



Legend of Scorpio (The Thirteenth Zodiac #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A fiery warrior plus an icy scientist equals an action packed adventure and explosive passion.

For eons, the Zodiac Warriors have fought in secret the evils that threaten Earth: aliens, monsters, even depraved humans. So when their seer predicts a coming calamity these fighters are more than ready to protect humanity.

First up is Scorpio who is tasked with locating an artifact in Antarctica. A simple mission, except the doctor who's supposed to help him find it has no idea what he's talking about.

Rebecca doesn't know what to think of the dude who suddenly appears—naked in subzero temperatures. He claims to be some kind of astral hero. Ridiculous, and yet, there is something not quite human about Scorpio. As for his conviction she can lead him to some kind of relic that will save the world? He must be smoking some epic astral dust.

To her surprise, though, the glacier she's been chipping at is hiding the entrance to a mysterious cave. An ancient one full of peril. What they discover inside blows her scientific mind. Almost as much as Scorpio blows her usually quiet libido.

However, before Rebecca can come to terms with the fact Zodiac Warriors truly are magical, she's betrayed by her employer. Turns out, she wasn't contracted by some do-good climate group, but by villains who steal the relic for nefarious purpose! Good thing a true hero never gives up.

Can Scorpio recover the relic before it's too late? And if he does, will this bachelor decide he's ready to relinquish the single life for love?

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PROLOGUE

“There is a disturbance in the astral forces,” declared Sage as she dropped some herbs into the pot of boiling liquid, which she stirred with a long-handled wooden spoon. She was always brewing concoctions. Tinctures for healing. Potions for good luck. Fragrant stews that foretold a future of a happy stomach.

Aries, working out in the corner of their apartment, paused his bench pressing to eye his wife. “Another asteroid?” He and the team had recently acted to change the course of a hurtling rock so it bypassed Earth. Successfully, of course, although its adjusted trajectory baffled NASA observers.

“No, not a meteor. What I’m sensing is already here but has been hidden for a long time. According to my portents, its emergence will cause chaos.” Sage frowned at her brew. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say...” She shook her head. “No, impossible.”

“What’s impossible?” Aries padded over to his wife, wiping his sweaty brow with a towel.

Sage’s lips pursed. “There are only twelve. It makes no sense.”

“Only twelve what?” He’d gotten used to his wife’s somewhat cryptic replies. Being a mystic, Sage saw the world differently than others.

“The twelve Warriors of the Zodiac are eternal and unchanging.”

“I hear a ‘but.’”

She raised her gaze to his, her eyes swirling with colors as her powers flooded her petite body. “But I see a thirteenth.”

His turn to frown and mutter, “Impossible.”

“Agreed, and yet I see it. A thirteenth warrior will soon rouse, and in its wake: destruction. Death.”

At that announcement, Aries stiffened. “Not while the twelve stand. Tell me what we must do to counter this interloper.”

Her voice took on a monotone as she stated, “Find what was lost and make it whole. True love’s kiss shall show the way. Join them under the nimbus of the eclipse.”

Aries drawled, “Is this your way of asking for a smooch? Because you know I don’t need a prophecy to give you one.”

Sage blinked before focussing on him. “This is not a joke. Something dangerous is coming. The threads of the future show it only being stopped by an object of power, long broken apart with its pieces lost. Those fragments must be found and reassembled during a solar eclipse.”

“Where does the kiss come in?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, but we’d better find out, or the world is doomed.”

“Where do we start looking for these missing parts?”

Sage bit her lower lip. “Let me see what my casting stew has to say.” She dropped in more ingredients and stirred, the fragrance changing with each addition. Yummy-smelling, but he knew better than to taste. Only an idiot would eat powerful magic.

With Sage busy, Aries nuked some pizza pockets for dinner. He didn't bother making any for Sage, as she would only eat once she achieved?—

“The first piece of the relic will be located by a woman.”

“You do know there's a billion of that sex populating the earth?”

Sage cast him a dark look. “I wasn't done. She is a scientist, currently doing some research in Antarctica. She's about to make a discovery that will put her in danger.”

“I'll gather the team and head out immediately.”

At his statement, Sage shook her head. “No. Only one can go. If you send any more, the mission will fail.”

“A single warrior?” Aries frowned as he thought over his options. Libra's wife just had a baby, so that would be cruel. Leo was most likely on another bender. Capricorn had last been seen roaming the mountains of Tibet, finding himself. “I don't have anything on my schedule.”

“Not you.” A flat reply from Sage. “It should be Scorpio.”

“He just finished a mission and is supposed to be on a break. We could send Cancer.”

“It must be Scorpio.”

“Can I ask why?”

“Because I said so.” A tart reply.

And that was that.

The mystic had spoken.

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CHAPTER 1

The summons came while Scorpio sunbathed on a beach in Florida.

Your presence is requested immediately.

He uttered a groan, and the bikini-clad lady by his side murmured, “What’s wrong, handsome?”

“Work’s calling.”

“How do you know? Your phone didn’t ring.”

“The boss has his ways,” Scorpio’s cryptic reply as he rose from the sand and stretched.

“Will I see you again?” she asked.

“Not likely.” Scorpio wasn’t into the whole relationship thing. In his defense, the women he dated weren’t either. Fun, casual times. That was the way to live.

He padded to the hut he’d been renting and gathered his belongings, stuffing them into a bag before bowing his head and concentrating.

No place like home.

The tattoo on his back, a scorpion that spanned the entire width, heated.

In moments, he found himself on the first floor of the Tower of Babel. Not destroyed as historical texts claimed but hidden from human view after the attempt.

The massive structure used to house all the Zodiac Warriors. However, these days, some of them chose to maintain homes outside of it, wanting the freedom to enjoy what the modern world offered.

Not Aries. Given he'd married the prophetess, Sage, he remained, and the two embraced a life devoid of the chaos and constant surveillance now happening pretty much everywhere in the world. Other Zodiac Warriors stayed because they had a preference for solitude. Neither was why Scorpio maintained a suite of rooms in the tower. He liked people, liked partying. However, there were numerous reasons he had for continuing to call the Tower home: one being, he couldn't decide on a new permanent place. Besides, it wasn't as if he spent much time there. On his days off he tended to travel the world: the warmer the climate, the better.

As Scorpio climbed the stairs to Aries' office—a thigh-burning two hundred steps out of the almost twelve thousand that it took to reach the peak of Babel Tower—he wondered what the de facto leader wanted. Scorpio had just returned from a mission, a rescue of migrant children who'd been smuggled over the border for foul reasons. The tykes he'd freed had been handed over to adults who didn't have nefarious designs. As for those responsible... Currently feeding coyotes in the wild. Scorpio recycled whenever he could.

He arrived on the seventh floor breathing a little heavily. It had been a while since he'd trained by running up and down those steps. Might be time to recondition.

The windows that wound around the tower, along with the staircase, let in the bright sun and illuminated the circling corridor lined with potted plants. When he'd first been recruited, he tried to find out who kept them watered. No matter how much caffeine he pumped into his body, he always fell asleep. The plants weren't the only

thing that seemed to be magically cared for. The tower never stayed dirty. No matter how many muddy boots he tromped through his quarters, or how much pizza he dropped, when he either woke or returned after a trip, everything was once more pristine. It proved jarring at times because, in the real world, when he roamed among the humans, his messes didn't vanish. Part of the reason why he kept his home in the tower. He liked having an invisible maid.

His boots barely made a sound as he strode to the wooden panel carved with the wheel of the Zodiac. Within that circle, the inscribed symbols for each of the warriors. Twelve marks, for twelve constellations, for twelve flesh-based avatars. Scorpio's emblem glowed as he placed his hand on the portal.

Click . The door opened, and Scorpio entered to find Aries standing behind his desk, looking out the window.

"Hey bossman, what's up? Thought I was supposed to be on a two-week break before the next mission." He flopped into a chair across from the desk.

Aries glanced at him over his shoulder. "Change of plans. Sage had a vision."

Scorpio stiffened. All the Zodiac Warriors listened when Sage spoke. "What did she see?"

"Something wicked is coming, and to stop it, we have to locate some artifacts."

"Wouldn't it be simpler to fight it?" Scorpio usually had one simple solution to most things: Kill it. That tended to end most problems.

"Apparently, we can't. Sage insists we find these relics, and lucky you, you're first up."

“Fair enough. What am I looking for?”

“I don’t know. Sage couldn’t see the actual items in question, although she did have a location for the first one. Congrats, you’re going to Antarctica.”

“Where it’s like a billion degrees below zero?” Scorpio huffed. “You know I hate the cold.” Yes, he complained. Why couldn’t his task be somewhere hot and sticky?

“One, where you’re going, it’s only minus twenty or so degrees Fahrenheit. Two, the cold can’t hurt you.” One of the quirks of being a Zodiac Warrior. “And three, you are going because Sage said it had to be you. Trust me, you weren’t my first choice because I knew you’d whine.”

“I’m just busting your balls. ’Course, I’ll go. However, if Sage doesn’t even know what I’m looking for, how the fuck am I going to find it?”

“It’s a mystic quest. It will reveal itself. And you won’t be completely without aid. You’re to locate a doctor... Hold, let me find the name.” Aries checked the notes on his computer screen. “Dr. Guthrie, who is already there studying the glaciers.”

“They have scientists analyzing giant ice cubes? Sounds absolutely scintillating.” Not. “I assume I’m not supposed to kill this doctor.”

“No.” A flat statement accompanied by a stern look.

“What about roughing them up if they don’t cooperate?”

Aries sighed. “You know, you don’t always have to use your fists—or knives—to solve problems.”

“You’re right. Guns are much more efficient, as they can be used from a distance.”

Yes, Scorpio antagonized on purpose. The leader of their faction took his role very seriously.

“No hurting anyone unless your life is in peril,” snapped Aries.

“Aye, aye, bossman. So, how am I getting there? Do we have a portal I don’t know about in Antarctica?” Because, while Scorpio had been around the world using the doorways that linked their home base to various locations, he’d never heard of one at the South Pole. North, yes. It was shared with Claus. Yes, that Claus.

“No portal. You’ll have to starbeam in.”

Scorpio groaned. “You’ve got to be kidding me. That is like the most annoying way to travel.” Starbeam involved triangulating their constellation to act as a conduit that would basically disassemble a warrior and reshape them at their desired location. Uncomfortable at best, but at its worst, if they miscalculated even slightly, they’d been known to reappear with nothing. In other words, in the buff. Hard to intimidate with your dick and balls swinging around.

“I am not wasting the time or resources renting a plane to drop you. And you know, starbeaming wouldn’t be so bad if you didn’t rush the calculations.”

Scorpio’s lips pinched. “I hate math.” He’d hated it when young and the teacher would show them five apples then take two away and ask them to count the remainder. She never liked his answer, which was five, because there were still five apples, just not in the same pile. Then when he ate the two and finally gave the response she wanted of three, she’d put him in time out.

“And I hate peas,” Aries replied.

“What’s little balls of green deliciousness have to do with math?” he exclaimed.

“Nothing. It’s as pointless as you arguing. Now, if you’re done, here’s the coordinates of the doctor’s camp.”

Aries handed over a printout that kindly included his constellation’s positioning for the next forty-eight hours, as well as that of a meteor travelling in the area that would require making some adjustments—AKA, more fucking math.

“Guess I’ll finally get to wrestle polar bears,” Scorpio stated as he stood to take his leave.

“The bears live in the north. South Pole is penguins and seals.”

“Bummer. Can’t exactly wrestle a cute penguin. Think a seal will provide a challenge?”

Aries once more sighed. “Don’t fuck up.”

“Who, me?”

“And don’t kill anything!”

“No promises,” Scorpio sang as he walked out the door.

He spent a few hours getting his shit together. Had a nap. Packed a knapsack—with weapons. Another with food. Played a few rounds of COD —and got destroyed by some kids who called him old. Then struggled with the calculations for his starbeam. By the time he finished, his brain hurt, but in good news, he was ready to go.

He went outside the tower with his gear but kept the knapsack in his lap as he plopped to the ground, cross-legged. Scorpio drew symbols in the courtyard sandbox, like, literally a sandbox. A square ringed in stones and filled with sand—not the

earthly variety, but that created by grinding meteors. It provided a perfect base for the squiggles he dug with a finger, the ones at his back being the most annoying to complete. Why starbeaming couldn't be as simple as concentrating, he never understood. After all, his tattoo gave him a direct link to home. Why couldn't the person who created the warriors have devised a similar method for travelling elsewhere? Yes, they had portals, twelve of them scattered around the world in major areas, but in a hurry, it would have been useful to choose their exact destination.

Once done with his drawing, Scorpio placed his hands on his knees, closed his eyes, and then, because it amused him, muttered, "By the power of the Zodiac, let's go!"

Uh-oh. The realization he'd miscalculated hit the moment his body began disincorporating, but by then, it was too late. He shot to his constellation of stars, faster than noise and light, and then, from there, ricocheted back to Earth.

In good news, he made it to Antarctica.

The bad? He arrived wearing nothing but a grimace.

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CHAPTER 2

“Just my freaking luck,” Rebecca muttered as she stared at the leopard seal she’d startled as she rounded the glacier she was studying. The massive bull quivered as it watched her. She backed away slowly, hands out in front of her as if that would keep it calm.

