you got them off.” Not only did the contraption block his ability, but he’d worried that if they had a tracker in them, Adam would have had a beacon practically inviting him in.

“I’m dreaming. No, wait. I’ve been drugged, and I’m hallucinating. We never left Area 51, did we? The gas must have gotten to us.”

“This is real, Beauty.”

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“No, because it’s not possible to move places almost instantaneously.”

“And yet, it just happened. Care for a tour?”

She crossed her arms. “I want to know who exactly the hell you are.”

“I told you, my name is Capricorn, and I’m a Zodiac Warrior, an enhanced human tasked with being a protector of mankind and Earth.”

“Not funny.”

“I’m being utterly serious. I was chosen for the duty because I showed selfless bravery. As part of my transformation, I have certain abilities that include starbeaming. The room you’re standing in”—he swept a hand—“is known as the portal chamber. Think of it as an arrival terminal.” He tapped the dais under his feet. “This spot we landed on, marked with my symbol, acts as an anchor for when I want to return home. The other medallions you see are for my fellow Zodiac brothers.”

Her lips pinched. “And those arches?”

“Fixed portals to specific spots on Earth. Those can be used by the non-Zodiac gifted.”

“Meaning I could walk through one and end up somewhere else.”

“You could, but I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for one, Adam is most likely still looking for you, and two, you might find yourself stranded somewhere you don’t like without funds or a way of getting anywhere.”

“This is insane.” She whirled from him.

“But real.”

“We’ll see about that. Show me this tower.”

“I’d be delighted.” They emerged from the portal chamber into the main hall just as the grand doors opened and Leo strode in, toting Olivia on his shoulders.

“Uncy Cap, you found Zora.” The little tyke clapped her hands and beamed.

Zora froze in place before whispering, “How does that kid know my name?”

“I saw you, silly.” Olivia giggled. “I told Uncy he’d find you.”

“And so I did, Squirt. Although Zora here is having a little bit of trouble accepting what’s going on.”

“Because it makes no sense,” Zora grumbled. “People cannot teleport.”

“Starbeaming is the best,” Olivia gushed. “It’s like a superfast zoom.”

Leo cocked his head. “Hey, Cap, your friend looks like she’s going to either faint or puke.”

“She’s fine,” Capricorn stated, but when he would have slid an arm around Zora just in case, she moved away and snapped, “Who’s the big dude?”

“That would be one of my Zodiac brothers. Goes by the name Leo, and that’s his daughter, Olivia. She can see the future, like Sage.”

“Of course she can,” muttered Zora.

“We are going to be the bestest of friends if you and Uncy save the world,” Olivia stated.

Leo coughed. “Um, yeah, on that note, I think it’s snack time. Let’s go, Rug Rat.” The big man jogged off, his daughter giggling as they jiggled and bounced up the stairs.

However, Zora didn’t watch them leave. She’d gone to the open door and peered outside.

“Where are we?” she asked quietly. “That landscape doesn’t match what I know of Nevada.”

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“Because we’re not in Nevada, but Iraq. And before you ask, you won’t find this place on a map or satellite image. Tower is hidden from most eyes.”

“Iraq? Did I fall asleep? Because it feels like only minutes ago we were still in Nevada.”

“Because we were. Starbeaming happens quick, from a few seconds to get home to a few minutes. Given you didn’t pass out, I’d say the former.”

“I didn’t realize anyone had mastered translocation technology,” she stated. “Hell, I didn’t even realize anyone was doing actual trials for it, let alone succeeded in teleporting living organisms.”

“We’ve had this ability for centuries,” he boasted. “And it’s not done via a machine. Honestly, I have no idea how it works. Guess the closest science term would be astral physics, but, given I don’t understand that mumbo jumbo, I still fall back on what most people call it; magic.”

“Magic isn’t real.”

“Yeah, you won’t be saying that after a few days here.” Everyone changed their mind once they got a taste of what Tower could do.

“Exactly how long am I supposed to be staying for?”

He shrugged. “That depends on Adam and Cetus. You can go home once we’re sure it’s safe.”

“Given we have the orb, shouldn’t we be fine?” She patted the bag holding it.

Capricorn eyed the bulging bag and frowned. “It’s still in there?”

“Well, yeah. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because the last two disappeared during starbeams.” He’d kind of assumed the same would happen with this one.

“I still have it.” She unraveled the bundle and pulled it out. Her brow creased.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I didn’t notice in the excitement before, but it’s not making my fingers tingle anymore.”

“Is that weird?”

“Weirder than everything else that’s happened? Not really, but it would indicate something about it has changed.”

“Give me a second to check on something.” Capricorn dashed into the portal room for a glance. Since he’d been dealing with Zora, he’d not thought to check the thirteenth dais when they arrived. It remained two-thirds full, which made sense given they still had possession of the relic. Did the fact they’d managed to bring it back intact mean they’d stopped what was to come?

Seemed too easy.

Capricorn returned to the main hall in time to see Zora dashing the artifact to the floor. It hit hard and rolled a few feet.

“What are you doing?” he exclaimed.

Rather than reply, Zora crouched and snared the artifact. She held it up and showed him the dented side.

“I thought you said it was indestructible,” he asked, confusion creasing his brow.

“It is. Hate to break it to you, but it appears we escaped with a fake.”

CHAPTER 9

“A fake!” Capricorn yelled. “That fucking bastard pulled a switcheroo.”

“I’m not surprised. Crius is a sly bastard.” And Zora hadn’t clued in, too adrenalized at the time to realize something might be amiss.

“Fuck me,” he huffed. “My entire mission was about retrieving the relic.”

“Does that mean you’re going back?”

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“I don’t know, but you can guarantee Aries is gonna ream me out for not double checking.” His lips turned down.

“Aries’ your boss?”

“Yeah. He kind of runs our team.” Capricorn raked fingers through his hair. “I gotta report in and see what they want me to do next.”

“Meaning no tour.” Pity, now that some of the shock had worn off, she found herself curious. The scientist in her could scream all it wanted that everything he claimed was impossible. However, no denying she’d been relocated, and in the blink of an eye. There had to be an explanation, and despite his claim of teleportation by astral physics—or magic—she knew there had to be a gimmick. Just because she’d never seen the machine that allowed it didn’t mean it didn’t exist.

“I can give you a mini one, if you want to follow me. The office is on the tenth floor.”

Zora eyed the stairs he led her toward. “No elevator?”

“Nope. Tower was built more than an eon ago, before those existed.”

“How many floors is it?” she asked as she joined him climbing the first flight.

“More than you’d believe.”

Zora began to lag as they trudged up the third set of stairs. “No way am I making it to the tenth,” she huffed.

“Want me to carry you?”

“I’ve been toted around like luggage enough. Can I hang out on this floor?” Her nose caught the scent of food.

“For sure. This is our cafeteria level. If you’re hungry, head to the alcove. Tower will offer you something to eat.”

The way he kept speaking of this tower as if it were sentient made her wonder if it was run by some kind of AI. There’d been massive strides recently in artificial intelligence and smart home systems.

“I don’t suppose it serves fast food.” Her deprived body craved something deep-fried.

“Tower will provide whatever it thinks you need.”

“If I end up with a salad, my hangry ass will probably hurt someone,” she warned.

His lips quirked. “I doubt Tower would be so cruel. I’ll be back in a bit.” Capricorn trotted off, taking the stairs two at a time now that he didn’t have to match her sluggish pace.

Showoff.

Zora glanced around and noted that, while he called this area the cafeteria, it wouldn’t have been out of place in a fine dining establishment. Clusters of round tables carved in wood with two to six chairs occupied one-half of the space. On the other side, a ridiculously long dining table that could have seated a few dozen, at least.

As she headed for the alcove, wondering if she had to place an order, she blinked and noticed it held a dome dish. Odd. She’d have sworn it was empty. Perhaps a trick of

the light.

Before grabbing it, she glanced around once more, wondering if perhaps it was meant for someone else. Seeing no one, she shrugged and grabbed it, carrying it to a table by a window that gave her a view of the outdoors. No buildings or even a road, just some brown-hued, rocky mountains and hard-packed dirt. She did notice a strip of noxious-appearing fluid that stretched out of sight left and right. A moat? Why not? It wouldn't be any odder than everything else thus far.

Once seated, she removed the dome covering the plate, and steam wafted, along with the mouthwatering scent of crispy fried chicken. The crunchy delight came with mashed potatoes, some plump corn, a jug of gravy, and some hot biscuits.

Zora could have cried as she ate. Delicious. Exactly what she needed.

As she finished the last bite, someone cleared their throat. "I think this piece of pie is for you."

A startled Zora glanced over her shoulder to see a woman holding a plate, her pregnant belly looking ready to burst.

"I hope I didn't accidentally eat your dinner," she blurted out.

The woman smiled. "No, that tray was meant for you, Zora."

"Who are you? How do you know my name?" She didn't mean to bark, but she really hated how off-balance this place made her.

"I'm Sage."

“TheSage?”

The pregnant woman’s lips tilted even higher. “I see Capricorn mentioned me.”

“He did. Claims you see the future.” Zora couldn’t help the slightly mocking tone.

“I do, but not easily at the moment. I’m not sure if it’s junior impeding my ability”—Sage patted her belly—“or the fact we’re at a pivotal branch that’s making it so hard for me to read what’s coming.”

Sage spoke seriously, obviously believing she was some kind of fortune teller. As if.

“Capricorn says you told him to hand his butt over to Cetus.”

“I did. His capture was the best chance we had at stopping an approaching calamity.”

“Yeah, that might not have turned out so good.” Then, because Zora wasn’t sure if this Sage chick knew, added, “The orb we brought out of Area 51 was a fake.”

“I know. Poor Capricorn is really beating himself up over it. Meanwhile, there was never any branch he could have taken that had him leaving with the real one.”

Zora blinked. “You sent him knowing he’d fail no matter what?”

“I wouldn’t say he failed. After all, he did rescue you.”

“But didn’t he need to retrieve the real sphere to stop this whole end-of-the-world

thing?”

“No, he needed to be captured to close off some of the nastier possibilities. I couldn’t exactly tell him he’d end up bringing home a fake, or he’d have most likely died tearing that place apart looking for the real one.”

The explanation didn’t clear shit up. Zora leaned back in her chair, ignoring the pie—warm cinnamon-scented apple with a dollop of melting vanilla ice cream, her favorite. “I’m confused. If Crius still has the sphere, isn’t that a bad thing?”

“Very bad for everyone on Earth. However, I have faith that all will turn out all right. After all, Olivia says the baby is going to take after Aries, which means she at least sees a future where my child will be born.” Sage rested her hands on the bulge.

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t buy into this cult bullshit you’ve got going. You and a kid seeing the future? Capricorn claiming he’s some kind of special Zodiac hero who can teleport? It’s a lovely fantasy, but also utterly impossible.”

Sage reached out and patted Zora’s hand. “Science-based people always have the hardest time, but you’ll come around. You should visit Tower’s library, which is on a floor above us. Lots of information about the Zodiac Warriors and Tower there.”

“Meaning books written by cult members.”

Sage laughed. “Oh my. You really are in denial.” Then the woman did something odd. She glanced to the ceiling and murmured, “Try to not shock her too hard.”

Sending a message to the AI running this place, or to those manning surveillance? Should she expect some theatrics in an attempt to subvert? They could try. Zora wasn’t gullible.

Sage rose. “It was nice meeting you. I look forward to getting to know you if the world doesn’t end.” With that, Sage waddled off, and Zora absently ate the pie—which was delicious—pondering what she’d learned.

A whole lot of crazy. However, the thought of a library did intrigue. Just how far back did this cult run?

She headed for the stairs and held in a sigh. No wonder Capricorn was so damned fit. At least the library was only a single flight from the cafeteria. She still arrived huffing and sweating but didn’t mind when she saw the shelves—and shelves, and more shelves—of books. Hot damn. So many to choose from.

She began walking towards the nearest bookcase and read the titles on the spine. The Capture of Capricorn. The Sins of Leo. Legend of Scorpio. Each Zodiac symbol had its own book. Beyond those dozen tomes, a slim spine, titled simply The Selection and Transformation of Warriors.

As if she cared about their cosplay routine. She glanced to the next shelf and saw a repeat of the books. Same colored binding, titles, size, everything. A glance left and right, even up and down showed only those thirteen books repeated over and over.

“Library, my ass,” she huffed. Was this some kind of joke? Get her excited about all the yummy things to read, only to mock her by offering no true selection?

“You know what, let’s see what kind of bullshit Capricorn and his friends believe.” She snared the how-to-become book and plopped herself in a chair.

The story began with, The planet we watch over, and the life that has blossomed on its surface, is in peril from otherworldly incursions and the emergence of dark forces. If something isn’t done, not only will humanity regress as they struggle to survive but they might be wiped out entirely. That would be unfortunate, as they are an

interesting race to observe and it would be a shame for them to go extinct just as they're beginning to unlock their true potential.

Zora kept reading and snorting in disbelief. What kind of fairy tale fiction was this? Written from an omniscient point of view, the first chapter spoke as if the author were some kind of god watching over humans and warning that civilization faced extinction from monsters, the kind that couldn't be killed easily or by normal means. Dragons, basilisks, gorgons, and even sea serpents that took down ships. But there were also references to cursed locations, most often caused by either a tragic—AKA violent—event or an object that didn't belong on this plane of existence. Because, of course," the book implied there was more than one.

Utter nonsense. Zora flipped ahead to a chapter labelled, "Selecting A Warrior." It began with a short sentence—To protect humanity, a cadre of warriors shall be chosen featuring the following qualities. A checklist followed.

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The candidate should have heroic qualities.