It barked and lifted itself, bristling with aggression.

“Nice seal. I’m not a hunter. You just keep sunning yourself. I’ll come back for samples later.”

Much like her singing, her voice failed to have a soothing effect.

The seal uttered a sound and slid a flipper forward.

To think she’d scoffed at the need for a tranquilizer gun. Antarctica wasn’t known for its predators. Curious penguins, yes. Seals, also, most of which ignored humans. But the leopard seals... they liked meat, and yes, that included humans. While attacks were rare, they did happen. Just ask that poor scientist killed by one in the early 2000s.

Rebecca fumbled at her utility belt and pulled forth a whistle. Sharp sounds startled most wild animals. She put it to her lips and blew.

Skree!

A piercing shriek filled the air, but rather than scare the seal, the beast began humping in her direction.

Oh, hell no. She turned and started to run. In her thick and heavy boots on uneven snow and ice, it went as well as expected.

Thump . She hit the ground and only narrowly missed smashing her face. Huffing hotly, she flipped to her back, scuttling from the seal charging in her direction, death in its gaze.

Would this be how her life ended? A blurb on the internet—Female Scientist Dies After Being Mauled by Seal in Antarctica. She could just imagine the comments.

Should have sent a man.

Why didn't she shoot it?

Wouldn't have happened if she stayed in the kitchen where she belonged.

At least she'd die doing what she loved.

Accepting this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study in Antarctica had been the culmination of a dream. From a young age, as a child raised in the arid and hot state of Arizona, she'd always been fascinated by snow and ice. It led to her acquiring a few degrees, including one as a glaciologist, something that had people always saying 'Hunh?' after asking her what she'd studied.

They didn't understand her fascination with glaciers. How slicing into one could uncover all kinds of secrets. The way the ice layers showed past climate events. The warming and cooling of the planet over the ages. How they could help predict patterns for the future. Sometimes, a lucky glaciologist would even come across

something perfectly preserved in the ice. A flash-freezing of an extinct species.

The seal hadn't slowed its approach, and she couldn't help but stare when...

A streak of light plummeted from the sky, bright enough she closed her eyes. When no boom accompanied the bolt, she peeked to see if she got lucky and the lightning hit the seal.

It hadn't, but the light had stopped the seal dead in its flippers, mostly because a naked man stood between her and the startled bull.

The seal barked.

The man, who possessed a very muscly back covered in a massive tattoo, barked right back.

Rebecca blinked. Had she already been killed? A glance at her intact clothing and the still-white snow around her seemed to indicate nothing had touched her.

Not dead—not yet—but the man might not fare so well.

The seal lunged at the stranger, and to her shock, rather than dodge, the stranger grabbed it in a headlock and laughed. “You’ll have to do better than that, fat ass.” The man then lifted and flung the huge seal.

It landed with a grunting noise and uttered a short-pitched whine.

“Don’t you bitch at me. You started this.” The man shook a finger, chiding.

The seal yipped some more.

“Yeah, yeah, I ruined your fun. Too fucking bad. Maybe you should pick on someone your own size.”

The seal raised itself to its full height and embarked on a frenzied barkfest.

Once more, the fearless man mimicked it.

To her shock, the seal chuffed and then turned around, humping its way back to the water. She'd lived. Maybe. She most certainly hit her head, though.

Rebecca muttered, “What the heck just happened?”

“I saved your butt,” the stranger stated as he turned with a smile. His front proved as impressive as the back, muscle upon muscle and a cock that didn't appear to mind the cold.

“Who are you? How did you get here? And where are your clothes?”

The stranger glanced at himself and sighed. “Fuck me. Not again. Next time I gotta remember not to wear my favorite jeans when starbeaming.”

Nothing he said made sense. “Hello, still looking for an answer.”

“Guess there's no point in giving you a bullshit story, seeing as how you saw my starlit arrival. I am Scorpio.” He struck a pose. “Zodiac Warrior, protector of the world, here on an important mission.”

“Is there a hidden camera somewhere? Is this a joke?” Rebecca glanced around, waiting for the punchline.

“I know you're overwhelmed by my presence. It happens. After all, we don't appear

to just anyone, and I didn't actually plan to be seen by you. However, I might have made a slight mathematical miscalculation, which turned out to be good for you. I do believe that seal was going to eat your face, which is surprising. I thought they only scarfed down fish."

"Are you an alien?" Because strangely enough, it made the most sense.

"Nope, although I have a close affinity to the stars. Those ones to be exact." He pointed to the blue sky, where not a single astral body could be seen.

"Are you human?"

"Yes, but one that has been enhanced."

She had to be dreaming, and yet everything felt so real. The cold. The bright sun making her squint. The details of his body that she would have never imagined. After all, the usual men featuring in her fantasies weren't body-building, platinum-haired man-beasts. "Why are you here?"

"I'm looking for Doctor Guthrie."

At hearing her name, she cocked her head. "Why?"

"He's supposed to help me find something. Do you know where he is? I'm assuming he's camped nearby, unless I really fucked up my landing zone."

"She ," Rebecca emphasized, "Is right in front of you, and the only thing I'm helping you find is a pair of pants."

"You're Doctor Guthrie?" He ogled her.

“Yes.”

“You’re not a dude.”

“You don’t say,” her dry reply.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Scorpio.” He offered a dazzling smile.

“You already introduced yourself.”

“That’s right, I did. So now that we’ve been introduced, care to tell me where it is?”

“Where what is?”

“I don’t know. Some kind of special object. The details aren’t clear. I assumed you’d know what I meant. The bossman said Sage was very specific about you helping me.”

“Listen, crazy naked dude from the stars, I don’t know what you are, why you’re really here, or what you want from me, but I think I’ve had enough weirdness for one day. So I’m going back to my shelter and having a cup of coffee, which will be fifty percent or more whiskey, then to bed, where I will later wake up and decide I hallucinated on account I smacked my head.”

“Not a hallucination, that is assuming you’ve not imbibed any shrooms. Even then, this is happening, Doc. Now lead me to your camp, because a whiskey coffee sounds great. Although you can skip the coffee in mine.”

“Who says you’re invited?” she retorted.

“You’re a scientist. Don’t tell me you’re not curious about the naked man who appeared from the sky.”

“I would be if this were real.”

“I’ll show you real.” He stalked for her, and she got to notice just how tall he was. Fluid, too, his body moving limber and confident. His smile just enough to stutter her heart.

When he stopped in front of her, she had to crane to see him. Heat radiated from his nude flesh. “How are you so hot?” she muttered.

“Baby, I was born this way,” he murmured before dragging her upward and planting a kiss on her lips!

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CHAPTER 3

Her lips were cold, yet still tasted sweet for the two seconds Scorpio kissed the doctor.

Until she stomped on his foot.

His bare foot.

With her boot.

As if that weren't affront enough, her knee rose and hit him in the balls.

A warrior didn't exist that wouldn't fold in shock and pain.

As he breathed through the agony, she tartly stated, "Keep your hands and mouth to yourself. As a matter of fact, keep your entire person away from me and go back to whatever hole—or star—you crawled out of."

With that, she stalked away which led to confusion. Women didn't reject him. Ever. Unless...

"Apologies, I assumed given Sage sent me on this mission that you were into men. My mistake."

The doctor whirled and gaped before huffing, "I'm straight, I just don't like strange men mauling me."

“Hardly mauled,” he argued.

“You kissed me without permission.”

“How else would I do it?” he asked with genuine puzzlement. “Doesn’t asking take away from the impromptu nature and passion of a kiss?”

“Is that the excuse male predators are using these days?”

“What?” Scorpio’s turn to gape.

“I am not in the mood to stand around in the cold discussing your lack of morals and behavior. Goodbye. And don’t follow,” she added as she continued marching away from him.

Dilemma. Should he crawl back to Babel Tower and admit to Aries he’d borked the mission in under five minutes, or should he ignore her demand and try to salvage the reason he’d come?

Given the mockery he’d suffer if the reason he returned empty-handed ever got out, he chose the latter.

“Listen, I’m sorry if we got off on the wrong foot.”

“Go away.”

“I can’t. The fate of the world depends on you helping me to find some relic.”

She whirled suddenly. “You are talking to the wrong person. I don’t have anything you might want. Or are you here to steal my equipment?”

“No. I’m here because you’re supposed to help me find some ancient artifact.”

“Wrong place. In case you hadn’t noticed, there is nothing out here but ice and snow.”

“And seals.”

“And penguins. Whatever,” she exclaimed. “Whatever it is you seek, I can’t help you. All I’ve discovered since getting here are glacier samples.”

“Sage is never wrong.”

“Always a first time,” she chirped before heading away from him again. In the distance, he could see a trio of tents, one pyramid-shaped right next to a pair of domed ones.

“Are you here alone?”

She stiffened before saying, “Nope. My partner is around somewhere. And he’s bigger than you.”

She lied. He could tell. He let it pass. She thought him dangerous. True, but he wouldn’t be harming her.

“If there’s nothing to see, then why are you out here?” he called out instead.

“Because it’s my job. I’m a climate scientist with degrees in biology, geology, and glaciology.”

“What the fuck is glaciology?”

“A science that studies glaciers.”

“Oh. That’s a thing?”

She didn’t reply.

He’d stuck his foot in it again. “What’s so interesting about glaciers?”

She sighed. “What part of go away are you not grasping?”

“I’ll leave when I’ve gotten what I came for.”

“You’ll be waiting a long time then,” she muttered before she unzipped the flap on the domed tent and entered.

Should he follow? She might be waiting with a frying pan or a knife.

But she did mention having whiskey, and his blue balls—with a hint of purple now!—could use a shot of warmth.

He marched into the tent and found her standing by a fold-up table plugging in an electric kettle.

She glanced at him. “You just don’t quit.”

“Did you really think I’d leave that easily?”

“No.” She sighed. “Whiskey?” She held up a bottle half-full of amber liquid.

“Hell yes.” He sat down on a chair, which his bare ass didn’t appreciate. He could tolerate the cold but that didn’t mean he liked it.

“Where are your clothes?” she asked as she slapped down a mug and the bottle.

“Told you, lost them during transit. It happens when I miscalculate the mass being translocated.”

She blinked.

“Bad math took my shit. I don’t suppose you’ve got some spare stuff that might fit.”

She snorted. “No. Best I can offer is a blanket.” She scrounged in an open crate and pulled out fabric that made a crinkling sound. She tossed it to Scorpio before she plopped into the seat across from him with her own mug and splashed some whiskey into it.

He draped the strange blanket over his lap.

“How come you’re not shivering or turning into a Popsicle? It’s like minus twenty out. You should have frostbite,” she stated.

“Zodiac Warriors don’t feel the cold like humans do.”

She took a sip before murmuring, “I’ll probably regret encouraging you, but what is a Zodiac Warrior?”

“Me.” He grinned. “There are twelve of us, one for each Zodiac constellation. It is our task to fight evil in the world.”

She arched a brow. “Only twelve? Guess that explains why there’s so much crime still running rampant.”

“We don’t deal with petty stuff. We leave that to human authorities. We handle the

truly dark scenarios, the kind involving nonhumans, true depravity, or threats to Earth.”

Her brow arched. “Nonhumans?”

“Ogres. Manticores. Actual aliens, which, let me tell you, are not like the cute little green guy you see with Bugs Bunny.”

“And what kind of threats to Earth are we speaking of?”

“Asteroid impacts. Ancient curses unearthed. Probably the freakiest one was the spider that managed to burrow its way into an atomic reactor. The size of that thing...” He shook his head in recollection. “Libra had nightmares for months after we sliced him out of the cocoon it wrapped him in. He’s on sabbatical right now and thinking about retiring, given his wife just gave birth to their first kid.”

“Once he leaves, does that mean no more Libra?”

“Only for a little while. Sage, she’s the one who sees the future and shit, will name a replacement. A human, who, if they accept and pass the tests, will receive the Zodiac Astral Blessing, making them special like the rest of us.”

“How come I’ve never heard of Zodiac Warriors? I mean, if you’re out there saving the world, shouldn’t there be news articles or stories or even rumors about you?”

“Our existence is kept secret to avoid issues with governments and those who would seek to destroy us.”

“So secret you couldn’t wait to tell me,” her dry reply.

“Only because I had no choice given my abrupt appearance before you. You will, of

course, not mention my presence to anyone.”

“As if anyone would believe me,” she muttered before she sipped her whiskey.

Scorpio took a slug of his own before asking, “They wouldn’t, and I also don’t recommend trying to get anyone to, as then we’d have to take measures.”

“Meaning what?”

“Depends on the threat to the crew. Mind-wiping is the first thing we try. Discreditation. But personally, I find removing someone’s head to be most effective at keeping them quiet.”

He probably should have kept the last to himself because she stiffened.

“You’ve killed?”

“How else would I protect this world?”

She shook her head. “I’ll give you credit for creating an elaborate story, but sorry, I’m not sure I believe it.”

“Very well then, explain my presence.” He leaned back and crossed his arms.

Her lips pursed. Pretty lips, the kind with a full bottom and a lovely indent on the upper—the kind that had already lured him into trouble. She’d removed her hood, hat, and goggles, revealing smooth features, cheeks pink from being outside but skin pale of hue. Paler than him, with his golden sun-kissed tan. She’d unzipped her coat, the bulk of it hiding her shape, but her breasts did push against her sweater nicely.

“I don’t know how you got here, and naked at that. I do remember seeing a flash of

light?—”

“That was me being beamed back to Earth from my constellation.”

“—and then you were suddenly just there, wrestling a leopard seal. That wasn’t too smart. They have killed people.”

He snorted. “I’m a warrior. I’ve battled much worse.”

“Let’s say you’re telling the truth... I still don’t see how I’m supposed to help. Surely you have some clue as to what you’re supposed to find.”

“The boss didn’t offer much in the way of details. Basically: go there, find the doctor, retrieve the object. It should be noted that prophecies often work like that. We get the bare minimum to start us on a quest, and things kind of happen along the way, revealing what we need to know.”

“A quest.” She snorted. “Do you know how odd that term sounds to a scientist who deals in facts?”

“Fact is you are going to intentionally or inadvertently help me locate an artifact.”

“Let’s say I do. Why would I let you take it?”

“Because it’s needed to save the world.” For a scientist, she didn’t listen very well.

“But here’s the thing. I’m here on a grant, which means anything I find doesn’t belong to me, but to Cetus.”

“Who is this Cetus?”

“The Cetus Environmental Research Corporation is who sent me here to study the glaciers in the area. I signed a contract. All samples, all discoveries, everything I do here is their property, and that would include any object I happen to find in the ice.”

“Only if they know about it.”

She stared at him. “I am not lying to my employers.”

“Not lie, just not mention.”

“It’s the same thing,” she huffed. “And how do I even know you’re a good guy? For all I know, this supposed special artifact”—she did finger quotations—“is actually what will cause trouble in the world and you’re a villain trying to use me to get it.”

“You think I’m the bad guy?” Flattering because, after all, he did appear quite ferocious. However, it was also insulting. “I’ve been saving humanity for over a century.”

Laughter erupted from the doctor that went on for some time before it devolved into choked giggles. “Oh, now I know you’re messing with me. You are not a hundred years old.”

“A hundred and seventeen, to be exact. And, yes, I am. I told you becoming a warrior enhances our attributes and abilities. Longevity is one of those perks. I’m not even the oldest. That would be Leo. He’s hitting the big three-oh-oh later this year.”

She stared into the bottom of her empty cup. “There is not enough whiskey in the world for this conversation. I need to go lie down.”

“But it’s daylight.”

His remark arched her brow. “It’s nine o’clock at night. And the reason it’s still bright is because, in Antarctica, during the months of December, January, and February, the sun doesn’t set. So, it is technically night.”

“You go to sleep then. I’m not tired.”

“Wasn’t an invitation,” she muttered.

“Mind if I poke around?”

“Yes. Keep your hands off my stuff.”

“You know I’m going to do it anyhow.”

Again, she exhaled loudly. “Don’t break anything.”

As if he’d be so clumsy.

She exited through a draped doorway for another section of the temporary habitat leaving him alone, and he did indeed snoop. The very sturdy tent he was in appeared to be for meals and storage. The crates along the sides held food supplies for the most part, but some contained equipment as well. Tucked in a far corner, almost unseen for the tarp heaped atop, he found a duffel bag and, wonder of wonders, clothes inside. Men’s clothing from a less-than-sizable fellow. A rifle through the items had him able to cobble together an outfit of snug track pants and a T-shirt that stretched.

He left the domed tent for the next one, where scientific equipment had been set up along with some computers. Sweet.

He sat down and moved the mouse to wake the device. To his surprise, there was no login screen. Then again, who would be snooping on the doctor’s computer out here?

It had an internet connection, mostly likely via satellite, seeing as how he'd seen a receiver outside. He opened a browser window and logged onto the website Aries finally agreed to—not easily. It took Aquarius a decade of badgering before the boss let them get with the times.

The casual observer who happened across the website `Zodiacsforworldpeace dot org` saw a graphic claiming “website coming soon.” Scorpio clicked on the corners of the screen, top right, then bottom, bottom left, then top, then middle.

A box popped up flashing, Username?

He typed it in with his passcode and then answered his three security questions. Favorite show? Archer . Color? Black, duh. Best restaurant? McDonalds. The screen changed to a page with symbols, one for each of the crew. He clicked on the curled horns for Aries and reported.

Arrived in Antarctica and was observed by the doctor, who is a girl! Could have mentioned that. Says she has no object. Not too crazy about me either. Doesn't believe a word I say.

He leaned back in the chair and waited. It took a few minutes for a reply.

What the fuck do you mean she saw you arrive? I gave you coordinates that should have been a mile from her camp.

So, I might have messed up my math a bit. I landed a few feet away from her, in my birthday suit.

A short pause then, Sage claims she didn't see a future where you didn't get there naked.

He didn't know if that should make him feel better or not. Was he really that inept at calculations?

Aries kept typing. She says to stay close to the doctor. The object will reveal itself shortly, and when it does, that will trigger a chain reaction. Expect possible hostiles.

And him without any weapons.

Don't suppose you could beam me over a kit?

Can't. Sage says this first part of the mission has to be done by you and you alone. I'm sure you'll figure something out.

Well yeah, he would. Because if Sage had faith, then so did he. That faith still had him scrounging for weapons and coming up empty-handed. He sure hoped he didn't face off against any guns, or worse, though, because he doubted anyone would be intimidated by the tripod he'd split and sharpened into spears.

You know who else wasn't intimidated by him? The doctor.

She woke and walked into the dining tent, saw him, and drawled, "And here I'd hoped the seal returned to finish you off."

CHAPTER 4

When Rebecca left Scorpio—who really took the whole Zodiac theme to the limits—she truly believed she dreamed. None of what he said made sense. Men didn't appear out of nothing. Or wrestle seals barehanded. Or claim they needed her to help them on a quest that would save the world.

Any second she'd wake up, and realize she was alone, that the whole thing had just been a vivid hallucination. Only, the next morning, she walked into the dining tent and saw him, clad in a ridiculous outfit.

Did her libido care his T-shirt molded his upper body and left his naval uncovered or that the track pants ended mid-shin? Nope. She saw the hunk of man and suddenly had a hankering for another kiss.

Despite her less-than-pleasant greeting, Scorpio smiled. "Do you always wake up so cheerful?"

She glared as she stomped for the coffee pot already full and steaming, obviously set on a timer. "Only when I have uninvited guests."

"I'll leave as soon as we find?—"

"The artifact. Yup, I remember. But I hate to break it to you: I've got work to do, so you'll have to go scrounging on your own."

"What will you be doing?"

“Checking my messages from Cetus then extracting some glacier samples for analysis.”

With that said, she grabbed her cup of coffee and left for her work tent, noticing her chair had been moved. She pursed her lips as she eyed her computer. She’d not bothered putting a password on it because she worked alone. It also wasn’t as if she kept state secrets.

Sipping her coffee, she pulled up her email and found a new message from corp. Essentially, a demand for her to grab samples from a specific area of the glacier she’d only just started cataloguing. She printed out the coordinates and wondered who on the other end decided where she’d be poking. Did they have an image of all the glaciers in their office that they threw darts at to decide where she’d work next?

Whatever. They paid her well to do so, and when she returned, she’d write an article, which would hopefully bolster her prestige in the field.

While the printer spat out the sheet with the diagram showing where to dig next, she went and layered on her clothes. The tent heaters only barely kept occupants from freezing, and it had been quite some time since she’d been fully naked. Even the quick changes of clothing had her shivering and her skin pimpling from the cold. Yet Scorpio acted as if he were somewhere balmy.

Maybe he really was superhuman.

Shouldn’t she be more curious? He’d probably think she flirted if she asked questions. Still, if he truly was who he claimed—and it was beginning to seem that way—she might be missing out on a discovery of a lifetime.

That she could never tell anyone. She’d not forgotten what he’d claimed happened to those who spilled their secrets. Mind- wiping and discreditation were bad enough, but

he'd also mentioned death. Would he really kill her?

She didn't know him well enough to tell. Although she took the fact she woke uninjured as a good sign.

Still, given she'd not imagined his existence, she should be more cautious. To that end, she tucked a folding utility knife into her boot to go along with the one in her belt. Snowsuit, boots, hat, face mask, and goggles—because the forecast called for sharp winds—and finally her heated gloves.

She trudged outside to find Scorpio standing there, barefoot, stretching. One leg up, the foot resting on his thigh. His hands stretched to the sky. She couldn't help but snort, "Someone's watched *The Karate Kid* too much."

"A cute movie, although I liked the TV show more," he stated, putting his foot down.

"Zodiac Warriors watch television?"

"What else would we do in our downtime?"

"Go bowling in the sky? Race Martians in space?" She joked, but he shook his head.

"Aliens are more about enslaving and conquering than playing games, and we try to avoid Earth's atmosphere, lest we launch an unexpected climate event. Pisces got in so much shit when he accidentally punched a hole in the ozone layer back in the eighties."

She blinked.

He didn't crack a smile.

“I’m going to work,” she stated. “Feel free to leave while I’m gone.” She entered her work tent to grab her equipment cases, lugging them out one at a time to load on a sled. He remained outside—still barefoot!—flinging spears at a mound of snow.

Wait, she recognized those metal rods.

“What did you do to my tripod!” she screeched.

“Made it useful.” He replied without turning to address her.

“It already had a use,” she grumbled. “And just so you know, you can’t kill the seals. Or anything else for that matter. The animals here are protected.”

“Not worried about the wildlife.”

“Expecting company?”

“According to Sage?—”

“Ah yes, the woman who sees the future. Did she see me walking away from you?” Rebecca grabbed the rope to her sled and began trudging toward the glacier west of her camp. According to the map given by her employer, she’d be tapping into the far side, which she’d not yet explored.

It shouldn’t have surprised that Scorpio kept pace with her. Actually, he ranged ahead, trotting as if this were a pleasant summer day in a grassy field. Her own toes curled at the sight of his bare feet running along the ice.

Definitely not human.

Then again, people could do incredible things when determined. Look at those who

walked on coals without injury.

“You’re pretty spry for an old guy,” she muttered under her breath.

He still heard. “I like to keep fit.”

“Are all these other Zodiacs built like bodybuilders?”

“Yup. In our line of work, we can’t afford to be weak, or it could spell our demise.”

“So, you’re not invincible?”

He flashed her a grin. “No. But I wouldn’t recommend plotting my death, as I am tougher than most.”

“You aren’t affected by the cold, but you definitely feel pain,” she observed.

“Yes, but we recover more quickly than a regular human. Heal faster. Most illnesses have no effect on us.”

“But some do?” she questioned.

“While rare, it happens. The most recent case being from a crypt discovered in Egypt. Pisces got hit by a lingering curse. Took him a few weeks before he didn’t look like a walking pustule.”

“Now you’re telling me curses exist?”

“Oh, yes. Magic is real, but those who can wield it are rare. It takes a very gifted person to wrangle the esoteric forces around us.”

“I take it you can do that?”

“Me? No.” He chuckled. “The best I can do is starbeam, which, for lack of a better term, is astral physics. Although I know Virgo likes to call it magic.”

“Do none of you have real names?”

“We give those up when we become a warrior. Our meld with the constellation erases our connection to our past lives.”

“You don’t remember who you used to be?”

He shook his head. “I do, but I had to leave that behind. In order to serve, we need to sever any emotional ties.”

“But you said Libra had a wife and baby.”

“He does.”

“Doesn’t that compromise him?”

“It does. Those who commit to a partner have a weakness that can be exploited.”

“In that case, why make you forget the past if your future can reform emotional bonds with new people?”

He shrugged. “I don’t make the rules.”

She noticed he didn’t offer to pull the sled, not that she needed help, but for an alpha male, he sure lacked in some respects. She huffed as she heaved her load over a rocky patch. Some areas were windswept and flat. Others? Humped and bumpy.

“I’m going to climb and see what’s around us,” he suddenly stated before clambering like a goat up the glacier. No rope or picks, nothing but his hands and feet. The spears dangled down his back in a sling made from the blanket she’d given him.

Let him play king of the mountain. She was almost to the spot. She skirted a pool of water and rounded the sizeable mountain of ice. A shiver went through her as the new angle blocked the sun, leaving her in the much chillier shade.

Hopefully she wouldn’t be there too long—if her equipment cooperated. She parked her sled and began unloading and setting up. Soon, she’d forgotten Scorpio as she took measurements and pictures. She set up her radar and had it scan the ice, only to frown as it blipped.

She leaned over the screen and eyed the spot. In the shade, and with the ice so thick, she couldn’t actually see anything. Not yet, at any rate. Could be nothing, or simply a rock or an animal frozen in the glacier. Still, her mind went right to Scorpio and his mysterious object.

She tapped, chipping at the area of interest. Unlike other research sites, Cetus had not provided her with a thermal drill. When she asked why, she’d been told they preferred more old-fashioned ways. Hence why she had a hammer and a chisel. Ridiculous, but the paycheck made up for it. She’d tried to argue that the drill would get much deeper samples, but Cetus maintained its firm stance.

The ice chips fell into a bucket she’d placed to capture falling fragments, although she would dump the first one that held only the top layer of the glacier. That ice would be too recent to tell much.

As she kept tapping, despite what the radar indicated, she saw nothing out of the ordinary. The ice fractured as expected, revealing more ice. What a surprise.