A willingness to sacrifice themselves to help others.

Bravery despite impossible odds.

Male, for they are better suited to receive the gift.No surprise they had that sexist rule.

Must be on the verge of death.Odd requirement.

Of noble character.

The mental fortitude to handle death, both the meting of and the occurrence of on a possibly daily basis.

Compassion for those suffering.

Strength that is both physical and mental.

On and on it went, a seemingly impossible list of requirements that boiled down to one thing. A warrior should be a hero.

The next section dealt with the ritual to become a Zodiac warrior, AKA the cult initiation. Apparently, it required the candidate to accept, but the wording around that clause confused, for it said,It is not enough for the invited warrior to verbally agree. They must accept the charge with all of their being. Their heart, mind, and very soul

must be in harmony, or the transference will fail.

Transference of what?

An image appeared next, showing a body lying on the ground. Wait, not ground, but a floor inset with medallions, just like the room where Capricorn claimed they'd teleported. The passage alongside stated, The candidate should be placed upon the sigil of the Astraesus that has selected them. As their life force exits the body, the Astraesus shall imbue their chosen recipient with strength, adapt their candidate's physical form to be able to withstand the rigors they might face, and forge a connection to their constellation, which ends with marking their flesh with the constellatory sigil of their benefactor.

The next page showed a man's back with a massive tattoo of a fish splashed across it. The image reminded her not only of the painting she'd seen at the garage sale where she found the orb but of Capricorn and his gigantic skin art. No way that tattoo just appeared on his flesh as the book tried to claim. Just like bleeding out on a floor couldn't change someone. It was a wonder any of the so-called chosen survived if that was how the cult treated them.

Upon the completion of the transference, the newly minted warrior shall be powdered with galactic dust, healing them of their wounds and rendering them fit to undertake their new duties.

What a load of rubbish. Zora slammed the book shut and glared at the library. "Informative my ass."

"Did you not like the book?" Capricorn's sudden query surprised, and Zora almost toppled from the chair shifting to see him.

"I'm into fact, not fiction." She waved the tome in the air.

“What part do you think isn’t true?” he asked, perching on the armrest of the chair across from her.

“All of it. I mean, it speaks of deities watching over humanity and getting worried monsters might eat them all, so they decided to supercharge some dudes to become defenders of Earth.”

His lips curved. “A succinct summary, and while you might not believe it, it’s actually all true.”

The claim brought a snort. “You mean to tell me you became a so-called Zodiac Warrior by bleeding out on a floor?”

“Not just any floor,” he replied. “When I accepted?—”

She interrupted. “Accepted from who? The book says someone called Astraeus chooses who becomes part of the cult. I assume that’s a special title for those higher up in the hierarchy.”

“The Astraeus are the spirits imbuing the constellations. Depending on who you ask, some might call them gods, although they are rather restricted in how much they can act. They aren’t alive in the sense we understand. More like sentient energy.”

“Energy doesn’t think.”

“Not the kind you’re familiar with,” he rebutted. “However, I’m not sure how else to describe the Astraeus. They have no physical form but are somehow tethered to their constellation. While they don’t think or feel like we do, they have an interest in protecting Earth. Hence, why, when they saw humanity suffering, they devised a solution. The Zodiac Warriors. You might call us their avatars, as they lend us some of their energy that we might protect against perils that would usually be deadly.”

“How cute you think you were chosen by a god to be some vigilante hero.” She couldn’t help the pert yet sarcastic reply to his claim.

“You might mock, but had I not been selected, I would have died. Becoming a Zodiac Warrior saved my life.”

“What heroic thing did you do that almost killed you?”

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“Saved a mother and her child from being trampled by a panicked runaway team of horses pulling a carriage. Unfortunately, I used my own body to protect them.” He grimaced. “I can still hear the crunch of my bones breaking and a pain so sharp I passed out each time I woke long enough to feel it.”

She blinked at him. “It must have taken months of rehab to heal.”

“Nope, because, that same day, I became a Zodiac Warrior. As I lay there bleeding out in the mud, unable to move anything below my neck, I closed my eyes and found myself in a dark place. In that nothingness, a voice spoke to me and, in a nutshell, asked if I’d like to become a champion who would serve and protect those in need. Given the war had just ended and I had no clue what to do with my life, and the fact I was on the verge of dying, I agreed. Next thing I knew, I was draped over the Capricorn medallion in the portal room, bleeding out and literally sensing my soul leave my body, which is rather frightening and unpleasant. What followed is hazy. I remember feeling as if I were on fire one moment, then freezing cold the next. I know I passed out during the process. When I did recover my senses, I was covered head to toe in a layer of thick dust. I rose without thinking, my injuries healed without lasting pain or effect. The Astraeus for the Capricorn constellation saved my life, and from that day forth, I’ve been a Zodiac Warrior. Best thing to ever happen to me.”

“Congrats on passing your cult initiation.”

He shook his head. “You really are stubborn. What will it take to make you believe?”

“I’ve yet to see anything convincing.”

“Moving from Nevada to Iraq in the blink of an eye wasn’t enough?”

“Was it a blink? I mean, for all I know, when you kissed me, your lips passed on some kind of drug, putting me to sleep, whereupon you then transported me via plane to Iraq. Then, when you knew I’d be waking, ensured we were locked in the same embrace I’d recall, making it seem as if no time passed.” She’d had time to come up with some theories.

He stared at her. “You really think that’s what happened?”

“It makes more sense than you teleporting us halfway across the world.”

A low whistle emerged from Capricorn. “Boy oh boy, you are going to feel so dumb when you realize everything I’ve told you is true.”

“Prove it.”

“How?”

“Teleport us right now. Without a lip lock,” she warned, wagging her finger.

“We can only starbeam inside the portal room or outside Tower.”

Her lip curled. “What a surprise. You have an excuse.”

Capricorn glanced at the ceiling. “A little help?”

No one replied, and Zora was done playing pretend. “I don’t suppose you have washrooms in this tower. A shower and clean clothes would also be welcome, seeing as how you’re planning to keep me here for a while. Speaking of which, where am I sleeping?”

“Knowing Tower’s sense of humor, you’ll probably be bunking with me,” he muttered.

“Why would we share? This place seems big enough to host hundreds.”

“Tower decides where visitors stay.”

“You tell Tower, then, that I’d like my own space. Preferably with a phone so I can call my mama.”

“No one tells Tower shit. And I’d add you should be nice to Tower, or you might find your stay uncomfortable.”

“Is the AI system running things that sensitive?” Zora asked as she exited the library.

Zora never heard Capricorn’s reply, as she screamed, rather loudly, as she suddenly found herself being rocketed upwards through the ceiling!

CHAPTER 10

Used to Tower’s tricks, Capricorn didn’t freak when he and Zora were suddenly being zoomed upwards.

However, his skeptical beauty shrieked and cursed. “Mother fucking holy god Jesus fucking Christ I’m going to die.”

They wouldn’t, but he could understand her qualms, given they were encased in a clear bubble that rose rapidly, with no care for the ceilings and floors, even furniture, in their way. They rocketed through the levels of the tower so fast that everything they passed appeared as a blur.

By the time Zora ran out of breath and panted, their cocoon emerged onto the very top of Tower, a massive stone terrace, well above the clouds, high enough in the atmosphere that it should have been tremendously cold and hard to breathe. However, Tower wasn't one to let its inhabitants suffer, even those who refused to believe.

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The protective bubble released, and Zora heaved in a lungful of air, but before she could expel it in a harangue, Capricorn said, “How do you like the view?”

Zora glared. “What the fuck just happened?”

“Tower got tired of your disbelief and gave you the proof you demanded.”

“Where are we?” Zora glanced at her feet, standing on solid stone.

“The very top of Tower.”

“How did we get here? It’s like we turned into ghosts and zipped through solid walls.”

“Floors and ceilings actually, and we didn’t lose our corporeal bodies so much as Tower encased us in a cocoon that could pass through solid substance. And, yes, I know that’s supposed to be impossible. However, as I’ve been trying to explain, Tower can do things. Things science can’t explain.”

“Says you,” Zora muttered, looking around. “How high are we?”

“Thousands of feet. You’d have to ask Aquarius exactly how high. I’ve never cared. As a matter of fact, this is my first time being up here. I’ve never had the inclination to climb that many stairs.”

Zora eyed the smooth stone surface inlaid with symbols. “More Zodiac shit.”

“Well, it is our home.”

“Built by who?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I would imagine the Astraeus had a hand in it, but I couldn’t tell for sure. Tower has existed since the first Zodiac Warrior transformed. It’s our home. Our refuge.”

“It’s not run by a supercomputer, is it?” A soft statement.

“No. Like our constellations, Tower appears to be imbued by some otherworldly presence. It provides for us. Food, shelter, clothing, furniture, hobbies. The only thing it struggles with are complex machines and electronics.”

She pursed her lips. “So you don’t have any here?”

“We do. However, those are usually procured and transported here rather than brought into existence by Tower.”

“It conjures stuff out of nothing?” Zora asked, only to exclaim, “Wait, was that fried chicken I ate magically made?”

“I don’t know. Tower doesn’t explain how it provides. For all I know, some of its levels could be filled with animals and crops.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

“Not really. My job is to protect the planet from threats. Tower’s is to ensure we’re taken care of when not on missions.”

Zora wandered from him to the edge and peered over, briefly, before recoiling.

“Fucking hell, I can see clouds way below us.”

“I told you, Tower is tall.”

“There’s tall, and then there’s impossible.”

“Impossible by your scientific standards. Tower operates on a whole other level.” He paused before querying, “Now do you believe?”

She exhaled loudly. “Yes, and no. While my eyes can see, my mind is struggling to make sense of it.”

“Why does it need to make sense?”

“Because.” He thought she’d leave it at that, but she slowly added, “Because I like my life to have a sense of order, and before you ask, there’s a reason for that. My father left when I was young, meaning my mama had to raise me alone. Being poor meant we moved, a lot. Apartment to apartment. Some better than others, depending on how Mama’s job was doing. Our fridge and cupboards rarely held more than a day or two worth of food. Every day I had to wonder if I’d have enough to eat. A place to sleep. It left its mark. Turned me into a person who likes order. Stability. Who needs to understand what’s going on around me so I don’t feel overwhelmed or taken by surprise.”

In other words, a shitty and erratic childhood left her with control issues. “Hate to break it to you, Beauty, but some things can’t be explained by science or logic. And forget order. The world has more secrets than you can imagine. Creatures that shouldn’t exist outside of horror movies. Cursed objects. Aliens?—”

“Aliens?”

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“Yes, because we are not the only life in the universe.”

“This is a lot to take in.” Her hugging of her upper body led to him stepping close and wrapping his arms around her as well.

“Yeah, it is. And I get it, you don’t like chaos, but that said, so long as you live within Tower, you will have shelter, clothing, and food—excellent food, I should add. And, if you’re nice, I’ll bet Tower will give you some of the answers you need to help you understand and make sense of things.”

“You mean another book on how to join the Zodiac cult?” her sarcastic reply.

“I’ll admit that was an odd choice, but I will add the library tends to give people what they need to read. Therefore, I imagine there’s a reason you got to learn about the process. You should count yourself special. It’s not something that’s really ever talked about.”

“Do you ever regret accepting?” she asked, turning in his arms and tilting her face to meet his gaze.

“Nope. I was supposed to die that day, and instead, I got a second chance at life. An opportunity to actually make a difference.”

“Those are hero-type words.”

His lips quirked. “What can I say? I’d have looked great in tights.”

Her laughter rolled husky and sexy from those luscious lips. “Only if you have the package to pull it off.”

“Anytime you want to be the judge, Beauty, you let me know.” He winked, and to his surprise, his brash new lady friend blushed.

She slipped out of his grip and looked to the sky before saying, “Do you think this tower of yours is going to zoom us back down, or am I going to be punished and made to walk all those stairs?”

“Why not ask it?”

She sucked her bottom lip before shaking her head and saying, while rolling her eyes, “Um, Tower, sorry I didn’t believe you before. Would you pretty please do your thing and maybe bring me to a room where I can freshen up?”

Capricorn stepped close to her just as the bubble once more encased them. This time Zora didn’t scream, although she did reach for his hand and held it with crushing strength.

No surprise, Tower deposited them in his quarters, an open-space apartment replete with a giant bed, a few recliners, a massive television, and a new piece of furniture, a chaise longue with a side table holding a stack of books.

Zora glanced around before arching a brow. “I take it this is where you live?”

“What gave it away?”

“The guy vibe. I’m surprised there isn’t a pinball machine or a foosball table though.”

“We have those in the game room.” He inclined his head toward the chaise. “Looks

like Tower's expecting you to bunk with me, because that appears to be for you."

She wandered over to peruse the stack of books. She held one up with a grin. "The Metallurgy of Asteroids. I didn't even know a book about those ores existed."

"It probably doesn't, outside of Tower. What else did it give you?"

"A few books on metal working techniques, most of which I've never heard of and appear old. Cool." She grinned in pleasure. "Oh, and here's one with metal art designs."

"Don't be surprised if Tower assigns you a room to play with metal. It tends to encourage hobbies. Leo's girlfriend got a professional kitchen, since she likes to bake."

"It shouldn't go through the trouble since I probably won't be here for long. After all, once you've handled Crius and find the real sphere, it should be safe for me to go home."

It shouldn't have bothered to hear her indicate her intention to depart, and yet, Capricorn found himself wanting to argue in favor of her staying.

"If you still want to freshen up, bathroom's that way. Don't scream if you find some clean clothes when you're done showering."

"Planning to peek?" she asked in an almost teasing tone.

"While it is tempting, I won't. Tower will ensure you have something to wear."

"I guess there's no point in asking how it will guess my size."

“Tower knows.”

“Okay, then I’m off to check out your water pressure. See ya.” Zora’s round ass wiggled as she strode to the bathroom, and Capricorn resisted an urge to follow.

Barely just met and yet the woman was like a worm wiggling into his thoughts. But more scary? The way she also seemed to be wedging herself into a spot in his heart.

CHAPTER 11

The shower proved large with multiple jets and scorching-hot water. The bar of soap, while lacking the usual logo of the one back home, felt and smelled the same. The shampoo provided was the same brand she usually used, and she could have cried at the relief of finally feeling some semblance of normal. She’d been making do in her prison with generic crap that left her skin feeling dry and her hair a frizzy mess.

“Thank you,” she murmured. She’d finally accepted the fact that this place didn’t have an AI running things, but figured that whatever did provide would probably appreciate politeness. A building that could whip people through floors probably shouldn’t be pissed off.

As Capricorn predicted, when she emerged from the shower, wrapped in a huge fluffy towel, she found her dirty prisoner scrubs gone and a pile of clothes waiting for her. Good. Those rags were good only for burning.

The ensemble left for her could have come from her closet. Cargo pants, T-shirt, sports bra, and cotton undies. For her feet, athletic socks and, oh hell yeah, some

steel-toed boots. Unlike most women, Zora hated heels and flimsy shoes. Given her line of work, she preferred something sturdy.

She emerged to find Capricorn watching his television. It took her a moment to grasp what he watched: a news report.

“What’s going on?” The scene on screen displayed military vehicles and personnel as well as people sitting on the ground, hands cuffed behind their backs.

“It appears the invasion of Area 51 by alien enthusiasts got the attention of the media. The military was called in to clear the protestors.”

The camera panned to a dark plume of smoke. “Did Crius’ base burn down?”

“They’re not saying, but it appears the fire we set hasn’t yet been put out. The place is mostly made of concrete, though, so I don’t imagine it will suffer too much structural damage, but their machines and shit will likely be ruined by smoke and water.”

“That should slow Crius down.”

“If we’re lucky. This isn’t the first installation of theirs we took out. Although, Aquarius has yet to find another.”

“You think the relic you’re looking for is still inside?”

“Doubtful. Dickhead most likely fled with it once he realized shit went south.”

“How will you find it, then?”

“By not looking. Apparently, I’m supposed to sit put for the moment and wait for it to

surface.”

Her brow creased. “Wait? Doesn’t that give the asshole time to figure out how to use it?”

“That’s what I said,” he exclaimed. “But Aries seemed adamant that I’d be wasting my time seeking it out.”

“What about that Sage chick? Can’t she see where it is?” Zora still struggled with the idea of someone seeing the future, but Capricorn believed.

“She’s been having trouble seeing anything. Same with Olivia.”

“The little girl I met.”

“Yeah. When Sage asked her if she’d seen anything, Olivia apparently said, ‘Don’t worry. It’s coming.’”

“What’s coming?”

He shrugged. “Dunno, but I’ll admit it wasn’t exactly reassuring.”

“So we’re supposed to just sit around on our asses and wait?”

“Apparently.” He sighed.

“Poor baby. Stuck with me.”

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“Actually, that’s probably the least annoying part.” He offered her a smile. “You ready for that tour I promised?”

“Will it end with dinner?”

“Yes,” he replied with a laugh. “Shall we?”

He showed her several of the tower levels, from the admin office, where she got to meet Aquarius and admire his impressive surveillance and research computer setup. He set up an untraceable phone call that allowed her to call Mama, a conversation that went fairly well once Mama stopped yelling.

“Where have you been? You didn’t call and weren’t answering,” Mama accused.

Zora couldn’t exactly tell the truth, so she gave an excuse her mama would enjoy. “Met a guy who kind of kidnapped me.”

“What? Do I need to call the cops?”

“No, Mama. I’m kind of staying with him at the moment.”

A moment of silence before a whispered, “You’re shacking up with a man?”

The surprise was understandable, as Zora had never done that before. “Yeah. At least for the next little bit. We’ll see how things go.”

“You should bring him by so I can meet him. I’ll make my battered catfish and Cajun

collard greens.”

“Maybe. Let’s see how things go.”

“Don’t you be scaring him off,” chided her mama.

“Either he takes me as I am or he can bugger off,” Zora replied, not for the first time. She refused to pretend to be someone she wasn’t.

“Would it kill you to wear a dress and be nice?”

“Yes.”

“I’m never gonna have grandbabies to spoil,” her mother lamented.

“Would it help if I got a cat?”

“You’re a brat.”

“Love you, too.”

When Zora hung up, Capricorn grinned. “Your mom sounds awesome.”

“She is, but she’s also a bully, especially about the whole having-a-kid thing. Your eggs are going to shrivel up if you keep waiting.” Zora pitched her voice to mime her mama’s tone.

“Do you want kids?”

She shrugged. “It’s not a top priority for me, to be honest. But I wouldn’t hate it if it happened. What about you?” she asked as they left the office area to do more stairs.

“I wouldn’t mind a rug rat or two. But finding a woman who can handle me is the challenge.”

For some reason, her gaze dipped to his groin before she naughtily said, “Maybe you’ve been dating the wrong type. I’m pretty sure you don’t have more than I can take.”

His dropped jaw was worth it, and she skipped down some steps lest he see how her own daring statement made her flush.

They continued their tour, hitting the training rooms, which included some neat hologram options. The game room, which indeed held pinball machines, a pool table, foosball, and even a few arcade units.

“You have the original Gauntlet?” Zora squealed. “I fucking loved this game as a kid. Used to scrounge and return bottles just so I could have change to play.”

“I see we’ll have to come back and play after dinner.”

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“Hell yeah, we will.”

They saw no one as they went level to level, the stairs not so bad when she got a break between flights to peek around. They finished at the cafeteria, where they ran into some of his friends and their partners. She’d already met Leo, Olivia, and Sage but also got introduced to Cancer, Aries, Scorpio, and his girlfriend, Rebecca, and Ruth, Leo’s better half.

“Is that everyone who lives here?” she asked Capricorn as they sat down at the giant table since none of the others would fit them all.

“Nah. Depending on missions and marital status, the other warriors come and go. Plus, Tower has some other folks stashed. Not that I’ve met many of them. They’re usually refugees of some kind and kept separate from us.”

“Why?”

His broad shoulders rolled. “Only Tower knows.”

The meal provided had her taste buds singing. Some kind of flattened steak rolled around herbs and goat cheese drizzled with a red wine reduction sauce, served with some roasted potatoes and grilled veggies. For dessert, Crème Brûlée, the caramelized sugar on top crackling when smacked with a spoon. Along with the delicious meal, she got to interact with some of Capricorn’s coworkers, who were more like family in the way they spoke and teased. While Zora wasn’t a very social person usually, she did quite enjoy herself.

After dinner, a bunch of them ended up in the game room, where they played and chatted. Zora found herself fascinated by Rebecca, who was a glaciologist, amongst other things. To her surprise, she even liked Ruth, a shrink, who didn't give off a pompous, I'm-analyzing-everything-you-say vibe.

At one point, Zora and Capricorn got competitive playing Gauntlet, and she didn't realize the late hour until she yawned wide enough to crack her jaw.

"I think that's our sign it's time for bed," Capricorn stated with a laugh.

"You might be right." Her lips curved. "I had fun."

"Me too. Rematch tomorrow?"

"Already cruising for another spanking?"

"Only if you're the one punishing," he quipped.

Returning to his room meant suddenly dealing with the sleeping situation. Unlike Leo's and Scorpio's ladies, who'd apparently balked when they realized they'd have to share, Zora eyed the large bed and said, "I usually start off on the left side, but be warned, I move in my sleep."

"Should I wear protective gear?"

"Only if you're a pussy. Also, I will mock you if you whine because you ended up elbowed or shoved to the floor."

"Has that happened often?" he asked.

"A few times." Zora's eyes sparkled with mirth as she added, "But if you're a good

sport about it, then maybe I'll kiss your boo-boos better."

"Is it wrong I kind of hope you do maul me in my sleep?"

"Maybe you'll get lucky," her flippant reply. Should she seduce him? The man definitely showed interest, but at the same time, given the situation, maybe she should abstain. After all, they were stuck together for who knew how long. What if he sucked in bed? What if the sex was great and she ended up liking him more than he liked her?

"You're thinking too hard," he murmured from his side of the bed.

"Been an interesting kind of day."

"Tomorrow will probably be even more so. You should get some sleep."

Good plan. She could figure things out in the morning.

Despite her warning, Zora didn't bruise Capricorn in her sleep. On the contrary, she snuggled. She woke to find herself wrapped around him, and when her leg shifted, rubbing over his erection, she murmured, "If you tell me that's a morning pee, I will slug you."

To which he replied, "I'd rather you kissed me."

CHAPTER 12

Zora slept amazing, which said a lot considering she didn't usually share a bed nicely. She had to admit, though, waking up snuggled against the hottest man she'd ever laid eyes on made it even better. She might have done a little bit on purpose to get him going, subtly shifting her thigh so it rubbed against his cock. It reacted, swelling to a

thick size that made her ache between the legs.

As for his demand he'd like a kiss? Not before she brushed her teeth, but that didn't stop her from teasing him. Her hand slid under the covers to cup his erection.

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He sucked in a breath. “Trying to kill me before my morning coffee?” he asked in a strangled tone.

She squeezed his package, and it pulsed in reply. “I’m debating if I want sausage for breakfast.”

“Definitely trying to murder me,” he groaned.

“Poor baby,” she purred, her hand slipping past the waistband of his boxers. He’d worn those and a T-shirt to bed. Same as her, except her panties were much skimpier.

She grabbed his cock, and he hissed. “Teasing isn’t nice.”

“You don’t like this?” she murmured, sliding her hand up and down his shaft.

“I’m liking it too much,” he growled.

She wrapped her fingers tighter around his thick length. “You going to show me how much?”

“I want to more than anything, but at the same time, I’ve gotta ask if you’re sure?”

She thumbed the tip, spreading a pearling drop. “Does this not feel like I’m sure?”

“I don’t want you to feel like you have to. After all, I did kind of force you to come here.”

“To protect me.” She kept stroking. “And, no, I’m not doing this because I feel like I owe you. I am fully cognizant of what I’m doing. I’m also a woman who has needs.” Said as she slid under the covers and tugged at his briefs to expose him.

He uttered a groan as her lips touched his fat head. She didn’t take him into her mouth though, not yet. She licked the length of his shaft, teasing the taut flesh, enjoying how he trembled at her touch.

Some might be shocked she was being so bold with someone she barely knew. Fuck them. She wasn’t lying when she claimed to have needs. Zora wasn’t one to attach all kinds of emotional bullshit to sex. Sometimes she just wanted to feel good. To have that toe-curling release only a man could give her that felt ten times better than playing with herself alone.

She was also the kind of woman who loved to give pleasure. Sucking his cock, having it pulse, hearing him groan, his hips twitching, made her wet. She shifted herself to be between his thighs, one hand gripping the base of his cock while her mouth opened wide to take him.

“Oh fuck,” he groaned.

His hands fisted the sheets as she worked him, his muscles taut as he let her suck and tease.

She had a tiny ripple of pleasure when he growled, “Bring me your pussy.”

Sixty-nine? Hell yeah.

She swiveled her body so she crouched over him, uttering a gasp when he tore her panties to expose her.

His hands gripped her by the hips and pulled her down to his mouth. She almost bit him with the first electrifying touch of his tongue.

She bobbed her head on his cock, moaning and sucking as he licked and teased, his tongue flicking with just the right speed and pressure against her clit. The man knew how to eat a pussy. She could feel herself tightening. Her channel ready to explode.

He complained when she shifted her pussy away from his lips. “Bring that back. I wasn’t done.”

“Neither was I,” she quipped as she repositioned herself to be astride him.

His eyes widened and then closed as he arched, his reaction to her slamming herself down on his cock.

“Fuck me, Beauty. You’re going to make me come,” his husky whisper.

“Good.” Because she was close. So fucking close. She dug her fingers into his chest as she rolled her hips, driving him deep, grinding herself against him, her pussy clenching tight. She rode him, bouncing up and down then doing a back-and-forth rub. His hands cupped her ass, helping her to keep the rhythm going as she reached the brink of pleasure.

When his hips rammed upwards, deep, touching her sweet spot, she came.

Came hard.

Her pussy rippled around his hard shaft, which pulsed in reply as he released.

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An epic orgasm that had her collapsing on his chest, her ear pressed to it hearing his pounding heart.

The best and quickest climax of her life.

To her surprise, he didn't shove her off but rather wrapped his arms and cuddled. Not what she'd have expected. Most hookups tended to want to leave right after coming. Her included.

But she remained splayed across him, not in any hurry. It didn't mean anything though. What just happened? Sex. Only sex. Because what else could it be?

"Hungry?" he murmured against the top of her head.

"Very." She wiggled against him.

"I was talking about food," he said with a chuckle.

"Poor baby. Guess I need to give you time to recover."

"Sassy wench." He rolled them suddenly, putting her underneath him. "Is that your less-than-subtle hint you need more?"

"Yes." A surprise since it had been an excellent orgasm, and yet being close to him did something to her senses. She found herself already tingling with need.

To her surprise, he was ready too. The tip of his cock poked. Someone was hard

again.

And he didn't waste the erection. This time he fucked her, his steady thrusting pace quickly drawing a second climax from her. An orgasm so intense she thought she'd die of pleasure. But even more disturbing? The connection forged in that moment. A closeness she'd never experienced to any other lover.