As the hole she chiseled deepened, she began dumping her bucket, bagging only the largest, most promising pieces for study back at camp. She hated that part, since she had to turn off the heat lest she melt the sample before she could observe it under the microscope.

Tap . Tap . The gap widened, and she still hadn't found what caused the blip on her radar. Only when she heard a sudden hissing escaping from the newest chiseled crack did it occur she might have picked up a trapped pocket of gas.

The recoil from the glacier didn't just occur because of her sudden fear of poisoning but because of the smell. Kind of like a cleaner but hinting of something else. Not rot, nor methane. What was that stench?

The hissing ceased, and she dared to venture close once more. She sniffed. Nothing lingered that she could tell. She lightly tapped the crack and braced to jump away. A chunk fell out, widening it. Another smack and more began to crumble, revealing a hollowed space in the glacier.

She almost opened her mouth to call Scorpio. Had she perhaps found the hiding spot of his mysterious object? Even if she had, she'd meant what she said. It belonged to Cetus, not him.

With that thought, she kept widening the hole, yanking ice away and tossing it, only to freeze. She blinked, but the anomaly remained: Rock.

There was rock inside the glacier, and not just any stone. A smoothed surface engraved with symbols. As she began to excitedly uncover more, it took a moment to register she'd found a facsimile of a door.

For a second, she debated telling Scorpio because this definitely went beyond the scope of her job. This shouldn't exist, not here, the most inhospitable place on earth.

Antarctica was known for never having been inhabited, but this indicated otherwise. This was the discovery of a lifetime. A game changer.

Who carved it, and why?

On a whim, she removed her glove for a moment and placed her bare hand against the surface. After all, she'd discovered it, she should be the first to touch?—

A sudden vibrating hum had her recoiling. Under her disbelieving gaze, the stone shifted, moving sideways into the wall of rock, just like a pocket door would. It should have been utterly impossible, but before she could pinch herself, she found her gaze captured by the sight of stairs descending into the glacier.

Exactly what had she discovered?

Warm air wafted upward and brought a sweat to her brow that had her removing her face mask as it kissed her skin moistly. Heat vent? Again, should have been impossible.

She eyed the stairs. Should she go down them alone?

Who knew what hid down there.

Discovery.

Danger.

Hearing a crunch of snow, she whirled to tell Scorpio what she'd found.

Only it wasn't a big, tall hunk coming at her, but that damnable leopard seal.

It lunged and barked.

She startled and recoiled. In doing so, she lost her balance. Her arms windmilled a few times before she lost the fight with gravity and went tumbling down the stairs.

CHAPTER 5

Scorpio planted himself at the top of the glacier to have a look. He could see for miles around. Saw a whole lot of nothing, just the glaring white of snow and ice and the dark blue of the ocean as it lapped against the shore. Penguins roamed the wet edge, hopping onto the solid ice, only to fling themselves off again into the water. Cute little buggers. A few seals sunned themselves, including the same one he'd wrestled with the day before.

He treaded to the far side of his high vantage point and observed as the doctor pulled the sled around the glacier, huffing and straining. It killed him to watch her struggle. He'd kept waiting for her to ask for help. She never did, and, after her reaction to the kiss, he didn't dare offer, lest she accuse him of overstepping. He didn't want her to think he viewed her as incapable or weak, but it almost physically hurt to not give a hand. He would have pulled that sled with ease.

Avoiding a pool of water, she parked her sled in the shadow of the glacier and removed some equipment. She aimed some of the devices at the icy wall before tapping at it with a hammer and chisel, placing the chunks in a bucket, selecting some to go in plastic bags.

Boring. He chose to make a circuit, on the lookout for threats. Aries and Sage hadn't specified what he should be vigilant for or even when the danger would arise, so best be safe. From his vantage, he could see the immediate area and even the smudge of her camp, nestled amidst a few snow- and ice-covered mountains.

Tap . Tap .

The doctor's picking at the glacier became a monotone in the background that he barely paid any mind to until it stopped and didn't resume. He went to check on the doctor, only to realize she'd disappeared. Her things remained, if scattered—the giant seal who'd snuck up was having a blast knocking them about.

“You fucker.” He leaped down, his knees bending to minimize impact. The seal took one look at him, barked, and waddled off, but not far. It slipped into a puddle and disappeared. Sly bastard.

Now, where was the doctor—first name Rebecca, another thing discovered while he'd been snooping. It wasn't as if she'd volunteered it.

“Where are you, Doc?” She couldn't have gone far, yet the icy plateau showed nothing but penguins. Had she fallen in the same hole the seal used? She didn't seem that clumsy. Still, he crouched by it and peered into the deep water. Saw nothing. As he turned, he noticed a slight alcove in the glacier. His brow raised at the sight of a large hole that showed an edge of stone, the size and shape of it very much like a doorway.

“Doc? Hello?” he called out as he approached. She didn't reply.

Up close to the gaping entrance to the cave, he noticed the rock had been tooled, the edges perfectly square, the symbols etched?—

“Holy fuck.” He recognized the Zodiac signs, or at least their ancient version and not the more modern stuff used these days. “She found it,” he murmured aloud, only to scowl. She'd discovered an ancient ruin and gone looking without notifying him.

He put a foot on the first step but hesitated at the darkness below. Surely, she wouldn't have gone exploring without light. Even he couldn't see in the dark. Did she carry a flashlight on that sled? Had she taken it? He didn't spot any hint of

illumination.

A faint groan rising from the stairwell brought a frisson to his skin.

“Rebecca?” he called out.

A moan replied.

Ah, fuck. He trotted down the steps, his visibility worsening as he descended, until he brushed his hand against the narrow walls enclosing the stairs. The stone began to emit a faint glow. He frowned as he flattened his palm against the surface, increasing the brightness.

“I’ll be damned.” This stairwell hadn’t been carved into just any rock, but a meteorite, a star fallen to Earth, which explained why it reacted to him. As he descended, he trailed his fingers on the wall, the glow following as he made his way down the long stretch of steps.

Very long.

How fucking far did they go?

Rebecca didn’t make another sound. Had she encountered something?

Nothing attacked, and when Scorpio reached the bottom he found Rebecca crumpled on the floor. A quick glance showed no limbs visibly broken or twisted, a relief, although she did have a gash on her forehead. The blood from the head wound stained the floor, but her breathing remained steady. She’d have a headache for sure when she woke, possibly even a concussion, but at least it wasn’t worse.

He knelt by her side and began checking her more thoroughly. Once he’d ascertained

she'd broken nothing—her thick snowsuit having padded her fall—he scooped her into his arms and stood. The dilemma? Should he take up the stairs and back to the habitat, or explore the small round chamber he found himself in? A glance showed the walls smooth but for a slender hole.

The kind of hole that begged for a hand to go groping.

The kind of hole that could very well hide something that would eat said hand.

The kind of hole that would bug him endlessly if he didn't know what it hid.

Holding Rebecca with one arm, he pulled a spear and poked at the opening.

Nothing happened. The spear entered and exited without issue.

Did he dare risk his flesh?

Fuck yeah, he did. His hand went in next and found the interior warm and dry. Nothing skittered over him like in Temple of Doom . Nothing tried to bite it off. He pushed deeper, only to find the opening narrowed enough he risked being wedged.

He withdrew his hand and noticed nothing on his skin, not even dust.

Doc began to stir, grunting in his arms, her head turning side to side. Her lashes fluttered, and when they stared at him blearily, she murmured, “Not you again.”

He grinned. “Hey, Doc. You took quite the tumble. Forget how to use stairs?”

She grimaced. “It was that stupid seal again. It scared me, and I fell.” She stiffened. “Hold on, you said stairs. Where am I?”

“Inside the glacier. You appear to have found some kind of ruin. You should have called for me before exploring,” he chided.

“Never had a chance. The radar spotted an anomaly, which isn’t unusual. I began chipping and had just uncovered the doorway when the seal attacked.” She craned to look. “Is this really a ruin?”

“Yup. Those stairs you rolled down finished in this room.” He spun to show her, the faint glow letting her see.

Her mouth rounded. “How is this possible? The Antarctic was never settled.”

“That anyone knew of. Congrats, you can add archeologist to your resume now.”

Her lips twisted. “It’s kind of ironic since I have a thing for ancient civilizations. I blame Indiana Jones. All my vacations are usually to spots where I can explore the past—the pyramids, Aztec temples, Machu Picchu.”

“I’d say this place is as old or older,” he stated, setting Rebecca on her feet but keeping an arm around her in case she proved unsteady.

“How is it I can see? Is the rock glowing?” She tottered from him to place her face closer to the surface before running her fingers over it. The light remained steady, not reacting to her touch.

“I do believe we’re inside a sizeable meteorite, and the light is because it’s reacting to my presence.”

“And you say you’re not an alien.” She snorted. “Any idea who built it?”

“I don’t know, but the symbols around the door are very old Zodiac ones.”

“Really?” Her brow arched. “Guess that means you found what you were looking for.”

He shook his head. “Not yet. There’s nothing here except that hole in the wall.” He pointed. “I tried reaching in, but it narrows quickly and I couldn’t feel much inside.”

She glanced at the crevice and, without hesitation, stuck her hand in it. Her tongue peeked from her lips as her eyes went out of focus and she murmured, “I wonder if there’s a catch inside here somewhere.” Her arm went inside past the elbow.

“That’s much farther in than I made it.”

“Aha.” An exclamation that was followed by an audible click.

She withdrew her hand, and her lips curved as a section of the wall shivered before sliding out of the way. “Tada!”

“Good job unlocking it.”

“What do you think is in there?” She poked her head into the opening, but the illumination of the chamber didn’t extend that far.

“No idea, hence why I’ll go first.” He stepped in front of her, ignoring her rolling eyes.

“Oh please. Pretty sure there’s nothing alive in there that can hurt me.”

“Said every person who died before going into a strange new place. Just give me a second to see if it’s clear before you enter.”

He stepped into the dark space, and once more, a mere brush of his flesh against the

walls caused them to illuminate, showing an innocuous tunnel. He immediately distrusted it. Call it his astral sense, but something was amiss.

“See anything?” she asked, sounding far too close.

“Careful. Stay where you are,” he exclaimed. “I think the place might be trapped.”

“This is not a movie,” she scoffed, shuffling to his left. “Those kinds of things?—”

An audible click had him whirling. He threw himself on Rebecca, taking them both to the floor in time to avoid the blade that whistled as it swung past.

She lay under him, wide-eyed. “What was that?”

“A warning.”

“A good one, if you ask me. I think that’s our cue to leave.”

“Agreed. You should head back up.”

“Me? What about you?”

“I will join you once I’ve located what I came for.”

“You want to die for this mystery object? Go ahead. I’m not that brave. So, get off me you, heavy lug.”

“I’m not fat,” he huffed. “It’s muscle.”

“Which is still squashing me.”

Again, not a complaint he'd ever heard. He rolled from her, and she scrambled to her feet, moving back to the door, only to stop abruptly.

"It's closed."

"What do you—Oh."

The opening they'd come through had shut, and unlike the other side, no hole existed with a mechanism for her to unlatch. It didn't stop her from running her hands on the smooth stone before she huffed, "I can't figure out how to open it. What are we supposed to do?"

"Explore?"

She pursed her lips at him. "Why aren't you more worried? Were you expecting this?"

"Nope."

"You knew there were traps," she accused.

"Didn't know so much as suspected. Someone went through a lot of trouble to create this place. And if it does indeed have this object I'm looking for, it stands to reason they'd have placed safeguards."

"And how are we supposed to spot these traps?" She pointed to the floor. "I can't even see where I triggered the blade." A blade that now hung motionless. He glanced to the ceiling, where a section of it had moved to let it swing free.

"We'll need to move carefully."

“You move carefully. I’m staying right here,” she huffed, crossing her arms.

“That sounds like a great plan.” She couldn’t accidentally cause trouble if she didn’t touch anything.

She remained planted in place as he crouched to eye the floor. Seeing nothing, he placed his hand upon it. Unlike the walls, it didn’t glow, but up close, he could see faint striations in the stone. A glance behind and he could see where she’d stepped, a convergence of lines. A clue as to where to put his feet. He moved cautiously and paused before the next bundle of markings.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Testing a theory,” he murmured before lightly pressing the spot. He barely had time to fling himself backwards, as the floor suddenly dropped, revealing a deep chasm.

“Holy crap on a cracker,” she exclaimed. “Are you okay?”

“Seeing as how I didn’t fall, yeah,” was his sarcastic reply.

The gap, while wide, was jumpable. He leaped to the other side, carefully so as to not accidentally land on something he shouldn’t. A good thing he’d shown caution, as his toes were a mere half-inch from the next set of lines, which formed a knot.

He skirted them and the next before coming across a thick band of them. Once more, he hesitated. He eyed the floor, the ceiling, and finally the walls. This section was darker, as he’d not touched the walls since he’d left Rebecca’s side, and that initial glow was fading.

A light brush of his fingers brought light, but also a grinding sound.

“The tunnel is closing in,” Rebecca yelled as she backed slowly from the moving stone.

“Quick, get to me.” He headed in her direction.

“I can’t jump across the hole. It’s too wide,” she stated, standing by the edge of it.

“Fuck.” He sprinted as the wall kept coming, heading for Rebecca. He dodged the marks on the floor and leaped over the chasm with only two paces between them and the moving stone. He slung an arm around her waist, took one step back, and then launched them back over the hole. A bit too forcefully. His foot partially hit the next trigger, and he flung them forward away from the holes in the wall, which suddenly shot metal darts.

He stumbled but kept his feet, dragging her along. They had to keep moving because the wall didn’t stop at the rift but kept coming. Rebecca said nothing as she clung to him. His grip around her remained tight as he sprinted, over a knot of lines then past. He then had to slow, needing to carefully watch where he put his feet.

Not careful enough. He once more hit the edge of some markings, and the wall closing in moved faster.

In good news, he could see the end of the tunnel. In the bad? He saw no way out, just a smooth wall. No hole. Nothing.

Still, there was nowhere else to go. Surely whoever built this place had a way of getting past.

They reached the dead end, and Scorpio set Rebecca down. To dispel the gloom, as the moving wall blocked the glow behind them, he put a hand on the close wall, and, to his surprise, symbols lit.

“Are those the same markings as the outside arch?” Rebecca murmured, peering at them with curiosity.

“Yeah.” But what did it mean? He glanced over his shoulder and saw the stone wall coming at them fast. He estimated they had less than a minute to figure out the puzzle.

“Try pressing yours.”

He slapped at the symbol Scorpio. Nothing. He tapped them all as the tunnel shortened. Nothing he did had an effect.

“Might be they have to be done in a certain order,” Rebecca stated with a frown.

He tried again. Capricorn first, then Aquarius and Pisces. He did all twelve in order to no avail. The wall was mere paces away and not slowing down.

“It didn’t work.” His frustration emerged in those huffed words. To think he’d die so ignobly, crushed by stone.

“You did it by calendar month, but aren’t they related to the solstices?” she murmured. She began tapping them, starting with Aries. “Aries is the start of the spring equinox.” She then did them all as Scorpio watched the advancing wall and wondered if getting crushed would hurt or if they’d die before the pain had a chance to register.

Click .

The door opened just in time for them to tumble through. Thud . The moving stone came to rest in the spot they’d been standing in.

“That was close,” he exclaimed. Close, but they’d survived.

And that called for a celebration.

CHAPTER 6

The kiss took Rebecca by surprise and, at the same time, didn't. After all, they'd both almost died. This time, she didn't protest but let him kiss her because she felt the same joy as he did at the fact they'd survived and beaten whoever built those traps.

His lips moved sensually over hers, stealing her breath, increasing her pulse, boiling her blood—and warming other parts. However, the embrace ended almost as quick as it began with him murmuring. “We should probably see where we ended up.”

He had a point, but she couldn't help a tinge of disappointment. She didn't let it show as she stated, “Holy darkness. Can you get the rock to do that glowy thing again?”

“Let me see. First, I need to find a wall.”

“Find it.”

He moved away from her—which made her a little nervous given they could see nothing. Who knew what lurked or what pitfalls waited to be triggered?

“It should be right around here somewhere,” he murmured. A few seconds later, the walls began to glow, and unlike the other tunnel, all of them lit up at once, showing they stood in a strangely shaped room, maybe twenty or so feet across. It took her a moment to count and count again before she stated, “I've never seen anyone use a tridecagon shape for a building.”

“A what?”

“Thirteen-sided shape,” she murmured. “So odd, seeing as how it’s considered an unlucky number.”

“Only in Western cultures. The Egyptians actually loved it.”

“You think they built this place? They would have had the skills to do so,” Rebecca mused aloud.

“Possible.” He crouched to eye the floor of smooth stone.

“Are there more traps?” She clasped her hands and didn’t move, worried, and with good reason, that an inadvertent step might send her plunging—or make her lose her head.

“Doesn’t seem like it. Give me a second to scout.” He cautiously treaded the circumference of the space, empty of anything—including an exit. But given the puzzles they’d encountered thus far, she didn’t panic.

Yet.

Surely there would be a way out. They just had to decipher its secret.

“Seems like we’re safe.”

She snorted. “Seems like a bit of an oxymoron to use the word safe. We’re trapped underground in a place that did its best to kill us.”

“Not us, but those who didn’t belong.” He glanced at her. “Good thinking with those symbols by the way. I’d completely forgotten that, in older times, the Zodiac started with spring. Aries would have known, though.” He grimaced.

“I only thought of it because the calendar way failed. Good thing the builder didn’t start with a different constellation, or we’d be....” She couldn’t say it. The way they’d narrowly evaded death hitting her suddenly.

“I don’t see any objects,” he stated after having walked around twice. “Nor holes. No symbols either on the floor or walls.”

Which left only the ceiling. She craned to look. The room peaked at a point overhead. She indicated. “There’s something up there.”

“Which I can’t reach,” he grumbled. He eyed her. “Maybe if you stood on my shoulders?”

Rebecca shook her head. “It’s still too high.”

“Then how are we supposed to reach it?” He glared at the ceiling.

“It’s obviously another puzzle.” She chewed the thumb of her mitten even as she debated removing layers. It was warm in here. Too warm.

“Um, Scorpio, is it me, or is the room getting hotter?”

He frowned from his spot in the center. “Not from where I’m standing.”

She approached him, and the air noticeably cooled. “Odd. It’s chillier here.”

As if he didn’t believe her, he stalked for the wall then back before announcing, “You’re right. The temperature is rising. It’s radiating from the walls.”

“Meaning we’d better figure out this next puzzle or we’re going to get cooked,” she stated, doing her best to keep her panic in check. It would help if they had a clue.

She remained in the center of the chamber and glanced upward, the nodule at the peak intriguing, as it appeared to be silvery in color instead of the stone she saw everywhere else.

Scorpio joined her. “Any ideas?”

She shook her head. “No. I don’t see any markings or holes. Nothing.” And it was getting hotter. She unzipped her coat but couldn’t stop the sweat from pearling.

Scorpio grunted. “Fuck me. What are we missing?”

She tucked her gloves in her pocket, along with her hat. “A ladder.”

He chuckled. “I’ll have to remember to store one in my back pocket next time I go on a mission.”

“You know, it’s ironic that in the coldest place on Earth, I’m about to be killed by heat.”

Saying it aloud had the words hot and cold rattling around inside her head. It made her note that, while she was warm and sweaty, Scorpio remained cool-looking.

She thought of how they’d gotten in, how her hand and arm—but not his—fit through the hole in the first chamber allowing her to open the door. How he could light the stone walls. How the sigils for the last puzzle reacted to her despite her not being some Zodiac Warrior person.

How they were opposites who’d had to work together.

She eyed him. “I’ve got a weird idea.”

“Go ahead. We’re running out of options,” he stated.

“Kiss me.”

“What?” He glanced down at her.

“You heard me. Kiss me or touch me. Skin-to-skin contact.”

“I’d ask why, but if I’m gonna die might as well be having fun,” he stated with a grin.

He dragged her up on tiptoe and pressed his mouth to hers. Right in the middle of the room. Right under the peak. Hot-blooded meeting cold-blooded.

The kiss was more than fun. It exhilarated. Made her tingle head to toe. Made her forget they would probably be baked to death. Made her wish she had more time to explore this oddly fascinating man.

His hands tucked inside her coat and pressed her firmly to him. His tongue peeked past her lips. She tickled it with her own and moaned. As his hands cupped her ass, and he ground against her, the heat curling around them suddenly vanished, and she opened her eyes to see Scorpio staring back. “Did a kiss seriously save our lives?” His query held an incredulous note.

“Seems so.”

“Why didn’t the first one work?”

She shrugged. “Wrong spot? Maybe it wasn’t long enough? Does it matter? Look.”

She pointed, and he glanced overhead, his jaw dropping at the sight of the silver ball lowering, floating without string. When it got close, Scorpio grabbed the sphere, the

size of a large grapefruit.

“What is it?” she murmured, still a bit flustered from the embrace.

“I don’t know.” He tucked the sphere under an arm and frowned. “What made you think a kiss would work?”

“I wasn’t sure it would do anything, to be honest. Magic or star power or whatever you call it is a rather new concept to me. However, it occurred to me that this place, while built with Zodiacs in mind, obviously needed a human.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because I assume you and your other warrior friends are all bulky.”

“Yeah, we’re all kind of buff.”

“Meaning no way you could have unlocked that first door. And the spring solstice is a human thing, meaning not something you might have thought of. Ultimately, though, it was the heat in this place versus the extreme chill outside. Hot and cold, extreme opposites. Man and woman. Also opposites. Human and warrior, not quite opposites, but definitely not the same.”

His lips quirked. “Most definitely not the same. Good thinking. I see now why I needed you for this mission. Now, how about you use that gorgeous brain of yours to figure out how we escape?”

“I’m working on it.” Only she had nothing. The room remained unchanged?—

Creak .

The noise had them both glancing overhead to see cracks suddenly spreading across the ceiling.

“Um, that’s not good,” she stated.

“No shit. Let me see if I can get us out of here. Tuck close.”

“How does hugging you help?” she asked, glancing up at his face.

“Because all warriors have a built-in homing device for home. I just need to...” He frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

“My tattoo isn’t activating.”

“You have a magical tattoo?” She marveled that she still had the capacity to be surprised.

“Yeah. It links me to the portal in the tower where I live. But I can’t get it to do its thing.”

“Is it because we’re underground?”

“That, or the meteor around us is interfering with my ability. Fuck.” He spat the word just as the first chunk of stone fell from the center of the roof, crashing and exploding into shards.

“It’s coming down,” she stated unnecessarily. “We’re going to get crushed.”

“Not necessarily. Get to the wall.” He dragged Rebecca to a section and pressed her

tight against it as the ceiling continued to collapse. Not just rocks tumbled, but hunks of ice, too. Scorpio turned Rebeca so her face was smushed to the wall. His body shielded hers as the room caved in.

It seemed to be an eternity, but probably only took minutes, before the rumbling and crashing ceased.

“I think it’s done falling down,” he announced. “And look, it left a way out.”

A glance showed a shaft of light descending from where the room once peaked, a room now filled with rubble and ice.

“You think we can climb out through that opening?” She couldn’t help but sound skeptical.

“Only one way to find out.” He kept the sphere tucked under his arm as he nimbly navigated the mound, but he didn’t leave her behind. He steadied Rebecca as she struggled to follow, her bulky boots and suit making her less agile. He gave her a hand when she wavered. At the peak of the mini mountain, daylight beckoned.

The brightness had her squinting as she glanced upward to see a narrow shaft that must exit at the top of the glacier.

“Now what do we do? There’s no ladder or handholds.”

“It’s the perfect width to chimney climb.” A term that quickly became clear as Scorpio leaped into the opening and braced his legs against the inside. He began moving upward, making it look easy.

For him. “I don’t know if I can do it.”

“It’s easy. Watch me.” So easy, he did it one-handed, the other holding the sphere. His legs and feet moved, his bare feet gripping the ice. He reached the top quickly and peered down.

“Now you try.”

“Yeah, because I totally have the skill and strength,” Rebecca grumbled as she tried to leap and brace.

And failed.

She landed on her ass and scowled. “So much for easy.”

“Hold on a second. I’ll come help.”

He descended, both hands free, having left the orb at the top.

“Want me to carry you?” he asked.

“I’m not useless,” she grumbled. “Give me a boost and I should be able to manage.”

With his aid, she maneuvered inside the shaft. Copying his movements, she began to climb. Slowly. Laboriously. Huffing. Panting. Her muscles screaming. And for that effort? Only a quarter of the way there.

She sighed. “I changed my mind. Is that offer to carry still available?”

“Of course it is. I got you, Doc.” Scorpio immediately sidled his way to position himself in front of her, making the shaft even more narrow. “Loop your arms around my neck, legs around my waist. Hold on tight.”

She tucked against him, resting her face on his chest while he did the work. Most annoying part? He wasn't even breathing hard by the time they made it to the top and he set her down outside.

A good thing he had air to waste, because the stream of expletives he let out needed a lungful.

The reason? Surrounding the opening of the shaft, a dozen men in expensive snow gear, which included concealing helmets and pointed rifles.

"Hands up," one of them barked.

A scowling Scorpio obliged, as did Rebecca, her confusion mounting. Who were these people? Why did they threaten?

The only stranger who didn't wear combat gear or hold a gun had the sphere cradled in his hands. At the sight of them, the man, his hair graying at the temples, smiled. "Excellent job, Doctor Guthrie, in locating the relic."

"How do you know my name?"

"Because I hired you."

At his words, she noted the insignia on his coat, a familiar company logo.

"You work for Cetus?" She couldn't help a surprised note.

"I do, and as I was the one who nominated you for this job, I am delighted to see it was the right choice. The last scientist proved to be such a disappointment. Then again, he didn't have one of the Zodiac Warriors helping him."

Scorpio scowled. “What do you want with the orb?”

“You’ll soon find out. If you’ll follow me...” The man tucked the orb into a pouch slung crossbody before he turned and began to climb down a ladder dangling from the top of the glacier.

They had no choice but to follow since the man also stated, “If they don’t cooperate, shoot them.”

Rebecca needed no other threat. She obeyed, as did Scorpio, if unwillingly.

“Who are you? Where are you taking us?” he hotly demanded once he’d finished climbing down.

“I work for Cetus, which is also where we’re heading.” The man indicated the oversized chopper planted on the ice field by her camp.