She didn't know what it meant or how to handle it, other than with her usual brash brusqueness. Rather than bask in the afterglow and cuddle this time, she shoved at him and quipped, "Thanks for the morning nookie, but now it's time I got some actual food."

"As my beauty wishes. Better keep up your strength for later."

"What's happening later?" she asked as she rolled from his bed.

"You're going to sit on my face again, but this time, you'll stay there until you come on my tongue."

Her knees went weak, and her pussy quivered. Damn him for having such an effect. But two could play that game.

She tossed him a coy look over her bare shoulder as she purred, "So long as I get a turn licking your tootsie until it pops."

"Fuck waiting for later." He sprang from the bed, his cock semi-erect.

Needless to say, they didn't make it to breakfast. However, Tower kindly left them a tray of food for when they'd stopped panting and pawing.

"What's on the agenda today?" she asked, almost groaning at the flaky croissant she

bit into.

“Training for a few hours, and then the boss wants us to convene to discuss the relic situation.”

“And what am I supposed to do during that time?”

“Come get sweaty with me,” he said with a wink.

“Not interested in that kind of sweat,” Zora replied with a grimace. “I might check out the library again.”

They made plans to meet up for lunch, which she almost missed because Tower had a surprise for Zora.

When she exited the room, she found herself bubbled, but not screaming this time. Tower zoomed her across a few floors, still a dizzying experience, and deposited her on a level she’d not yet visited. One that dropped her jaw.

“Is this for me?” she whispered, staring about in awe at the smithy. She saw a forge against a wall, a massive hearth meant for melting metal. A table for working the softened ore. All the tools a metalworking gal could need. Raw materials begging for her touch.

Nothing modern, and yet, she didn’t mind, especially since a book with illustrations on pre-industrial metalworking techniques awaited on a pedestal.

A smile curved her lips as she uttered a very heartfelt, “Thank you,”

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Tower had obviously accepted her presence and set out to make her comfortable. Capricorn seemed determined to make her the most sexually satisfied woman ever. Everyone she met proved friendly and likeable—which was a big deal for someone like Zora, who didn't make friends easily.

The next week proved to be the best of her life full of good food, great conversation, some epic metalworking, and ridiculously awesome sex.

This was the life. Reality didn't come crashing until after her morning wakeup nookie with Capricorn got interrupted by a chime then Aries' voice saying, "Everyone to the cafeteria for an emergency meeting over breakfast."

CHAPTER 13

Despite the summons by the boss, Capricorn wanted nothing more than to bury his face back between Zora's thighs. This past week had been incredibly satisfying, and he had Zora to thank for that. What a minx. What a delight. What a lover.

When she'd made the first move and seduced him, he'd been taken by surprise. He hadn't even been sure she liked him up until that point. But damn, that woman knew how to pleasure a man.

Her lips on his cock? He'd almost come the moment she'd touched him.

Fucking her, he'd been like a virgin again, ready to pop at the first feel of a pussy around him.

But it wasn't even just the sex that had him eager to see her all day long. He looked forward to chuckling at her dark sarcasm, her acerbic humor, her way of stripping bullshit to see at the heart of things, her excitement and passion as she showed him what she'd designed in her smithy, but best of all, how she lit up at the sight of him. She always greeted him with a smile and a, "Hey, baby, how was your day?" and to be honest, it didn't matter how frustrated he'd been at the lack of progress in locating Adam or the relic, or how hard he'd been worked in training. Being with Zora made everything else fade away.

Fucking Aries calling a breakfast meeting, interrupting his morning ritual of making Zora come on his tongue.

"Guess we'll have to postpone this for later," she quipped as she hopped out of bed, that sweet ass of hers bare and tempting as she strode to the bathroom. He almost followed because sharing a shower was something he'd discovered he enjoyed. But if he did, they'd for sure be late. He made do instead with a washcloth provided by Tower.

When Zora emerged, teeth brushed, face washed, and body dressed, his gaze lingered on her chest area. Her snug T-shirt hugged the breasts he loved to fondle and touch. He could so easily imagine them bouncing, the motion hypnotic when she rode him, the dark berries of her nipples a drooling temptation.

"You might want to stop having dirty thoughts," she murmured as they skipped down the stairs. "You're tenting."

"Stop looking so delicious then."

Her lips quirked. "Yummy enough to eat."

"Tease," he hissed, which led to her laughing, the husky sound crazy sexy.

“You are good for my ego,” she stated. “I don’t think I’ve ever had a guy pretend to be so hot for me.”

“I think you should know by now I am not pretending. You are sexy as hell. I want nothing more than to say fuck the meeting so I can press you up against a wall and fuck you.”

She stumbled and almost missed a step. He snared her arm and reeled her against him, leading to her peering at him with parted lips. “You’re serious.”

“Fucking right, I am. You are so my type, Beauty. Curvy. Passionate. Smart. And with a tongue that should come with a warning label.”

She opened her mouth, most likely to refute or utter something sarcastic, but rather than listen, he kissed her. She immediately softened against him, their embrace still just as passionate as the first time. It only served to confirm something Capricorn had yet to say aloud. The fact he might have finally met his match.

“Get a room,” quipped Cancer as he bounded past them, providing the cold shower they both needed.

Zora shook her head. “Dammit, baby. I’m going to need to put a three-foot rule in effect around you.”

“Why, Beauty, did you just call me irresistible?”

“You’re more deadly than chocolate. Now, hands and lips to yourself, or we’ll never make it to this meeting.”

She had a point. He, the usually responsible warrior, almost said to hell with it.

But he was curious about what Aries wanted. Breakfast meetings involving all the tower warriors and their partners were rare. So rare he only recalled one, which happened after Leo thought he'd lost his wife and daughter to a monster. Aries had wanted them to discuss how they could support their fellow warrior during his time of grief.

The cafeteria bustled with noise as they arrived with more people present than he'd have expected. Apart from the usuals, it appeared some warriors currently living outside the tower had shown up.

Pisces sat with his partner, Mike, a werewolf who actually managed to keep his affliction under control. A good thing, since usually Lycanthropes were exterminated. As a matter of fact, Pisce's meet-cute with his partner happened because he'd been dispatched to hunt down the werewolf terrorizing a countryside village in the UK, only to find out Mike wasn't responsible.

Talking to Cancer was Pisces, who'd been out of the tower on a mission. Virgo was doing his best to charm Sage under Aries's scowling gaze. As for the Gemini twins, they kept to themselves, preferring their own company.

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Only a handful of Zodiacs were missing. Probably still on a mission that didn't allow for their departure.

As everyone got seated with their plate of food—which changed depending on palate—Aries remained standing and waited until everyone quieted.

“Thanks for coming to this impromptu meeting. I thought it best I gather as many of you as possible to discuss the explosion of monster attacks that occurred overnight.”

The statement had the warriors stiffening.

Aries tucked his hands behind his back. “It appears we have multiple confirmed incidences requiring our intervention. What appears to be a soul-stealing mummy in Egypt. A Sasquatch in the Rockies that tore through some campsites overnight. A bunyip in Australia terrorizing a town. And what appears to be a very hungry vampire in Louisiana.”

“You forgot the gargoyle in France,” Aquarius reminded without looking up from his laptop screen.

Leo whistled. “Damn. Did the bad guys get together and decide to fuck up shit all at once?”

“Leo has a point. That's a lot of activity,” Cancer pointed out. “Especially considering we aren't close to a full moon, nor have any celestial events recently happened.”

“The timing is certainly odd,” Aries agreed. “But given how they are scattered, most likely just coincidental. Keep in mind, as well, that we’re much better at detecting monstrous incursions given social media is quick to post about stuff happening locally, as opposed to us waiting until official news sources actually pick up on problems. Given the danger levels of all these occurrences, they need to be handled asap.”

“Sounds like it’s going to be all hands on deck,” Pisces remarked.

“Just about,” Aries agreed. “We’ll have to divvy up the missions, but at the same time, I don’t want to leave Tower undefended.”

“Why?” asked Pisces. “Surely you don’t think someone will attack Tower.” His statement had them eyeing Sage, who tucked into her breakfast.

At their sudden interest, she waved a fork. “Don’t look at me. I haven’t seen anything in days,” to which Leo added, “Not sure if Olivia has, but last night, she convinced Rebecca and Ruth to teleport her to a city for a day of girly pampering. They left a half-hour ago.”

Aries pursed his lips. “Could be your daughter acting subconsciously to keep them out of harm’s way.”

“What harm?” The Gemini twins asked in unison. “Even if someone stumbled across Tower’s location, any attempt to breach the walls or even the door is doomed to fail. Tower is practically impenetrable from outside. Should someone even attempt, there would be time to call back anyone in the field to defend.”

For some reason, Capricorn thought of the bracelet Cetus placed on him, which somehow managed to numb his hands and block his ability to starbeam. “Don’t be so sure Tower is invulnerable. Cetus knows more about the Zodiacs than they should.

Could be they've got some trick up their sleeve when it comes to Tower as well."

"We'd still see them coming a mile away," Cancer commented.

"We didn't spot the drone that somehow made it past Tower's perimeter defense," Aries reminded.

"Most likely because Tower hadn't accounted for the new technology. You can bet your ass it's monitoring for them now." Pisces glanced at Aquarius. "Right, bro?"

"Pisces is correct. Since the drone, Tower has implemented an aerial watch that pings anything non-organic both in the air and on the ground."

"Meaning we can all deploy rather than pick and choose which monsters get to keep killing because we're holding back." Pisces offered a balanced solution, but Aries still frowned.

Sage leaned over and patted his hand. "I'll be fine. Go. Tower will protect us."

"I don't like leaving you this close to the baby coming," Aries admitted.

"I won't be alone. Zora will be with me. So stop arguing and get the mission done," Sage retorted. "The faster you leave, the faster you'll return."

Aries sighed. "Yes, dear," a capitulation that led to chuckles. Aries eyed the warriors. "We have seven active situations, meaning we'll split into teams of two with Gemini twins taking the bunyip on their own since they've dealt with one before. Capricorn, you and I will handle the gargoyle since it will likely be the quickest to track down. Everyone else, pair up and choose from the remainder."

The guys quickly found a partner and then headed for the supply level where they'd

outfit themselves as well as get a file on their particular mission to study before leaving.

Aries mouthed, “Meet me in the portal room in twenty,” giving Capricorn time to deal with Zora, who took the news of his departure better than expected.

“Is this what it’s like being a hero?” she asked as they headed out of the cafeteria. “Getting randomly tossed at monsters?”

“Being sent on missions is the norm, yes, but as you heard, this many incidents all at once is uncommon.” It also niggled. Aries wasn’t entirely alone in his thinking Tower shouldn’t be left without a warrior to defend.

“You think Cetus is behind it?”

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His lips pinched. “Given how scattered each monster sighting is, I want to say unlikely, but I don’t like it.”

“Why, baby, are you afraid to leave me by my lonesome?”

He dragged her close. “More like I was hoping to drag you back to bed to finish what we started.”

“Guess you’ll be extra glad to see me when you return. Speaking of which, how long do you think you’ll be gone?”

“At best, a few hours. If the gargoyle proves elusive, a day or two, which would suck.” He grimaced.

“I doubt your boss is going to want to be gone that long. Sage looks ready to pop.”

“Which is why I’m surprised we’re even going, but then again, as warriors, we swore an oath. It is our duty to protect, and I’m pretty sure Aries wanting to hover over his pregnant wife wouldn’t count as a reason to shirk.”

“From the sounds of it, it will be just me, Pisces’s partner, Mike, and Sage in the tower.”

“Actually, Mike won’t likely stay. He runs an animal rescue so can’t be away for long. Luckily, they live close to one of the portals so he doesn’t need Pisces to starbeam back home.”

“So just us gals, then. Don’t worry. We’ll hold down the fort.”

His lips pursed. “If anything hinky happens?—”

“I will handle it because I’m not some delicate flower who can’t handle herself,” she chided but then softened the rebuke with a light kiss. “Don’t worry about me. You’re the one going off to be a hero, while I plan to soak in a hot bath, do a bit of reading, and...” She leaned close to whisper against his earlobe, “Touch myself while thinking of you.”

He groaned. “Now that’s just mean.”

Her laughter made him shiver. “More like torture because the whole time I’m doing it, I’ll be wishing it was your hands stroking my body.”

Capricorn had never wanted more to say fuck his vow. Surely staying behind to pleasure Zora was more important than... Sigh. No, it wasn’t. “I’ll be back soon as I can,” he promised.

“I’ll be waiting. Naked.”

With those words—and that tantalizing image—ringing in his head, Capricorn readied himself to go. He couldn’t have said who looked grimmer. Him or Aries, who kept staring at Tower when they exited to use the special sandbox for more precise beaming to non-portal locations.

He patted Aries on the back. “I’m sure Sage will be fine. She wouldn’t let you go otherwise.”

“Sage hasn’t been able to see a damned thing since you returned with Zora,” Aries grumbled. “I don’t like it.”

“Then let’s get this done quick as we can. You got the coordinates?”

“Yeah.”

Aries left first, drawing the required symbols in the sand before turning into what many would assume was a shooting star. Capricorn followed not long after.

As hoped, they hunted down the gargoyle rather quickly and were only gone a few hours.

A few hours too long.

When they tried to return home, using their tattoos for a quick transference, they zipped off into the cold, and when their atoms reassembled, they found themselves right back where they started.

Aries frowned. “That’s odd.”

More than odd, unheard of.

“Let’s try again.” Once more, they both activated their tattoos, the link to their constellation that gave them quick access to Tower. Once more, it failed. Their starbeaming ability appeared to be working but, for some reason, couldn’t seem to deposit them into the portal room. Capricorn gave up after the third failed attempt.