“Why?” Rebecca asked, joining him. “You have the orb. You obviously don’t need us anymore.” A bitter response to the realization she’d been used.

“Given you’ve proven clever, you might be useful yet. Three people we’ve sent looking for the relic, but you’re the only one who managed to find it. As for the warrior, we’ve long hoped to capture one of the famed Zodiac Warriors, but they’re not easy to locate.”

“Who says you’ve captured me?” Scorpio declared.

“Even you cannot think to escape this many armed men,” scoffed the man.

“Don’t be so sure about that.” Scorpio suddenly grabbed hold of Rebecca and murmured, “Hold tight.”

“What?” she exclaimed as he tucked her to his chest.

The stranger yelled, “Shoot him before he starbeams.”

As bullets suddenly fired, the world went blurry and cold, intensely cold.

For a brief moment, she felt as if she were flying.

Then.... darkness.

CHAPTER 7

With impossible odds that offered capture or possible death, Scorpio took a third option.

Escape.

Out in the open air, feeling the tug of his stars, he chose the cowardly route—mostly because he didn't want to see Rebecca injured or killed. However, his abrupt departure meant leaving the orb in the hands of the malfeasants who'd ambushed. But only for a short time because, once he'd made sure of Rebecca's safety, he would hunt them down and take it back.

Scorpio activated his power, the tattoo on his back heating, enveloping him and everything touching him—including the woman in his arms. The constellation and the tower did the rest. He, and everything touching him, dematerialized and shot to the stars, a streak of light only rarely caught by those watching that ricocheted back to Earth and reassembled them inside the portal room on the bottom floor of Babel Tower.

Home sweet—and safe—home, where Aries would likely give him shit for bringing an outsider. Only humans who'd taken the oath could visit the tower. An oath that bound them with star power and kept them from revealing their secrets.

It wasn't just Aries who'd likely freak. He had a feeling the doc wouldn't be too impressed. He'd apologize later.

He exited the portal room and carried the limp doctor to his room on the ninth floor. They did have rarely used guest quarters on the second. However, in his mind, she belonged in only one place.

His bed.

Not a thought he'd ever had before. As a matter of fact, she was the first woman he'd ever brought home. Although, technically, this probably didn't count because of extenuating circumstances.

His quarters were spacious. Larger than many apartments, the ceilings ten feet high, the living area with his couch and recliner spacious enough for his virtual game system to be played without smacking into furniture. His bedroom accommodated a king-sized bed on a platform with a few wardrobes and a recliner for relaxing in front of the fire. Not that he did that often. He usually gamed when bored. If he got lonely, he went to a bar.

Rebecca didn't wake as he lay her on his comforter, ensuring he pillowed her head. She appeared pale. Not unusual, especially for a first voyage, just like fainting tended to be common. Starbeaming took a toll on humans.

She'd most likely sleep a few hours while her body recovered. Then, when she woke, he'd have some 'splaining to do. Would she be angry? Scared? Curious? A blend of all those emotions?

While he waited for her to rouse, time to report to the boss.

A boss waiting outside his suite with arms crossed.

"What. The. Fuck." Aries snapped.

“So, I ran into a bit of an issue,” Scorpio stated with a shrug.

“You brought a stranger to the tower.”

“With good reason. She was about to be either abducted or shot.”

“And?”

“I was also going to be abducted or shot.”

Aries lips pinched. “What happened since our last conversation?”

“Quite a bit. The doc found some kind of ruin inside the glacier she was studying.”

“A ruin? In Antarctica?” Aries repeated.

“Yeah, carved out of a meteorite and buried in ice. The entrance had the ancient Zodiac sigils carved, and when I touched the walls inside, they glowed.”

The claim raised Aries’ brows. “What else did you find?”

“Traps.” Scorpio explained how they managed to gain entrance, the various pitfalls, the final chamber and?—

“You found the artifact!”

“I did.”

“Where is it?” Aries asked before pursing his lips to correctly surmise, “You lost it.”

“Not exactly. It was stolen, by the same company that hired Rebecca. They were

waiting for us when we escaped the ruin.”

“Wait, her company was the one that threatened to shoot you?”

“Or kidnap us. We emerged to find a dozen dudes armed with rifles. They had a massive helicopter waiting to take us to their evil lair.”

“How the fuck did you not hear a goddamned helicopter?”

“I assume it landed while we were dealing with the cave-in.”

Aries’ expression pinched tighter. “How did they know about the artifact?”

“Because they have a seer of their own,” Sage announced, startling Scorpio.

Aries didn’t flinch. Most likely used to his wife’s sudden eerie appearances.

“They knew exactly when we were going to find it?” Aries asked without turning around.

“They did,” Sage confirmed.

“And you couldn’t warn me?” Scorpio huffed.

“I did. You were told to be on guard.”

“I was on guard. I got us through the traps in the ruin. Got us out of it when the thing collapsed. Didn’t expect to be met with guns.” Scorpio complained mostly because of his own sense of guilt. He should have been more aware. Blame the fact the kiss, and Rebecca in general, had him out of sorts. Again, not something that usually happened.

“I can’t believe you found and lost it,” Aries grouched. “Not good. Not good at all.”

“Scorpio will get it back,” Sage declared. “Eventually.”

“How?” he and Aries asked.

“You know who took it, and you smartly kept the one person who can help you get it back.”

“You think Rebecca can get us into Cetus headquarters?”

“She will be key to retrieving it,” Sage’s next cryptic reply. “If you can convince her to help you, which is a question hanging in the balance.”

“Meaning you need to be nice to her,” Aries admonished.

“I’m always nice,” Scorpio rebutted.

“For one night, because usually you don’t have to see them again.”

“Ouch,” Scorpio exclaimed, even while knowing Aries spoke the truth. He didn’t do long-term things or anything, for that matter, that lasted more than one date.

Aries’ jaw shifted. “Maybe I should have someone else?—”

Sage shook her head, interrupting. “No. It has to be Scorpio. Only working together will they prevail.”

“Um, I don’t do partners,” Scorpio reminded.

“You work with the other warriors just fine,” Aries countered.

“Warriors being the key word. She’s a human. A delicate one at that. Not a fighter. I don’t see how she’d be much help.”

“There is more to a fight than strength and skill with arms.” Sage’s next words of wisdom.

“True. I couldn’t have found the orb without her, but at the same time, being smart doesn’t stop a bullet.”

“Neither does being dumb,” Sage offered with a smile.

“Okay, so the object has been found but needs to be retrieved. You’ll need this doctor to help you. Anything else we need to know?” Aries addressed his wife.

“Yes. I need ice cream. Chocolate and strawberry, drizzled in melted marshmallow and topped with a banana and some of those tiny crunchy dill pickles.”

Both he and Aries blinked at her.

Sage smiled. “The baby’s hungry.” With that announcement, she turned and glided away, utterly missing how Aries’ jaw hit the floor.

Scorpio helped him pick it up by slapping him on the back. “Congrats, bro. You’re gonna be a daddy.”

“Oh fuck me. Sage! SAGE!” Aries bellowed as he bolted after his wife.

Scorpio grinned. His serious friend needed someone like Sage to keep him on his toes.

He glanced at his suite door. What would it be like to have someone like that in his

life?

Probably hazardous to his health, because, when he walked back in, he was met with a videogame remote being thrown at his head.

CHAPTER 8

Rebecca woke in a bed, in a strange place with no idea how she got there. Last she recalled, armed men surrounded her and Scorpio at the glacier and the ruins they'd escaped.

Company men! Who stole what she and Scorpio found and planned to kidnap or shoot them if they didn't cooperate.

Then Scorpio hugged her tight and after...

Nothing. No memory at all. Had the kidnapping succeeded? She definitely wasn't in the Antarctic anymore. She rose and glanced around the luxurious suite. Plastered walls, tiled floors, heavy wooden furniture. A lovely space but it didn't excuse abducting her. A wide window drew her with its bright sunshine, and she gaped at the vista. Sand and rock and definitely not snow or ice.

Where was she?

As she wandered from the bedroom into the living area, again replete with furniture and even electronics, she had to wonder what had happened after she passed out. Heck, what about before?

How had the company that hired her known she'd find the artifact? The team had obviously been ready to snag them the moment they emerged, indicating some devious plotting. After all, they'd been inside the glacier for only, what? An hour or two at most. She'd not had time to tell anyone of her discovery of the ruin, yet those

armed men had been waiting when they exited. Known of the sphere. Known who Scorpio was.

Hearing a noise, she glanced at the door, and as it swung open, instinct kicked in and she grabbed the nearest item. A game system controller.

She flung it at the person entering.

Scorpio caught it one-handed and arched a brow. “Did you get ambushed by kids playing Call of Duty too?”

“It’s you.” Relief filled her.

“Expecting someone else?”

“Last thing I remember is armed thugs and a helicopter. Were we kidnapped?”

“No. We escaped.”

“How?” Because the odds at the time made that scenario unlikely.

“Since we were outside, I starbeamed our asses out of there.”

She blinked. “Meaning?”

“You know how in Star Trek they would beam people from the ship to planets and stuff? Well, instead of a transponder, I’ve got a tattoo that lets me do the same, only it always takes me home.”

It took her a moment to process before she blurted out, “You’re saying my body was dematerialized into tiny atoms and reassembled halfway across the world.” Because,

no matter where they were, no denying they were miles and miles and miles from the Antarctic.

“Yes.”

It led to her jumping to her feet and slapping her body. A body still clad in her winter gear.

“What are you doing?” he asked with curiosity.

“Checking everything is there,” she muttered, unzipping her jacket and shedding it.

Two boobs. Arms. Belly. She lifted her shirt and confirmed the presence of her belly button. Below? Two legs ending in booted feet. She kicked them off and wiggled her toes.

“You’re all there, Doc. No need to panic.”

“Says you,” she grumbled.

“I’m sorry. Would you rather I’d let those mercenaries kidnap you?”

“No. However, when you say you brought us home, exactly where are we?”

“Babel Tower, which, before you ask, is located in Iraq.”

“Impossible. The history books claim Babel Tower was destroyed ages ago, if it even existed.”

“That’s what the world thinks. The tower has long been hidden from electronic and human eyes.”

“More magic.” More impossible things science couldn’t explain. It hurt her poor brain, and she collapsed onto the couch, which made it easier to shed her snowpants.

“Some call it magic, but in reality, it’s star power.”

“Either way, it’s insane,” she grouched. “Everything I know has been completely messed up since I met you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Welcome for making me realize I don’t know anything?”

“For expanding your worldview.”

“My worldview didn’t need to be threatened by armed men. Which leads me to wonder, why they were even there?”

“They wanted the artifact.”

“Obviously, but how did they know I’d find it? I had no clue I’d find a ruin. I was supposed to be collecting ice samples.”

“According to Sage, they were ready because they have a seer of their own.”

She stared at him. “Exactly how many people can see the future?”

“Apparently two now, at least. I’m as surprised as you. I thought Sage was the only one.”

Rebecca rubbed her face. “This is all so crazy. Space power?—”

“Star,” he corrected.

“Secret ruins, booby traps, artifacts that are stolen by men with guns. What’s happened to my life?” Her quiet, predictable life.

“Hungry?”

The change of subject had her narrowing her gaze on him. “No, I’m not hungry. I want to know what’s going on.”

“Simple. Cetus knew in advance that you would find the artifact. They even had knowledge of when. So they hired you, put some people in position ahead of time so, when you finally did locate it, they were there to snag it.”

“I know what happened,” she snapped. “I was there. I want the answer to why? What the hell is that thing we found? Why does everyone want it so badly?”

He shrugged. “Dunno.”

“Well, it must be darned important if so many people are going to all that trouble.”

“Agreed, which is why we need to get it back.”

She stared at him. “We?”

“Well, yeah. That asshole who stole it from us can’t keep it. You found it. Not them.”

“Anything I discover on company time technically belongs to them.”

The statement pursed his lips. “I am pretty sure they have no claim to it.”

“Neither do you, or anyone alive for that matter.”

“It belongs to the Zodiacs,” he stated.

“How can you say that when you don’t even know what it is?”

“You saw the symbols in that ruin.”

“Yeah. And so what? For all we know, some really old Zodiac folks put that object in there to keep it from someone else, meaning it might not have been theirs either.”

“Sage says the fate of the world depends on us finding the missing artifact.”

“We did find it. So, technically, we did our part.”

His turn to sigh. “Don’t you care they stole it? It was your discovery.”

“I do care, but I’m less pissed about the theft than the way the company used me. Not to mention their bullying tactics were uncalled for. Why not tell me they sought a ruin in the glacier? Why did they threaten to shoot me? Why the attempt to abduct me? They didn’t have to be so extreme. I would have told them about the ruin in my next report.”

“And given them the sphere?” he asked.

She pinched her lips.

“Well?”

“I would have told them about it and, yes, most likely handed it over. But”—she hastened to add—“I would have first documented everything I could and relayed that

information to some people who would have made sure Cetus couldn't hide it or keep it. A discovery like that belongs to the world."

"Why does it sound like you're not going to help me retrieve it?"

"Because I'm not. I have no legal right to the orb. My contract with them has a clause that states, in simple terms, that finders-keepers doesn't apply." Which she'd not thought much of because she'd assumed they meant fossilized remains.

"Sage said?—"

"I really don't care what Sage says. What I do want is to leave and get back to my life."