It took six tries before a grim Aries declared, “Something’s wrong.”

“No shit. Try calling Sage,” Capricorn suggested, knowing Aries had brought a satellite phone.

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His friend just about smacked himself. “Fuck. The phone. Right.” Aries whipped it out and dialed. It rang several times and went to voicemail.

Hi, this is Sage. Don’t bother leaving a message. I know what you want.

Capricorn didn’t say shit. The boss held on to his panicked sanity by a thread, and Capricorn wasn’t far behind. Had something happened? Were Sage and Zora in danger?

Aries hung up and dialed again. This time, the phone was answered.

“Aries, oh thank the stars,” Sage sobbed, which chilled Capricorn more than everything because the seer always controlled her emotions.

“I’m here, honey. What’s going on?”

“Tower is under attack. It’s sealed all the rooms.”

Which explained why they couldn’t beam into the portal chamber.

“Do you know who’s attempting to breach?” Aries kept his tone calm, but the stress showed in the white knuckles as he clutched the phone.

“A man with the relic,” her reply. “He’s here and done something to Tower. Everything’s dark, and Tower’s not responding. I think he might have killed it,” she whispered.

It led to Capricorn asking, “Is Zora with you?”

“No. I don’t know where she is. She was supposed to join me in the library, but she never showed, and now the door is sealed.”

“Are you safe?” Aries queried, his expression taut with worry.

“For now,” she whispered. “But the baby’s coming. Please, Aries, I need?—”

The call cut off, and no amount of redialing reconnected. The phone went flying, accompanied by a stream of curses, as Aries lost his fucking mind.

In direct contrast, Capricorn descended into a cold, calculated state as he barked, “Freak out later. We need to find a way to reach Tower.”

Before it was too late.

CHAPTER 14

Just before the phone call...

The first inkling of trouble came in the form of a tremble that caused the bathwater to slop over the side of the tub. Zora sat up, sending suds flying, and frowned. Earthquake? Not a big one, but she had to wonder if it were a precursor to a larger event. She held still, waiting to see if it would reoccur.

It didn’t. With her attempt to relax and take her mind off Capricorn failing, she rose from the tub and reached for a towel. She’d just wrapped it around her body when a loud knock at the apartment door startled.

“Coming!” Zora yelled, dashing out of the bathroom with slapping wet feet.

A panicked Sage barged in, shouting, “Zora, I need help. I think the baby’s coming.”

“What?” Zora barely held on to the towel as she ogled Sage, who clutched her rotund belly.

“I’m having contractions,” Sage stated, her expression pale.

“Oh shit. Is there, like, a doctor somewhere in the tower? Should I get you to a hospital? Have you called Aries?” Zora didn’t have the slightest clue what to do.

“I can’t call and distract him while he’s on a mission.”

“I’d say the fact his baby’s coming is a good reason.”

“Ungh.” Sage groaned and rocked on her heels before panting, “There’s no time. We have to hurry.”

“Pretty sure we’ve got a few hours before junior arrives.” While Zora might have limited knowledge when it came to giving birth, she remembered her mama talking about how she spent thirty-six hours in labor before Zora made an appearance.

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“I’m not talking about the baby,” Sage huffed between her gritted teeth. “A vision hit me on the way to your room. We need to hide.”

“Why? What did you see?”

Sage stared at her with eyes that swirled freakishly and in a low monotone said, “Soon what was torn asunder shall be renewed. The fate of the world lies in the balance. Shall evil prevail, or will a champion sacrifice everything?”

The words sent a chill through Zora. “I don’t suppose you can repeat that in English.”

Sage’s expression cleared. “Danger. Here and now.”

“What kind? I thought Tower was like some super fortress no one could see?”

“Apparently, someone found a way. We have to hide until the warriors can return and deal with the threat.” Sage immediately strode for the door, whereas Zora eyed her toweled body.

“I’m gonna need a second to throw on some clothes. You get going and I’ll follow. Just tell me where to meet you.”

“Library. Given the knowledge within, it can transform into an impenetrable bunker in times of strife.”

“What strife? I thought Tower never had to deal with outsiders.”

Sage bit her lip. “The last time the library was sealed was to protect it from a peril within.”

“Hold on. Are you saying one of the warriors turned traitor?”

“I don’t know the full details.” Sage grimaced and sounded strained as she added, “Only that it had something to do with the thirteenth Zodiac.”

The floor rumbled, and items rattled as another tremor shook Tower.

“Um, maybe we should be exiting the building instead,” Zora suggested.

“We can’t. It’s too dangerous.” Sage’s head swiveled, and her voice took on an uncanny tone as she muttered, “They’re here.”

No point in asking who. Assuming bad guys kind of covered all the possibilities.

“I can’t go in a towel, but I don’t want you waiting to get your butt to the library. You go on ahead,” Zora ordered. “I’ll join you soon as I wedge my fat ass into some pants and put on a shirt.”

Sage looked undecided. “Maybe we should stay together.”

“I can catch up to your waddling butt easy,” Zora declared. And while some might have thought her comment rude, she knew the other woman well enough to know how she’d react.

Some of the panic eased as Sage snickered. “I can’t wait until I can ditch the penguin walk. Don’t take too long.”

“I won’t. Now, shoo. I’ll bet Tower’s got a nice warm blankie and one of those

disgusting pickle milkshakes you're so fond of waiting for you."

"Mmm. With peanut butter." Sage smacked her lips as she tottered out of the apartment.

Zora didn't waste time snagging some pants and attempting to yank them over still-damp skin. Anyone who'd dressed right after bathing understood the battle that involved much hopping and hauling before convincing the fabric to slide up and over her hips. She eschewed a bra and threw her shirt straight on. If she ran into some bad dudes, maybe they'd be distracted by her protruding nipples. It certainly worked on Capricorn.

Thinking of him had her wondering how long until he returned. If Sage were right, then they could use a few warriors, assuming there was even a threat. The shaking hadn't reoccurred, and she heard nothing untoward. Then again, given her spot, one could erupt on the first few levels and she'd never know. If they were about to be attacked, she assumed they'd have to enter through the main doors.

Perhaps she could ease Sage's mind by taking a peek outside. Zora strode rapidly to the window and glanced to see the usual vista. Arid landscape. Scrubby brush. Agitated moat.

Wait a second. Since when did its waters—deadly according to Capricorn—undulate? The air remained still, so she couldn't blame a breeze, yet no denying the roiling of the liquid. She wondered what agitated it until movement caught her eye and dropped her jaw.

A genuine mother fucking tank advanced toward the tower, its caterpillar tread easily humping over the uneven ground. When it reached the moat, the hatch at the top opened, and a man dressed in dark combat gear, which included helmet and some fancy-ass goggles, popped out. He knelt atop the tank, aiming some kind of tube-like

contraption.

“Holy masked crusader,” Zora breathed as his device shot out a grappling hook that shot across the moat and hit the tower, anchoring itself. The guy tethered the other end of the rope to the tank before clipping himself to the line he’d strung across. He began to traverse, hand over hand, moving rapidly, his boots dangling a couple of feet above the moat.

What emerged from the liquid defied explanation. It wasn’t a creature, and yet the fluid that rose shaped itself into the snout of a crocodile and snapped its jaws around the man’s legs.

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Zora could only imagine the scream as the moat monster yanked the guy from the tethered line and dragged him under. His buddy, who'd emerged to watch, also wearing strangegoggles, waited his turn to cross, understandably shook his head and returned to sit in the safety of the tank.

Ha. Looked like the bad guys weren't invading after?—

Boom! Tower shuddered.

She'd mentally celebrated too soon. The muzzle of the cannon smoked. Fuckers were shooting at Tower.

The tank fired again.

The impact once more brought a shiver to the stone all around. Not good. Those bastards were going to bring Tower down with Zora and Sage inside. She had to find the seer. Forget the library. They should think about fleeing before...

Zora abruptly halted that train of thought. Was she really going to leave Tower alone to defend itself? She might not be some bad-ass warrior with superpowers, but she wasn't some wilting lily, yellow-bellied coward either. Think. Surely, she could think of some kind of defense.

Which was when it hit her. She was inside a building that could do magical things.

"Tower, I don't suppose you have a missile launcher?" Because not much else would destroy an armored vessel.

One didn't appear, but suddenly huge ballistae fired from the very walls of Tower, giant metal harpoons that struck the tank, piercing its metal shell. While they didn't destroy, one of the embedded lances knocked the tank's cannon askew, and even better, it couldn't swivel back to fire.

"Nice shot! Good thinking."

The air around her warmed for a second as if expressing Tower's pleasure.

"Guess I should go find Sage now and tell her we foiled the attack." If the people in the tank couldn't cross the moat or fire on Tower, then they should be safe.

A siren went off, and she could have groaned. "I spoke too soon, didn't I? What's happening now?"

Tower, of course, didn't reply, but Zora, still standing by the window, noticed approaching dark specks in the sky. Birds? Nope. As they neared, she realized some assholes now attempted to paraglide over the moat.

"Holy shit. Take 'em down," she hollered.

Tower tried. Arrows shot from the walls with unerring accuracy, tearing into the parasail fabric, sending those clinging to the contraption plummeting to the ground on the side near the tower, narrowly missing the deadly moat.

Even worse, most of those who landed rose immediately, unclipping from their harnesses and unstrapping guns.

"Oh fuck me. It's a fucking invasion." And they'd come prepared.

Luckily, Tower still had more tricks up its stone sleeves. Arrows continued to fire and

would have nullified the threat if they'd managed to penetrate the body armor. However, most struck and fell harmlessly to the ground. A bullet might have done it, but Tower couldn't wield technology.

"I don't suppose you can open pits under their feet?" she suggested.

A second later, the ground did split open, swallowing those who'd landed, but this time, Zora didn't cheer as quickly. Would there be a third wave?

The answer came in the form of a dust cloud that turned into a couple of revving UTVs aiming for the moat. They didn't appear to notice—or care—about the tank rendered useless. They'd soon learn the peril.

"Get 'em, Tower."

A few ballistae launched, falling slightly short. The arrows barely made it past the moat. The ground beyond the liquid line remained intact, out of Tower's reach. The men in the UTVs, all wearing the bulky goggles that must have been what allowed them to see Tower, began disembarking, and Zora couldn't help but watch despite the fact Sage waited for her and surely worried. However, locking herself away meant she couldn't support Tower and give it suggestions for defense.

Someone holding a box and dressed in tan khaki clambered out of a vehicle. He spoke to one of the thicker guys, who nodded before pulling something from a pouch hanging from his utility belt. The man pulled back his arm and threw something, not a large object, for it barely made a splash in the moat. However, the effect? The fluid suddenly frothed, churning and bubbling before going completely still.

The man wearing khaki waved his hand, and the baddie who'd thrown the object strode to the edge of the moat and knelt. The crazy bastard stuck his hand in it, and she waited for him to get snatched.

Nothing happened.

“What the fuck? Where’s the moat monster?” she murmured. Obviously incapacitated. The flung item must have been some kind of bomb. The baddies began pulling what looked like ladders from the UTVs and snapped them together to create a bridge, not only over the moat but the ground as well. So much for reusing the pit trick.

The invaders began to cross, and Zora pursed her lips. “Might be time to make sure all the doors are locked.”

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Tower went one step further than that. It sealed all outside egresses. The window suddenly disappeared, becoming a smooth wall of stone.

There went her view, and without it, she had no reason to stay in the room. “Guess I should check on Sage.”

Only she’d apparently waited too long. She emerged from the apartment to all the doors in the hall gone. Only the stairs remained intact, going down only, the upper floors sealed off. With no choice, she descended a seemingly never-ending staircase. Gone were the various levels. Not even a landing remained to mark their location.

Good and bad. Good because it meant Sage, and whoever else lived in Tower, were well hidden. Bad in the sense Zora had nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. Unless...

If she could make it the main level, she could use one of the arches in the portal room to escape and get word to Capricorn or the others. Although she had no idea how she’d do that since she not only didn’t have a phone, but she also lacked contact information for him.

The bigger problem with that plan, other than convincing Tower to give her access to the portal room, was the fact she’d be right by the main doors. Hopefully, she could escape before they broke their way in.

“I don’t suppose you could zoom me to make this faster?” Zora asked as she kept skipping down the steps.

Tower shivered in reply, and the stone groaned ominously, which, given the

gravitationally impossible height of the tower, caused some worry.

No bubble encased her. Tower must be too busy to help her chunky ass, or could it be running low on magic? No one seemed to know Tower's limits.

Zora huffed as she jogged, in better shape since her arrival. Climbing a gazillion stairs a day would do that. However, it still took way too long to make it to the main floor—and even longer to catch her breath. She leaned over, hands on her thighs, huffing and puffing, but in good news, the main doors remained shut. In the bad, all the rooms were sealed just like the other levels.

Time to see if Tower could unlock just one room. “Hey, I don’t suppose you could give me access to the portal room so I can get some help?”

No reply and the spot where the entrance for the portal room used to be remained a wall of seamless stone.

“Fuck a duck,” she huffed. There went her plan to beam her butt out of there.

Tower once more shuddered. This time the shaking went on for a few terrifying minutes while Zora crouched with her hands over her head, as if that would save her skull from being crushed by falling stone. Luckily, nothing cracked or tumbled. The building remained intact, but when the shivering stopped, the lights extinguished. Zora could see nothing, and a hum she’d not previously noticed disappeared. A deafening silence ensued, which lasted almost long enough for her to start screaming.

It ended with a familiar sound, that of a torch plied against metal. In this case, the doors. She could do nothing but watch as a faint orange line appeared as someone cut through one of the doors, creating a jagged rectangle. Once the four melted sides met, the cut section got kicked hard enough to dislodge it. The discarded metal panel hit the floor with a clang.

Oh shit, the baddies were coming in.

Zora pressed her back to the wall. Maybe they wouldn't see her.

A bright spotlight bathed her, and she shielded her eyes while blinking away spots. Even without seeing, she recognized the voice that mocked her.

“Well, well, if it isn't the missing blacksmith.”

Zora lowered her hands and squinted before snarling, “Crius.”

“Surprise!” the asshole beamed as he entered with an entourage of armed men who formed a semi-circle around him and held their weapons at the ready.

“How did you get past Tower's defense?” The question she asked rather than the more dreaded one of, did he kill Tower?

“Same way I nullified the warriors' ability to access the stars. Black hole technology.”

The answer rounded her mouth. “You made a black hole? Are you fucking insane?”

“I prefer the term brilliant. And, yes, I found a way to create and contain them, and what do you know? Black holes, even tiny ones, nullify the Zodiacs' astral power as well as the magic protecting their secret base of operation,” Crius boasted with a smirk.

Her lips pinched. “And now that you've forced your way in, what's your plan?”

“Activating the last relic and harnessing its power.”

“You didn’t need to invade to do that. You already have the orb,” she pointed out.

“Ah, but you see, unlocking it requires an astral portal, and while I could have used one of the permanent ones scattered around the world, I wouldn’t have had access to the thirteenth Zodiac’s dais for the transference of power.”

His claim reminded her of the book she’d read when she’d first arrived, how the dais imbued the chosen warrior. The key word being “chosen,” not to mention close to death. It would seem Crius understood only part of how the imbuing of power worked. “Looks like you’ve wasted your time and effort, seeing as how the constellations are very particular about who they associate with. They only pass on their gift to heroes, not villains.”

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The corner of his mouth lifted, and Crius sounded positively gleeful as he stated, “The thirteenth isn’t bound by the same rules, and when its last avatar caused quite a bit of trouble, it was rendered into three parts and scattered. I’m sure it will be rather grateful to the person who sets it free.”

Did he speak the truth? “Doesn’t really matter, seeing as how the portal room isn’t accessible. Tower locked it down.”

“Do you really think a bit of stone will stand in my way?” Crius laughed. “I’ve got enough C-4 to bring down this whole building if I want.”

“You won’t get away with this.”

“But I already have,” Crius’ sly reply. “You see, I knew the tower would turtle in its stony shell to protect itself, but in doing so, it also prevented the warriors from beaming back. By the time they do sluggishly make their way here via more mundane methods, I’ll have transformed. Then, with the thirteenth’s power and my black hole technology, it will only be a matter of time before I control all the constellations.”

“You’re out of your mind if you think you can control the star entities.” She snorted.

“The Astraeus that refuse to transfer me their support will be destroyed. As Earth’s Supreme Leader, I won’t tolerate any dissidence.”

“You want to rule the world?” She ogled him as he uttered the most insane thing yet.

“I think it’s time to put an end to all these bloated, and useless, governments. What

humanity needs is one ruler making and enforcing laws worldwide. I will put an end to all crime. There will be no divide between wealthy and poor, as all will be rendered equal under my rule.”

“How amusing you think you’ll be the first dictator to make communism succeed. It won’t work. Never has, never will.” She rolled her eyes.

“I will run the planet like a hive. Drones working for the common good, and once the lazy complainers are eradicated, humanity will thank me for it.”

“I doubt that.”

“Then they’ll die. I think Earth would be a much better place with fewer people, don’t you?”

“You’re going to fail.”

The slap didn’t exactly take her by surprise, but it still stung.

Crius snapped, “Mouthy bitch. I was going to kill you, but now, I think it will be more enjoyable to have you watch as I succeed. Tie her up,” he ordered. “We don’t want her getting in the way.”

As if Zora could actually do anything. She had no magical power or strength. Nothing but her wits and sassy mouth.

Fuck me, I’m screwed.

CHAPTER 15

Aries couldn’t stop pacing and freaking, completely unraveled by his impotence when

it came to aiding his wife.

An inability to starbeam to the portal room had never been an issue they'd dealt with before. Sure, they could book a flight to Iraq and then drive to Tower. After all, they knew its location and its defense—if any even remained. However, that would take time, and who knew the damage Adam and his goons could do? Not to mention the harm he might cause to Zora and Sage.

There had to be a quicker way. If they had their usual sandbox they could have calculated a trajectory. Alas, they had no access to meteorite dust—

“Aries, how far is Paris' National History Museum?”

“What? Why the fuck would I know or care?” snapped the boss.

“Because doesn't it have a display of galactic rocks?”

Aries stared at him for a moment before exclaiming, “Holy shit, you think we can crush them up and use them to connect to our constellations and chart a path.”

“You think it could work?”

A pensive expression tugged Aries' features. “I don't know. I mean, first we'd have to steal those displays, then we'd have to find a way to crush the stone down into a powder. I don't know if there will be enough to draw the calculations.”

“You got a better idea?”

Aries pinched his lips. “No. So I guess the question is, how can we obtain them without too much notice?”

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“Pity we dispatched the gargoyle. It would have made a great distraction,” Capricorn mused aloud.

“I’ll bet Aquarius can help with that.” Aries crouched to grab his satellite phone, the screen of it cracked from the abuse, but at least it still worked. He placed a call and relayed the situation then their plan.

When Aries hung up, he glanced at Capricorn. “He’s working on a diversion but figures he’ll need at least an hour, which gives us time to scout out a portable stone-crushing machine and make our way to the museum.”

“The curator is gonna be mighty pissed when they discover we decimated the collection,” Capricorn remarked.

“Better they replace some rocks than we lose the women we love,” Aries replied starkly.

Love? Capricorn’s initial impulse was to deny. However, that would be lying, something he tried to avoid when possible, especially to himself. He did love Zora, and after the week they’d spent, he couldn’t imagine a future, a life, without her.

“Let’s get moving,” he growled, because who knew how easy or hard a portable stone crusher would be to find in Paris?

Not too difficult, as it turned out, since Aquarius sent them a lead on a college with a petrology and mineralogy department. A yank of a fire alarm cleared the building, and they quickly absconded with two of the machines tucked under their arms and

made a rapid getaway in the rental parked nearby. They then made their way to the museum and waited for the distraction.

Aquarius called them. “You need to get around to the back side. I’ve disabled the cameras and will override the door lock in the next ten minutes.”

“What about guards?”

“They’re about to be busy evacuating the building due to a bomb threat.”

“Meaning cops will be quickly on the scene and surrounding the museum,” Aries pointed out.

“Not necessarily. See, a certain terrorist group just released a statement claiming they’re about to blow up ten sites of significance.”

Capricorn whistled. “They’ll have to spread themselves thin to cover them all. Good thinking.”

“I will keep them off balance as long as I can. May the stars shine favorably on your mission,” Aquarius stated before hanging up.

As promised, the rear entrance to the museum provided access with only one minor hiccup. A guard having a smoke had to be knocked out. They left him tied and gagged amidst some crates in a loading bay.

Within the museum, an alarm rang stridently, making it hard for them to hear, but as they made their way to the meteorite collection, using a map of the floor saved on Aries’ phone, they encountered no one. Wouldn’t have mattered if they did. Their mission took precedence.

Capricorn felt the presence of the rocks before seeing them, and his steps quickened. Please let this work.

Upon reaching the vast collection, featuring even more meteor bits than they could have hoped for, Aries pointed to a clear area of flooring. “Let’s make our pile of sand there.”

They quickly got to work snaring samples from the various cases and crushing them. The slowness of the process frustrated, but bit by bit, a pile of small pebbles and grit grew. The compact machines didn’t exactly provide them with the fine sand they were used to, and some bits needed to be run through a few times, but at least it felt as if they were accomplishing something.

Aquarius kept in touch during that time, doing them the favor of cutting off the alarm, while updating them on the situation outside. When it appeared some of the bomb squad might enter, their Zodiac tech specialist arranged for a nearby transformer to overload, the explosion startling the advancing cops and sending them scurrying for safety.

“Do we have enough?” Aries asked as he spread out the pile and traced his fingers in it to test if he could draw.

“Only one way to find out,” Capricorn stated.

“You got the calculations for me?” Aries asked Aquarius.

“Already texted,” their tech guy replied.

Aries held out the phone and frowned at the screen before he sat in the pile and began to draw.

It had always seemed such a dumb way to travel, but at the same time, those sigils acted like the tattoo on his back, creating a path between their location and their constellation, which then redirected their life energy to where the sigil's coordinates indicated. In this case, since they couldn't beam into Tower, they chose a spot just outside of its purview.

The boss finished his tracing and tossed the phone at Capricorn. "Now to see if it works." He placed his hands on his thighs and closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath and?—

Aries disappeared, and a streak of light rocketed from the pile of sand up through the skylight. No way of knowing if it worked, but that didn't stop Capricorn from smoothing out the meteorite debris and plopping himself down.

The phone rang as he drew.

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“What?” he barked, putting it on speaker and continuing his artwork.

“The bomb squad might have figured out it’s a hoax. They’re coming in.”

“Fuck.” Capricorn rushed his sigils and had just finished the last swirl when he heard shouts and the clomping of booted feet.

Time to see if he’d succeeded.

He closed his eyes and reached out to the stars, to the special ones linked to him. As people poured into the room, coldness enveloped him as he shot off to the sky.

The intense frigidness lasted only seconds, but he still shivered as he returned to Earth.

Naked.

Dammit. He must have messed up part of the equation. Capricorn eyed his naked junk and sighed. Nothing like storming a tower to save the woman he loved with his dick and balls swinging.

“Well, now I don’t feel so dumb,” drawled Aries.

Capricorn glanced over to see his friend just as nude. “Guess we should have taken our time.”

“Bah. We’re here, which is the most important part.”

“We made it?”

Aries nodded. “Not exactly where we planned, but close enough” He pointed behind him. “Tower’s just over that hill.”

“Could you see anything?” he asked.

“A few abandoned all-terrain vehicles, a disabled tank, but not much else. There’s a thick fog surrounding Tower.”

“I don’t suppose there’s some clothing and weapons lying around?” his hopeful query.

“Only one way to find out.”

Despite being a tough-as-nails warrior, walking over rough ground in bare feet sucked. At the peak of the hill, they hunkered and observed. As Aries detailed, there was a smattering of vehicles parked on the outside of the moat. The tank showed harpoon damage, indicating Tower did put up a fight. But of Tower itself... the fog hung too thick to see.

Aries nudged him, but Capricorn had already seen the movement. A man emerged from the tank and sat down, legs dangling, to light a cigarette.

Oh hell yeah. Seemed like one of them would be getting a pair of pants.

“First one there doesn’t stay naked,” Capricorn whispered.

Before he could say go, Aries bolted.

Fucker. Capricorn couldn’t catch the boss. Aries made it almost to the tank before the

guy having a smoke noticed.

He tossed his cigarette and stood, his gun loosely aimed. “You there. What the fuck are you doing?”

“Thank god, we found you. Me and my friend were set upon by bandits,” Aries exclaimed, holding up his hands. “They took everything. Even our clothes.”

“Sucks to be you. Now scram. I’m busy.”

“You can’t be serious. You have to help us. We’ll die out here.” Aries overdid it on the drama, but the guy seemed to believe it, because he snorted.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have been wandering around here in the first place.”

Aries had been approaching the entire time he engaged with the fellow and now stood right below him. “Surely you have an extra pair of pants? Maybe a phone so we can call for help?”

The tank guy snarled, “Listen, asshole. I don’t have time for this bullshit. Move it before I put a hole in you.” The fellow stood close to the tank’s edge, glaring down.

A mistake.

Aries leaped, moving fast, faster than the guy could react. He grabbed him by the ankle and yanked, dragging the fellow down to the ground, where a few quick pops to the face knocked him out.

Only then did Aries grin at Capricorn over his shoulder. “Here’s hoping there’s another one for you.”

“Heads up!” Capricorn shouted as a second fellow emerged from the tank, aiming his gun. Capricorn quickly ducked and snagged a rock, his arm moving forward before he’d even thought of throwing.

Bonk.

It hit the guy between the eyes, and he toppled off the tank with a thump.

Given the noise it made, they both waited to see if anyone else would pop out of hiding.

Nope.

In minutes, they’d stripped the guys—and trussed them—as well as dressed and armed themselves. The pants were too snug, the shirt couldn’t be buttoned, and given the way it flapped when left open, Capricorn elected to go bare-chested like Aries. The boots weren’t even close to a fit either, but the soles of his feet would recover.

“Ready?” Aries asked, a knife tucked in the waistband of the snug pants while he held a rifle.

“Let’s go kick some Cetus ass.”

As they approached the moat, he noticed how it appeared dull and lifeless. Aries knelt and dragged a finger through it. “Seems like just plain water.”

“How the fuck did they neutralize the poison?”

“How the fuck did they manage to even get this far?” Aries grumbled. “Come on.”

They crossed the moat using the ladder bridge that spanned it. The fog on the other side hit them but not with expected moisture.

Aries spat. “It’s dust.”

Indeed, the air was chokingly full of it. What had happened? As if to reply to his inner query, the dull boom of an explosion had them both dropping to their haunches.

“Sounds like it came from inside,” Aries stated.

Adam must be trying to get inside the sealed rooms.

They moved slowly, guns swinging left and right, ready to shoot anything that jumped at them. Nothing did. They heard and saw nothing. Aries stumbled slightly when his foot encountered the edge of their beaming sandbox. He stepped through it, and Capricorn followed, knowing Tower lay just ahead.