"Do you really think the company will allow that?"

She opened and shut her mouth. "Why wouldn't they? They got what they wanted."

"Not entirely. They also wanted you and me."

"Surely now that they've got the sphere, they'll leave me alone."

"You're being na?ve," his harsh rebuke, and while it stung, a part of her understood he probably wasn't wrong. A company willing to shoot and kidnap wouldn't just let her walk away.

"You make it sound like my life is over," she muttered with a sulking lower lip.

"No, but it has changed."

"Because of you," she accused. "If you hadn't shown up?—"

“You would have still found the cave. However, would you have survived it?” he countered.

Thinking of that first trap, probably not.

“Now what? If I can’t go back to my camp in the Antarctic or return home, then where am I supposed to go?”

“Nowhere. You’ll stay here for now.”

She glanced around. “In your room?”

“Yes.”

“You have a spare bed?”

“No.”

She pursed her lips. “I am not sharing one with you.”

“Afraid you won’t be able to control yourself?”

She snorted. “You’re hot, but not that hot. I need more than a pretty face to stimulate me.”

“Did you call me dumb?”

“I’m not sure how you rate, intelligence-wise, because we barely know each other. We met only a day ago.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Nothing, because we’re not dating. We’re not even friends.”

“Now I’m hurt. I saved your life.”

“And I saved yours at that door,” she reminded.

“You can’t deny we have chemistry,” he argued, referring to the kiss.

“I already said you’re hot, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to shag you.”

“Shag?” He laughed.

She blushed. It did sound kind of juvenile. Blame her love of the Austin Powers movies. “This arguing is getting us nowhere. I guess I’ll sleep on the couch until we figure something out.”

He heaved out a breath. “The stars save me from stubborn women.”

“Excuse me, it’s called self-respect. Just because you’re used to getting your way doesn’t mean you get to call me stubborn.”

“I’m going to find some food,” he growled.

“Great. I’m coming with you. I’d like a look at this tower place you’ve got me stuck in.”

It proved much larger than she would have expected and lacking in elevators. As they went down several flights, she asked, “How many stories is this place?”

“No one knows for sure, but my understanding is it’s more than three hundred.”

She almost fell in shock. “You can’t be serious. That’s gravitationally impossible.”

“Tell that to its builder. It’s been here for millennia without issue.”

“Who the heck lives on the three hundredth floor? That’s got to be like a million steps.”

“Around seven thousand actually.”

“That’s insane.” She glanced behind her. “Is this kitchen much farther?” While descending wasn’t too bad, it occurred to her she’d have to climb those same steps to return to his suite.

“Almost there.” He stepped onto a landing instead of going down another flight. The space was wide open, unlike some of the previous floors, where she’d only seen closed doors and hallways.

The tile on this level had a lovely pattern, vines twining around fruit and vegetables. A mosaic of color with beautiful craftsmanship. To one side of the staircase, a bunch of different-sized round tables were set with chairs grouped in twos and fours. On the opposite side, a massive table that could have seated a hundred.

“This is quite the dining room,” she remarked.

“It’s not used much these days. Only a handful of warriors live in the tower full time.”

“Why is that?”

“Some have chosen to marry and live amongst the humans for their spouses and children.”

“You’re not married?” She’d never even thought to ask before.

“No, never.” A vehement reply. “You?”

“I was engaged once,” she admitted.

“But didn’t go through with it?”

“He wanted me to quit my career to have children right away, and I wasn’t ready to ditch my years of schooling. Not to mention, I’m not sure about the kid thing.”

“You don’t want a family?”

She shrugged. “Honestly, I was never big on the idea. I like working. I like the freedom to do as I please, to travel, to not have a space cluttered by toys.”

“On that, we agree. I mean kids are cute and all, but I’m more the cool-uncle type than the daddy.”

What an inane conversation to be having. She took them out of personal back to the reason for them having met. “When are you going after the orb?”

“Soon. I need to figure out where they’ve taken it so I can plan how I’m going to get in there and take it back.”

“Cetus only has the one headquarters, located in Maine.”

“How does someone make a business out of getting samples of ice?”

There was no harm in telling him. After all, Cetus had a public website detailing their work.

“Cetus, which studies climate today and in the past, has been around for about two decades. They run on environmental research grants and private donations. And for your information, they don’t just collect glacier samples. They actually also study other strata. I know they have a team out in the Middle East getting sand samples from the great desert. Some in Asia studying Kangchenjunga. They even have people in the Rockies.”

“Looking for what?”

“Not so much looking for something as testing what’s in the layers of some of the oldest mountains and glaciers in the world. For example, the ice samples can show us the heating and cooling of the planet. We sometimes find microbes, some of them millions of years old. The frozen water layers can show environmental contaminants of the time, like remnants of ash or smoke from volcanoes.”

“And people find that useful?”

“Climate scientists do. It helps us better understand what the planet has gone through.”

“You’re saying this Cetus is essentially a giant lab.”

She pursed her lips. “I guess. I’ve never actually visited the building. A company representative reached out to me via email and came to me for the interview. From the moment I was hired, they made the arrangements that got me to the Antarctic.”

“You didn’t find that odd?”

She shrugged. “Not really.”

“Weren’t you working elsewhere?”

“Teaching classes at a college.” Her nose wrinkled. “I prefer being out in the field to dealing with students.” The entitlement had grown over the past few years. Excuses as to why they couldn’t get things done on time. Why they needed to be able to redo a test. Why they should have a good grade, and sometimes, that reason was simply because the student felt they deserved it without putting in the effort.

“How long were you in the Antarctic before my arrival?”

“Not long. A week.”

“Alone?” At her nod he asked, “What happened to your partner?”

She frowned.

He indicated his clothes. “You said you had one when we first met and I found his duffel of clothes.”

“I lied. It’s only me out here. Those must have been left behind by the previous guy.”

“What happened to him?”

She shrugged. “I was told he didn’t work out.”

“Was he also digging at the ice?”

“I would assume so. Since I’ve arrived, I’ve received daily coordinates on where the company wants me to chip.” Her brow furrowed. “I did think it odd they had me popping from glacier to glacier with no rhyme or reason.”

“They wanted you to find the door,” he mused aloud.

“Seems obvious now,” she replied with a grimace.

“I do wonder why they didn’t just send in a team with a flamethrower to melt the damned things.”

“Because there are rules they have to follow. The Antarctic is a protected place. You can’t just start demolishing glaciers.”

“Ever hear of ruins inside one?”

“Nope. As for rocks embedded in them, while it does happen, it’s usually stray ones picked up by moving glaciers.”

A bell dinged.

“Food’s ready,” he announced, heading for an alcove that showed some domed dishes.

She blinked. “Where did those come from?”

“The kitchen.”

“You have a cook on staff?”

“Yeah. Cleaners too.”

“How are they hired? Do they live here?”

“The tower housekeeper handles all that. We just reap the benefit.” He carried the tray to a table and whipped off the domes to reveal plates filled with a mixture of food. A fresh garden salad with grilled chicken. A pitcher held iced tea.

The food was beyond delicious, the freshness making her happy after a week of MRE rations, the easiest thing to supply and use in the Antarctic.

After the meal, Scorpio rose and said, “I should get started on my research of Cetus.”

“What about me?”

“There’s a game room on the floor below with televisions. A library above.”

“Oh.” Then despite it being pathetic, she asked, “When will I see you again?” because the idea of being alone in this place daunted.

“A few hours. I’ll come find you for dinner.”

With that, he left, and Rebecca sat at the table for a bit, finishing her iced tea, wondering what would happen to her.

And if she would ever be able to leave.

CHAPTER 9

Scorpio felt a little guilty at leaving Rebecca to her own devices. However, she'd made it clear she didn't want to help him retrieve the orb. He could only hope Sage was wrong when she'd stated he needed the doc for his mission to be successful. Maybe Rebecca would come around. In the meantime, might as well figure out what he faced. He went to the administration level where Aries had his office but there was also a meeting room, along with a computer lab.

He walked in to find Aquarius sitting in his usual chair surrounded by three monitors, each displaying a different thing. Random videos to his left, more of them to his right, and, in the center, Rebecca's face.

"Why do you have Doc's face on your screen?" Scorpio barked, a little more harshly than intended.

"Aries told me to look into her and the company that commissioned her services. You'll be glad to know your lady friend is squeaky clean. Not even a speeding ticket to her name. Single. Lives alone. Parents deceased in the past few years. No siblings. Works as a college professor when she's not in the field studying glaciers or hunks of rock and dirt." Aquarius glanced at him. "I hear you brought her to the tower."

"Yeah, kind of had no choice. It was that or let the company she worked for kidnap her."

"Aries mentioned something about you being ambushed." Aquarius smirked. "Not like you to run away."

The remark brought a grimace. “I’m not bulletproof. They came prepared. Dozen dudes, all armed with rifles. While I might have prevailed with a few holes, Doc most likely wouldn’t have.”

“Damn, they really wanted that thing you guys found.”

“No shit. What did you find out about the company she works for?”

“Not much, yet, but I just started digging. I can tell you they’ve got a lot of donors for a small niche company. Most of them anonymous, which is odd. Not sure why you’d hide the fact you support climate research.”

“Doc says they only have one building as headquarters.”

“Publicly, yes, but it wasn’t hard to find a second location that they’ve been trying to keep quiet. It’s out in the Nevada desert.”

“Let me guess, Area 51,” he joked.

“Yup.”

“Wait, seriously?”

Aquarius nodded. “I was surprised too, but it seems they were given one of the old military facilities to use.”

“Are you saying their work is government-backed?”

“Not officially. On paper, they’re leasing it via a shell company.”

“What are they doing there?”

“No idea, but I intend to find out.”

“I’ll need everything you find. I’m supposed to retrieve the object they took from me. Any way of figuring out which location it went to?”

“Maybe. Depends on if they’re logging its existence online or keeping it completely off the record. I won’t know until I get into their server. I’ve got a few hacks running, trying to find a way in. Until I get access, I won’t have much to give you.”

“How long until you crack it?”

Aquarius shrugged. “Minutes, hours, days. No way of knowing.”

Which meant waiting. Not something Scorpio excelled at.

“I don’t suppose their public office has blueprints.”

“Those should be registered, as the city would have had to approve them. Hold on while I pull them up.”

Scorpio got the floorplans of their main building. A basic structure with twelve stories, thirteen if you counted the basement. The lowest level held the utilities running the place. First floor reception and a mini museum for the public showing what they did. Top was for the CEO and the top-level employees. The other floors in between were for research, six of them in total, accounting and PR, private offices for scientists on two floors, as well as one entire level for supplies.

There were no air ducts large enough for him to use to move around. All access past the first floor required authorization, and not the kind with a keycard.

“Facial recognition?” Scorpio murmured. “Seems kind of extreme for a lab dealing in

chunks of ice, sand, rock, and shit.”

“Most companies are moving to those kinds of safeguards since it’s more secure than using keycards. Anyone can steal the latter, but someone’s face is unique.”

“Any way you can add me to their database?”

“Will do, once I get access.”

Meaning more of that tedious waiting bullshit.

Usually when faced with that kind of permission boredom, Scorpio gamed, but this time, he had something—make that someone—more interesting to keep him occupied.

He spent more time than he’d planned away from Doc. Hours as it turned out. She didn’t prove hard to locate. He found in the library. No big surprise. She sat in a chair by the window, a book in her lap. The setting sun framed her in a soft pink glow.

“Hey, Doc, whatcha reading?”

Rebecca startled. “Oh, hey.” She closed the tome and placed her hands over the cover to no avail. He recognized it.

“I see you found the most interesting book in this place.”

Her cheeks turned pink as she removed her hands to show the gold-leaf-lettered title, Legend of Scorpio . ““I’ll admit, I was curious and ended up reading a good chunk of it. Is everything in here about you?”

“Not all of it. Just the last few chapters. I took over when the last Scorpio retired. As

we accomplish things, our exploits get added to the story.”

“You write?”

He recoiled. “Oh, fuck no. I don’t know who the author is.”

“Surely they’ve interviewed you. How else would they relay your experience?”

He shrugged. “No idea, but last time I checked, it seemed accurate.”

Her lips pinched as she flipped to the back. Her brow arched as she pointed at the last chapter title: Scorpio Takes on Antarctica. “How is it possible it’s already written? We only just arrived.”

“The tower works in mysterious ways.” And he meant that. No one understood the tower, how it knew what each occupant needed and provided it.

A frown creased her brow as she read. “It’s exactly what happened. It even has the kiss in the chamber.” A flush spread across her face.

“Does it mention the words epic?”

She slammed the book shut. “No. Because it was just a kiss.”

“Just?” he huffed in mock chagrin. “Perhaps we should try it again, because I’m pretty sure it was more than that.”

She stood. “To you maybe, but I found it rather ordinary. I’m surprised it passed the muster enough to give us the relic.”

He gaped.

She smirked. “Is it dinner time yet? I’m famished. I wonder what your alien space fairies have in store.”

“Space fairies?” he repeated incredulously as she sauntered away. A grin spread across his face. What a woman.

He followed and caught up to her going down to the dining level, where they found Sage and Aries already seated at a table set for four.

His friend and boss stood and waved them over. “Join us, please.” The empty chairs had plates covered in domes waiting.

Rebecca strode to meet them and held out her hand. “Hello, I’m Rebecca Guthrie.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Aries, and this is my wife, Sage.”