The dust fog remained thick until they were only paces from the building. Then a clear spot appeared, and sitting in it, a box with its lid flipped open.

A box that made him sick to his stomach.

“What is that?” Capricorn murmured, peeking inside and shivering at the strange swirling blackness being held within.

“Dunno, but I don’t like it. Feels wrong,” Aries replied, kneeling by it. He gritted his jaw as he reached his hand for it.

“I don’t think you should touch that.”

“Wasn’t planning to.” Instead, Aries flipped its lid shut.

The nausea dissipated immediately, and Capricorn let loose a breath. “That was unpleasant.”

“I do believe Cetus discovered our version of Kryptonite.” Aries stood and glanced in the direction of Tower as if he could see it.

“What should we do with it?”

“Nothing for now. We’ll deal with it after we free Sage and Zora. Ready to take back our tower?”

“Hell yeah, I am. Let’s go Zodiac some asses.”

CHAPTER 16

The many explosions inside Tower left Zora partially deaf. Crius had indeed brought some bombs, and he used them.

Over and over.

The main hall’s walls resembled Swiss cheese with the many holes blasted in them. While Crius might know of the portal room’s existence, he had no clue where to find it—and Zora refused to tell him.

It should be noted Crius tried to get her to spill. Her bruised face, cut lip, and other bodily aches and pains could attest to it. However, helping Crius would be tantamount to abetting his goal to become some supervillain. Fuck that.

Her refusal to aid didn’t just incur a beating. When they began blowing holes in walls, no one offered her a mask, or any type of protection for that matter. As a result, her eyes stung from the dust and her lungs burned from coughing and inhaling too much of it. As for her ringing ears, while she could hear, everything came across muffled.

“Sir, I think we found it,” someone hollered.

A bleary-eyed Zora peered through the dust-filled air but failed to see if they’d actually succeeded. She also didn’t hear whoever approached and roughly grabbed

her by the arm.

“Let’s go. Boss wants you.” The baddie hauled Zora to her feet, and she stumbled to follow as he led her through a jagged hole into the portal room. A portable light had been set up to illuminate, and a fan blew the dust out of the chamber, making it less hazy than the entrance.

Atop the incomplete thirteenth dais stood Crius, his lips tugged into a shit-eating grin as he cradled the damnable sphere. Upon seeing her, he swept a hand and taunted. “I told you’d I find it with or without your help. Hope the black eye was worth it.”

“Fuck you,” she croaked.

“You’re not my type. Kylie, though... A shame she died.” Crius shook his head. “But then again, now that I’m a widower, I can take a new spouse. Perhaps the seer the Zodiacs are so fond of.”

“You have no shame.”

“Great men never do, but we do like witnesses, the more, the better. Behold and prepare to be awed as I release the thirteenth Zodiac.” Crius flung the orb at the nearest portal. It went through. Literally. Flew in one side, emerged out the other, and clanged as it hit the floor.

The failure creased Crius brow. “That should have worked.”

Zora didn’t know enough about the portals to comment, and even if she did, she’d have kept her parched tongue still.

“Most likely it needs someone living to take it through. Back in a second.” Crius walked around the portal and grabbed hold of the sphere. He returned to the front of

the doorway and, this time, stepped through, gripping it. Nothing happened. He moved to the next portal and did the same thing. Then a third, where he once more didn't disappear, but he did get angry.

“Why isn't it teleporting me?”

“Maybe it doesn't like you,” her raspy reply.

Crius glared at her for a moment before smiling. “Actually, the reason is much simpler. I'll wager my portable black hole that nullified the tower also disabled the doorways. An easy fix.” He glanced at one of his goons. “Close the lid on the box.”

“Yes, sir.”

The man hadn't been gone two seconds when suddenly the room illuminated as some of Tower's functions returned.

Rather than be happy, Crius frowned. “That was too quick.” The moment he spoke, gunfire erupted outside the room, resulting in a few screams and yelps of pain.

The noise widened Crius' eyes. “Those sneaky bastards found a way back.”

His sudden worry acted as a balm to Zora's despondency, and she chirped, “Guess you can kiss your plans for world domination goodbye.”

“I don't think so.” Crius whirled and lobbed the orb through a portal. The doorway flashed with light, and the sphere disappeared.

Uh-oh.

Crius grinned and clapped his hands. “Ha. The warriors are too late.” With cocky

confidence, he strode from the archway to the thirteenth dais, which began to glow, and as Zora watched, the missing piece suddenly filled it, making it whole. The sigil upon it illuminated and pulsed, while the air took on an electric feel that reminded her of that moment before lightning struck.

Or should she say a supervillain was born, for Crius stood atop the dais, raised his hands to the ceiling, and shouted, “Give me your power.”

Nothing happened.

He glanced at his feet, stamped the medallion before growling, “Why isn’t this working?”

Zora knew because of the book she’d read upon her arrival, but she wasn’t about to tell him.

The gunshots outside the room ceased, and in that silence, she could hear Tower’s hum. At least it lived, of sorts, but with its injuries, how much could it help?

Fixated on the doorway, Zora didn’t notice Crius lunging for her but certainly felt the arm that wrapped around her neck. The chokehold had her gasping and clawing, but Crius held her tight against him, using her as a shield just as two shirtless men entered the room.

Not just any men. Zodiac Warriors, who looked more savage barbarian than anything, given Capricorn and Aries wore ill-fitting pants and nothing else. The pair toted guns, which they aimed.

“Let her go, asshole. It’s over,” snarled Capricorn.

“I didn’t come this far to give up,” Crius replied.

“You won’t succeed,” Aries coldly stated. “Nor will you be leaving here alive.”

“How are you going to kill me?” taunted Crius. “You gonna shoot the blacksmith?”

What about your vow to protect the innocent?"

Capricorn's jaw tightened. "I don't need to shoot because you'll eventually tire. Or do you really think you can hold her forever?"

He didn't need forever. Zora could feel herself fading, the lack of oxygen making her vision blur.

Aries must have noticed. "He's choking her out."

"Fuck me. Do you have clean shot?" Capricorn asked, his voice reedy with a hint of panic.

"No." Aries' somber reply.

"Tell me how to transfer the power from the thirteenth dais, and I'll let her go," Crius offered.

That would be the worst idea, but Zora saw Capricorn contemplating it and managed to croak, "Shoot him."

"I can't," Capricorn cried out. "You'll be hurt."

"Do. It," she managed to whisper as darkness began sucking her into its limbo.

Aries murmured something she couldn't hear, to which Capricorn replied, "If she dies, I'm blaming you."

Crius jerked her sideways just as someone fired a gun. She heard Capricorn yell, "He fucking moved, and I hit her in the chest. Fuck. Fuck."

Zora didn't feel any pain, but Crius did, for he cried out abruptly and released her. Lacking strength to stand, Zora collapsed atop the dais, doing her best to heave in much-needed air. But breathing wasn't enough. She suddenly felt her injury, the throb in her ribs, the gushing of blood. It pooled under her, coating the dais she'd fallen upon.

Soaking it.

Activating the medallion for the thirteenth Zodiac and drawing her into a cold and nothing place.

Wait, not nothing. She could see pinpricks of light. The twinkle of stars, hundreds, thousands, millions of them. Had she died?

You're not dead. A voice replied to her unspoken words.

While she had no lips to speak, she could still think. Where am I?

You are in the void of space.

Are you God?

No, but there was a time I was worshipped as one, Female.

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Clear disdain in that last word, and she didn't let it pass. Sexist much?

I was expecting a male.

Well, excuse me. Or not, actually. So what if I'm a chick? It's the twenty-first century. Women can do pretty much anything a man can. Maybe you should get with the times.

You are impertinent.

Oh, I'm sorry, did I hurt your misogynistic feelings?

I've waited eons to be made whole, and now you insult me.

Exactly who are you?

The Astraeus known as Ophiuchus or, as the humans once called me, the thirteenth Zodiac.

The statement would have dropped her jaw if she had one in her disembodied state. Guess you being gone for so long explains your attitude.

Not gone by choice. I suffered an unfortunate incident with my last avatar.

What happened?

He tried to rule the world. In his defense, he grieved the loss of his wife and child.

How does ruling the world make that kind of pain better?

It doesn't. But to fill the void within, my avatar chose to sow death and destruction.

Why didn't you stop him?

I couldn't. Astraeus are restricted in what we can consciously do. Once we are melded to our avatar, they can use our gifts any way they wish.

Let me guess. The other Zodiacs put a stop to the rampage and then locked you away for bad behavior.

They would have tried had they known, but my last avatar proved sly before revealing his intent. One by one, he stalked the warriors of that time, but rather than kill them and risk the Astraeus creating new champions, he took them prisoner. Experimented on them in a bid to steal their gifts. He had to be stopped. Given there was no one strong enough to eliminate my avatar, I took action.

The following dramatic pause prompted Zora to ask, What did you do?

Went supernova.

It took her a second before her thoughts blurted out, Wait, are you saying you killed yourself?

Not in the sense you understand. One of my stars was sacrificed, exploding and thus shattering my constellation, severing my tether to the avatar, rendering him powerless.

If you killed one of your stars, then how is it you're still here?

The Astraeus gathered a few of the broken pieces and put them in hibernation, giving them a chance to regain strength.

The orbs. They held a part of you.

Yes. When the three relics were released back into space, they joined together, recreating my missing star, completing my constellation and returning me to my rightful space in the galaxy.

And in the process almost sticking you with someone just as bad as your last avatar.

That would have been catastrophic, especially since I don't know if I could have sacrificed myself a second time,Ophiuchus replied.

Lucky for you, I'm pretty sure Crius, the bad guy, is dead, which means you can choose whoever you like as your avatar, but might I suggest maybe following the Zodiac rules a little more closely this time?

You mean the rules imposed after my destruction? My avatar's destructive behavior was the reason for them.

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Seems to me the first rule should have been no more men, seeing as how they're usually the ones most keen on war and world domination.

At the time, women were considered too weak to handle the burden. Being a warrior involves much fighting.

Not all battles are won with fists.

A wise thing to say. Tell me, female?—

My name is Zora.

Very well, Zora, are you brave?

Not really. But when push comes to shove, I try to do the right thing.

Such as sacrificing yourself? You told the warriors to shoot, knowing you'd be injured.

Because it seemed better than allowing Crius to have your power.

Do you know how to wield any weapons?

Nope, although I can deliver a mean slap, and my insults have brought some to tears. That said, I am pretty good at making blades and stuff, given I'm a blacksmith.

A female who works metal? How the world has changed.

We also vote now too. Oh, and some of us choose to have careers instead of being pregnant and in the kitchen.

You are interesting, Zora.

Glad to hear it, and while this has been informative, what's going to happen to me? You said I wasn't dead, but it sure seems like I'm lacking a body.

Would you like to live?

Duh.

I will assume that means yes. And if given great power, would you wield it with compassion and restraint?

Hold on a second, you better not be thinking of?—

I think you will make a good choice as my avatar.

You can't do that. I never said I accepted. The rules say I have to agree.

Those rules came into effect after my banishment and don't apply.

Don't you dare. I'm not a Zodiac Warrior. I'm?—

Zap. A bright light encased Zora, who suddenly found herself gasping for air, which only served to increase the stabbing pain of her body. Every nerve ending screamed in agony. She trembled. Thrashed. Arched and tried to scream.

The trauma was over as fast as it started, and it took a moment for her to realize she lived, but still hurt. Her chest throbbed something fierce, but some of that pain eased

when Capricorn leaned over her.

“Beauty, you’re back!”

“Is Crius?—”

“Dead. Very much so. The fucker thought he could flee through a portal. A waiting Scorpio snagged him on the other side, and let’s just say, Crius won’t be bothering anyone anymore.”

“Oh, good.” Her breathing hitched at the stab of agony that went through her.

“Fuck me. We have to get you to a doctor. Aries!” Capricorn bellowed. “Goddamn it. He went looking for Sage. Hold on, Beauty. We’ll go through the portal that leads to Maine. There’s a hospital not too far from it. I’ll contact Aries once there for funds to pay for treatment.”

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“I won’t make it,” Zora gasped, feeling her body failing. “Sorry.”

“Don’t you dare die on me!”

“She’s not dying, not today or anytime soon,” Sage suddenly announced. “That is so long as you move your big self aside.”

“What are you doing? The stardust doesn’t work on humans,” Capricorn exclaimed as he shifted to make room for Sage, who held a large clear jar full of dirt.

“You’re right, it doesn’t. Say hello to the thirteenth Zodiac.”

“Zora’s a Zodiac warrior?” Capricorn blinked in surprise, and she almost laughed but didn’t dare because she knew it would hurt.

“A perfect choice, seeing as how she was ready to sacrifice herself to save the world.” Sage leaned over Zora. “Close your eyes. This will hurt, but I promise you’ll soon feel much better.”

Zora gladly shut her lids and hoped Sage told the truth because the agony?—

Suddenly returned with a vengeance.

Zora screamed as she arched from the dais. Brawny arms held her tight, and a soothing voice murmured, “It will pass, Beauty. I promise.”

He told the truth because soon a languorous warmth spread through her limbs. All the

aches and pains disappeared. The darkness tugging at her vision receded, and her voice returned to murmur a husky, “What was in that dirt, baby? Because I’m feeling great.”

“Thank fuck,” Capricorn huffed before pressing his mouth to hers in a kiss that did more to revive than anything else thus far.

Only as the embrace came to a lingering finish did she hear Aries bark, “For fuck’s sake, Sage. You fixed her. Now will you please let me take you to the hospital?”

“Too late,” Sage chirped. “Junior is going to be born here.”

“What?” Aries screeched.

“It will be fine.” Sage tried to soothe her agitated husband. “Just fetch me some clean towels and hot water. Oh, and make sure you have a sharp knife to cut the cord.”

“I’m not leaving you,” he growled.

“I’ll get the stuff,” Capricorn offered. “That is, if Tower’s unlocked the rooms. Back in a few, Beauty.”

Zora sat up as Capricorn dashed off. Aries sat with his wife’s head and shoulders in his lap. Sage bent her knees and panted.

“So impatient to greet the world,” the seer murmured. “Zora, if you could be so kind as to catch the baby.”

“Me?” Zora squeaked, but while daunted—and a little icked out by the request—she knelt between Sage’s legs.

Sage grunted as she pushed and, when she relaxed, in an amused voice said, “You might want to lift my skirt so you can actually see the babe.”

Zora bit her lip but folded back the fabric and did her best to not actually look, at first anyhow. But before long. Zora was droning on, repeating things she’d heard in shows and movies. “Doing great. I can see the head. Hairy thing. Get ready to push. You can do this.”

By the time Capricorn returned, Zora had delivered her first baby, a red and shriveled little thing with insanely good lungs.

Her lover dumped a load of white linens and set a jug of water down beside it. “I found some stuff in the kitchen. Cool place by the way. More modern than expected.”

Zora quickly swaddled the baby, poorly, given the loose fit, but the new parents didn’t care as Sage cradled the child while Aries stared on, dumbstruck.

A bright flash had her blinking then blinking again at the stranger that suddenly appeared in the portal room. “Did someone need a doctor?”

“Virgo! How did you know to come?” Aries exclaimed.

“A little star told me. Let’s see how baby and mama are doing.”

As the man went to check between Sage’s legs, Zora decided it was her cue to leave. She rose, and Capricorn followed her out to the main entrance with the many holes blown in the walls and debris from the explosions littering the floor.

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“Damn. This mess will take forever to clean,” she commented.

“Not really. Once Tower recovers from whatever was in that box, it will happen quick.”

“Crius found a way to make and harness black holes.”

The claim widened his eyes. “Shit.”

“Big shit,” she somberly agreed.

“Even though he’s dead, we’ll have to make sure any knowledge about how to make them is destroyed. Fuck.” He raked fingers through his hair.

“Does it have to be right this second?” Zora asked.

“No. We’ll need Aquarius first to find all of Cetus’ and Adam’s secret spots. Why? What do you need?”

“A shower, for one,” she replied, eyeing her dust and blood-caked skin. Her lips curved as she added, “And you.”

CHAPTER 17

Capricorn knew there were many things he should be doing in that moment. Checking on the damage. Arranging the removal of Cetus’ equipment outside Tower’s purview. Hunting any strays that might have escaped.

However, the woman he loved needed him, and in that moment, that mattered more than anything.

Still... “Are you sure? You’ve been through quite the ordeal.”

Zora rolled her eyes. “I’m aware. But you know what dying and then coming back to life makes me?”

“What?”

Her lips curved. “Horny. So, the question is, are you going to give me a hand with that, or am I going to diddle myself?”

When she put it that way... Capricorn tossed her over his shoulder and sprinted for the stairs.

“I can walk,” she exclaimed with a laugh.

His reply? “Not when I’m done with you.” He planned to love her so hard her knees would be weak for hours, maybe even days.

As he took the steps by twos and passed the many levels, he noticed the damage appeared contained to the main floor. Hopefully Tower wouldn’t struggle too much with the repairs. Never before in the history they’d studied had anything like this happened. But at least the good guys—and gal—prevailed.

Actually, if it weren’t for Zora, things would have turned out much differently. And now she was a Zodiac like him. Unheard of, and yet, he approved. Character and honor didn’t need a dick. Would the other warriors accept her, though? They’d better, or he’d be rearranging a few faces.

His apartment remained untouched, and unkempt. Tower must have expended much in the defense because the bed remained unmade from the morning. Not that it mattered, since they'd be mussing it up soon enough. First, though, he carried Zora into the bathroom and set her down.

She blew out a breath. "Damn, baby, that was fast."

"What can I say? I missed you," he stated as he turned on the water.

His answer had her snorting. "It's not even been a day."

"An eternity," he lamented as he turned from the shower and began stripping her filthy clothes.

"How did you get here so quick?" she asked.

"By destroying a museum exhibit. But I'd do it again in a heartbeat to reach you."

"You weren't hurt?" she murmured as her hands skimmed the flesh of his chest.

"Nah. Adam's minions never even saw us coming." He knelt to remove her boots, then yanked off her pants while she steadied herself with hands on his shoulders.

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“Tower was doing a great job keeping Crius and his army at bay until he activated that black hole.” She grimaced. “Can’t believe he was insane enough to create one.”

“Can’t believe you told me to shoot you,” he chided in reply as he stood to face her.

“Guess your hero schtick rubbed off on me, because it seemed better for one person to die than a planet full.”

“Not when that person is you,” he grumbled. When Adam had shifted, the bullet took her in the middle of the chest, instead of the shoulder like he’d aimed for.

“It all worked out, though,” she murmured, cupping his cheeks and planting a soft kiss on his lips.

She then moved away from him into the shower and uttered a groan as the hot water hit her skin. “Oh, this is nice.”

“I know what will make it better,” he said, getting in the shower with her and dropping to his knees.

He grabbed hold of her thighs, not that he needed to do anything because she parted them willingly. He leaned close and nuzzled her pubes before blowing against her pussy. She quivered and sighed.

“Tease.”

“It’s called foreplay, Beauty.” And he wouldn’t be rushed.

“Never said I minded, baby.” Her leg draped over his shoulder, giving him even better access. He gave her a long lick, parting her nether lips, lapping at the sweet honey that was his alone. She grabbed at his hair and moaned.

His cue to keep licking but also flicking her clit with his tongue, swiping it back and forth.

“That’s it, baby. Fuck yeah.” Zora liked to talk dirty, her encouragement adding an extra element to their lovemaking that always made him rock hard.

He played with her, alternating licks of her sex with flicks of her nub, eating her until she panted and her fingers clawed at his scalp.

“Give me a finger or two. Finger fuck me,” she demanded, and he obeyed, sliding two digits into her tight channel. Her hips undulated in time to his thrusting.

“That’s it. Oh yeah. I’m gonna come so hard for you,” she promised.

Fuck yeah, she would, and to make sure, while he kept licking and finger fucking, he didn’t let her come. He drew out her pleasure. When he felt her getting too close, he’d pull back and nuzzle her pubes until she complained.

“Baby, I need you.”

“I’ll fuck you when I’m good and ready.” But first, those dark berries of hers beckoned. He rose and latched onto an erect nipple. Her back arched, shoving it hard against his mouth. He opened wide and took as much as he could, his tongue teasing around the nub, sucking and dragging it into an even tauter point.

As he played with her tits, his hands slipped between her legs and stroked across her swollen clit.

“Baby, you better get inside me, or I’m coming without you.”

Like fuck she was. He wrapped an arm around her waist and lifted her before pinning her to the shower wall. The head of his cock poked at her sex, and any intention of sliding in slow evaporated when her legs wrapped around his waist and tightened.

He sank deep into her. Balls deep. And he held himself there for a moment, enjoying the way her channel tightened around him, the hot and moist pulse of her desire the most exquisite sensation. It only got better as he started to thrust in a slow, in-and-out motion that saw her pussy gripping him tight, trying to keep him sheathed.

But Zora wasn’t in the mood to take it slow. She grabbed hold of his shoulders and wiggled. She managed to ride him, and he held on as she bounced atop his dick, driving him deep, giving him the slick friction he craved.

By now, they both panted, their breaths mingling as they kissed and fucked.

She panted, “I’m going to come, baby. Come with me.”

Hell yeah. His fingers dug into her cheeks as he matched her rhythm. He knew her body well enough to know when she tightened that she was about to climax. When the first ripple hit his cock, he started to grind, knowing the added friction would drive her wild.

“Jeezus!” she screamed as she orgasmed, her pussy clamping down hard on his dick, causing him to erupt.

It took a moment for them both to calm down, not that he minded cradling her against him.

She chuckled. “Mmm. That was good.”

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“It always will be,” he promised.

“Is this your way of asking me to go steady?” she teased.

“More than steady. I love you, and I can’t think of anything I’d like more than to spend my life with you.”

She gazed at him with half-lidded eyes and uttered the naughtiest chuckle as she said, “I love you too, even if you’re too pretty and brave. But thankfully your big cock makes up for that.”

His lips quirked. “Glad to know it pleases.”

“Think it’s ready to please me again?”

His dick rose to the challenge.

When they eventually emerged from the shower—skin wrinkled like prunes—they went in search of food and found the whole gang gathered around the large dining table.

Aries, cradling his new daughter in the crook of his arm, beamed as he held up a glass. “You’re just in time for a toast.”

The first of many as they celebrated the birth of Aries’ child., Tower’s quick thinking, and Zora’s bravery and new status.

Things would probably change now that there were thirteen warriors, but Capricorn looked forward to the future so long as he had his beauty by his side.

EPILOGUE

A week later...

Becoming a Zodiac Warrior changed Zora and, at the same time, didn't. For one, physically, she remained mostly unaltered. Still full-bottomed, with kinky hair that turned frizzy when sweaty and hands calloused from her metal work. But she did have one kind of big change, in that she now bore a giant snake tattoo on her back. What made it worse? She was terrified of serpents!

Tattoo aside, the rest of her changes proved positive—increased stamina, strength, the cool-ass ability to starbeam, and she no longer wilted in extreme heat.

When it came to stairs, she didn't need Capricorn to carry her around anymore like a sack of potatoes, although she still liked it when he scooped her and bolted up the steps—usually because he was in a hurry to get somewhere they could have sex.

They fucked a lot. More than she'd ever thought possible and with one man! A man who had become her everything. But the biggest test to their relationship remained.

They stood outside the tiny house painted a pale yellow, it's front yard tidy with the concrete walkway lined with geraniums.

"Are you ready, baby?" Zora asked.

"Shouldn't I have dressed up more?" Capricorn glanced at his black T-shirt and jeans with skepticism.

“Mama hates suits. Says guys who wear them all the time are pompous asses.” In Mama’s defense, she’d been working as a receptionist in a law office for close to three decades now and thus formed her opinion based on the liability sharks she dealt with daily.

“I should have brought a bigger bouquet of flowers.” He eyed the floral arrangement with a frown.

“You’re awfully worried for a big strong warrior who faces down monsters.”

“Never wanted a monster to like me.”

“It will be fine,” Zora soothed, even as she had to wonder how Mama would react about the fact they’d moved so fast in their relationship. Living together full-time already, Tower being the home they chose to share.

“Did you warn her we were visiting?” he asked.

“No, why?”

He indicated the taxi that slid up to the curb.

Zora pinched her lips, but before she could reply, the door opened and Mama exclaimed, “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you. Where are you going?” Zora asked, eyeing her mama, who’d dressed in white capris with a floral blouse. A suitcase sat by her side.

“To the airport. I’m flying to Miami for my cruise.”

Zora’s brows lifted. “You’re going on a cruise? For how long?”

“Two weeks.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

Mama arched a brow. “Didn’t know I had to ask permission. I assume this is the man you’ve been seeing.” Mama eyed Capricorn up and down before smiling. “He’s pretty. I can see why you locked him down so fast.”

“Mama!”

“What? It’s the truth, isn’t it?”

“Speaking about moving, I’m selling my place.” No point in beating around the bush.

“I should hope so. It’s not big enough to raise a family. I take it you moved in with the boy?” Mama slewed a gaze at Capricorn, who wisely looked stoic and handsome.

“Yes. It’s a touch far for visits, so I won’t be able to swing by as often.”

“About time you cut the apron strings,” Mama riposted.

Zora blinked. “Er, what?”

“It’s taken you long enough to find someone and start living your life.” She glanced at Capricorn. “You’ll take good care of her?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he quickly replied.

“Ma’am.” Mama giggled. “The name is Mama, pretty boy. You take care of my sweetie pie.”

“You’re not upset?” Zora couldn’t help her confusion.

“Upset you’re happy?” Mama once more laughed. “It’s such a relief to know you found someone, because now I can finally sell this shithole after I come back from the cruise and retire somewhere nice. The beach is calling these old bones.”

“Oh, Mama, why didn’t you ever tell me I was holding you back?” Zora accused.

“Because you’re my sweetie pie and you needed me. But now she’s your problem.” She directed the last to Capricorn. “I hope you can cook because she’s shit at it.”

“I do okay,” Zora protested.

“When it comes in a box with instructions to reheat.” Mama’s lip curled.

“Meals won’t be an issue,” Capricorn’s diplomatic reply.

“Well, I should get going. The meter is running. Give me a hug.” Mama reached, and Zora folded her tight and only choked up a little when Mama whispered, “I love seeing you so happy and healthy.”

A part of her had been afraid Mama would notice the change in her or be sad, upset, or angry that Zora would be busier and farther than before. However, it turned out they were both embarking on new adventures, Mama with her grand plans to walk

barefoot in the sand every day, and Zora basking in the love shown to her every day by the Capricorn that captured her heart.

As to the future, Sage hadn't been predicting much, given she'd been preoccupied with the baby. However Olivia... that sweet but uncanny child had decided to announce at breakfast that morning, "Uncy Taurus, you should shave."

To which the visiting Taurus, who sported a ragged mop of hair on his chin, replied, "I thought you liked my beard."

"I do, but the green lady won't."

All eyes went to Olivia, but it was Leo who asked softly, "What green lady?"

And what did the little girl reply? "Can I have another piece of bacon, please?"