Rebecca arched a brow. “The lady who predicts the future.”

Sage grinned. “More like relays what I’m shown. Nice to meet you in person.”

A statement that only slightly jarred Rebecca. She covered it by sitting down and uncovering her meal. Roast beef, mashed potatoes, glazed carrots, and a crusty bun with a small pitcher of gravy for dipping and pouring.

“How are you finding the tower?” Aries asked to start the conversation.

“Interesting, if improbable. I was hoping to find a book on its origin in your library, but it has a daunting amount of literature,” Rebecca stated, placing a napkin in her lap.

“Which is always increasing,” Aries added. “I’m sure there’s something in there on

the tower's beginning, but the library tends to direct people to the books it thinks most apt for the moment."

"More magic," Rebecca stated, dipping her bread.

"Yes," Aries confirmed, to be countered by Sage, who said, "The librarian is shy but good at his job. He has a knack for knowing what people need."

"Pretty sure the Legend of Scorpio wasn't something I required," was Rebecca's dry reply.

It sent Sage into peals of laughter. "Oh my. Did he really direct you to that?"

"I don't know if directed is the right word. The titles I browsed weren't in languages I understood, so it kind of stood out."

Sage nodded. "That's how he works. You'll notice each time you return that different books will be available in a language you can grasp."

"You live in the tower?" Rebecca inquired as Scorpio tucked into his meal.

"Yes. Ever since I was a young girl. The world has no use for a strange child who would try and warn them of upcoming events. I was almost burned at the stake when Scorpio rescued me."

Rebecca glanced at him, and he shook his head. "Not me, the previous one."

"Wouldn't that make you..." Rebecca paused, and Sage giggled. "Old? Yes. Coming up on the big two-five-oh."

"But you look like you're not even thirty yet," Rebecca blurted out.

“The tower keeps me young, and some of us age better than others.” Sage glanced fondly at Aries. “My husband is a paltry one seventy-five and yet has a touch of gray.”

Aries grimaced. “All the men in my family turned gray young. At least I kept my hair, unlike my father and brother. They were bald by thirty.”

“Our daughter won’t have to worry,” Sage declared, patting her belly.

“You’re pregnant?” Rebecca didn’t hide her shock. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound rude.”

“Understandable. You’ve discovered much about our world that must have discomfited.”

“I’ll admit the existence of magic threw me for a loop. And this whole Zodiac and star thing...” Rebecca waved a hand. “It’s like I’m living in some kind of sci-fi book.”

“Over time you’ll get used to it.”

“You’re assuming I’ll be here that long.”

Aries glanced at Scorpio, who shrugged. “I’ve explained that leaving the tower might not be feasible for the next while. At least until we sort out the issue with Cetus.”

“I’m still having a hard time understanding how they’re involved,” Rebecca added as she took a bite of carrots.

“So are we,” Aries flat response. “We keep our secrets tight, so the fact they knew about us and the relic we sought is disturbing. We assumed Sage was the only seer.

To find out they've got one of their own is of great concern."

"Especially since I've seen nothing of them," Sage replied.

"But they knew of you," Aries' dark addition.

"Should we be thinking of mounting a mission to take this other seer into custody?"
Scorpio didn't like the idea of another one running around, foiling future missions.

"Maybe, but first we'd have to find out where they're located and then hope they don't have a vision that allows them to escape any attempt." Aries sipped from his wine glass. "Whatever we do, we'll have to be careful. Cetus wanted to capture you. If we try to nab this other seer, they could end up seeing it and warning them so they can lay a trap," Aries cautioned.

"I do enjoy a challenge," Scorpio quipped.

"I'd rather not have to save your ass because you moved too quickly," was Aries' dry retort.

"Me, rush in?" Scorpio chuckled. "I think best on the fly and on my feet."

"Don't do anything without running it by me first."

"Yes, boss."

"In other news, the tower's been doing some upgrades," Aries threw out casually.

Scorpio frowned. "What kind of upgrades?"

"When you get a chance, pop outside and take a look. The exterior of it seems to have

grown an extra layer, and there's now a moat."

"A moat?" Scorpio exclaimed.

Aries nodded. "And I don't recommend going for a swim. It's not water, but some kind of acid. Very corrosive."

Scorpio whistled. "Damn. What's the tower know that we don't?"

"Strife is coming," Sage murmured. "And if we don't prevail, then everything is lost."

CHAPTER 10

The dinner ended not long after Sage's dire prediction. While the men acted as if her utterance were a normal thing, Rebecca waited until they'd left the couple to hiss, "What the heck is going on? Is Sage serious when she claims the end is coming?"

"The end might be coming," Scorpio corrected. "Keep in mind, the futures she sees aren't set in stone. There is some wiggle room."

"Surely if she sees something bad, she could explain what, and when, so it could be countered."

"She's restricted in the sense she only gets shown pieces. From those glimpses, we do our best to avert calamity."

"And has it worked? Can you stop bad things from happening?"

"Most of the time. I recently disbanded a horrific child-trafficking ring because Sage saw enough to lead me to them. But other times, we hear it on the news like everyone else. The Twin Towers were one of our failures. She predicted a terrorist event, knew it would involve planes, but couldn't pinpoint where and when."

Rebecca went silent for a second as they climbed stairs before quietly saying, "That must be emotionally difficult to handle. To be shown horrific futures and then be unable to stop them."

"It is. Aries is her rock when that happens. Before him, she used to get either really

high or drunk or both, and let me tell you, a wasted seer is not a pleasant thing because she looks right through you and tells you some messed-up shit.”

“Like?” she asked, starting to huff as they climbed the third set of winding stairs.

“Well, she told me I’d never figure out how to whistle. Oh, and that I’d get married.”

She snorted. “That’s not so horrible.”

“Um, it is to me. One, men are supposed to know how to whistle, and two, I’m single for a reason: because I like it.”

“Only because you’ve never fallen in love.”

“Says the woman who dumped her fiancé. Or are you going to tell me you didn’t love him?”

She didn’t reply for a moment because he raised a valid point. “I loved him but not enough to give up who I wanted to be.”

“I thought true love conquered all.”

“Not always. And I’m of the belief you can love more than once.”

“Meaning you’re still looking for Mr. Right?”

“Yes. Unlike you, I would like to get married someday to someone who will respect my dreams and desires.”

“And not turn you into a baby-making Suzy-homemaker.”

“Exactly!” she huffed, more from a lack of breath. As they rounded the next bend and she eyed the next flight, she whined, “Is it much farther?”

“Yes.” Without warning, he grabbed her in his arms. She squealed but latched on as he bounded up the next two flights.

He set her down when they arrived at his floor, and she shook her head. “You really have no concept of asking first, do you?”

“Wait, that wasn’t you asking?” he stated not so innocently.

A noise left her that was part laugh, part rueful. “Are you sure you’re only a century old? Because your manners are more caveman at times.”

His laughter rang loud and without remorse. “What can I say, I was born in a time when men coddled women.”

“You mean acted as if they had no brains and couldn’t do anything for themselves.”

“Having lived in that era, I can actually state that isn’t true. Yes, women didn’t have the right to vote and own property and stuff, but many households relied on their matriarchs to make the big decisions. Without them, families fell apart. Obviously, this wasn’t the case for all women, but the same stands true today. Strong women have always found a way to make their wants and needs known.”

“Yet, here I am. Decorated scientist reduced to a maiden locked in a tower,” she countered.

“Someone has to keep you safe.” He opened the door to his suite.

“I’m still not sure anything would happen to me if I went home.”

“True, but in this case, if I’m wrong, the worst that happens is you spend a bit of time in the tower. If you’re wrong, you could end up a prisoner, or dead.”

“Is this your way of saying you wouldn’t save me?” she tartly replied as she entered the room.

“Oh, I’d save you, but do you really want to hear me say I told you so?”

At that, she laughed. “Guess I would deserve it.” His conviction did prove contagious. Would she be in danger if she returned to her old life?

The better question, did she even want to return? She had to admit that the last two days had added a level of excitement she’d never thought she’d enjoy. The wonder of discovery. The new things she kept learning. Then there was the man who made her toes curl.

“Wanna play some video games?”

“What do you have?”

“Counter-Strike, Call of Duty...”

“I’m not into first-person shooter games,” she stated with a wrinkle of her nose.

“How about bowling?”

“You have an alley in the tower?” she exclaimed before adding, “I am not doing more stairs today.”

He laughed. “We can do it right here. I’ve got the game on my console. All you have to do is swing a remote.”

“You’re on. But I warn you, I used to be pretty good in college.”

She still was. Scorpio moaned and declared himself emasculated when she beat him five games in a row. Not that he acted the poor sport about it. There was much laughter, teasing, and fun. No talking about the company or the orb or the future. Just two people having a good time.

When she finally collapsed on the couch, she exclaimed, “Enough.”

“Tired?”

“Yes. Hard to believe this morning I was doing my job and now I’m here playing games.”

“After an eventful day, it’s important to do something to unwind. It helps to clear the mind.”

“Do you need to do that often?”

He shrugged. “Some missions are harder than others. It’s why I’ve got these distractions.” He waved a hand at his gaming setup. “Aries has a treadmill when he needs to de-stress. Cancer has a fish tank with the most epic setup you’ve ever seen.”

“Will your tower magically conjure something for me?”

“Probably. Heck, the tower might decide to fill a room with glaciers simply to keep you amused.”

“You’re kidding?”

“I told you, the tower gives people what they need. It’s really good at taking care of

its inhabitants, even the non-warriors.”

“Are there many?”

He shrugged. “Hard to tell. It’s a big place so we rarely run into those who live here.”

“Aries ran into Sage,” she pointed out, recalling her story of having been brought here.

“Because Sage became part of the warrior circle, despite not being Zodiac.”

“Absolutely wild, and on that note, I think I’ll go to bed.”

“I take it you haven’t changed your mind on sharing.”

She cast him a glance and, for a moment, was almost tempted to invite him. Sleeping with him would complicate things though. “Nope. I sleep alone. You should be thankful. I’m a blanket stealer.”

“I don’t need a blanket.”

“Still no. Good night, Scorpio.”

“Night, Doc.”

He didn’t try to cajole or seduce. He let her go to bed while he took the couch. A big couch, but still, she felt a little bad about getting the comfy mattress.

Fatigue hit her fast and hard once she’d stripped in his bathroom, which held all the modern amenities she needed and a set of pajamas in her size. When she slid under the covers, her eyes immediately closed.

She slept. Deeply, but not dreamlessly. She floated in a dark place, not in water, but not with anything solid around her, either. Just pure nothingness, until she heard a voice.

Set me free.

She tried to reply, but nothing emerged.

Set me free! the voice demanded more stridently.

She wanted to ask how, but once more, the words remained caught. She couldn't even apologize.

Set me free or the world will burn!

To make its demand more urgent, heat licked her floating body.

Intense heat that came with pain. A pain that had her soundlessly screaming until—

“Wake up!”

She opened her eyes to see Scorpio leaning over her. “You okay? I heard you crying out in your sleep.”

Happy she actually wasn't burning alive, she didn't think, just flung her arms around his neck and dragged him close for a kiss.

CHAPTER 11

Scorpio could sleep anywhere. Couch, floor, bog. Sitting down, standing up. Not tonight, though. He lay on his couch and thought of the woman in his bed.

An intriguing woman who seemed neither awed nor daunted by his existence.

He'd not been surprised Rebecca turned down his offer to share his mattress. The impression he'd gotten thus far didn't have her as the type to indulge in casual relations. Pity. She had a great body and pretty face, but his attraction was more than physical. She displayed a sharp wit and intelligence, as well as courage and resilience. She'd also been adjusting well thus far to all the revelations. Not everyone could handle the tower or the warriors without having a meltdown. People sometimes broke when their perception of reality shifted drastically.

Not Rebecca. She asked questions, didn't immediately believe the answers but also didn't deny when provided proof. A good thing, since she might be stuck there a while. Aquarius had sent him a message while they gamed.

Your doctor friend's place was broken into. A neighbor who'd been asked to water plants while Rebecca worked in the Antarctic had contacted police after noticing the door showed signs of tampering. The subsequent report indicated her home had been tossed, but cops couldn't tell what, if anything, had been stolen. Most likely the intruders sought Rebecca's current location, and he only needed one guess to know who. Perhaps now she'd believe him when he claimed she was in danger. Or more likely, she'd argue again. She was cute like that.

He eventually managed to drift to sleep, only to be awoken by a voice. Rebecca's.

“How can I free you?”

Who did she speak to? He rose and padded to his bedroom, which lacked a door. He'd never had a need for one in his space.

She shifted restlessly under the covers on the bed and murmured, “Who are you?”

Her body squirmed and twisted some more before the screaming started.

Pain-filled yells that sent frissons down his spine. He darted to the bed and put a hand on her. “Rebecca! Doc! Wake up.”

Her lashes fluttered, and he asked, “You okay? I heard you crying out in your sleep.”

Her reply?

A kiss.

She dragged Scorpio down and mashed her mouth against his for a torrid embrace that fired the senses, but he remained aware enough to know he should be careful because she might still be asleep.

Usually, he wouldn't care, but he knew Rebecca would be pissed if the kiss were inadvertent, so he pulled away, murmuring, “You're okay, Doc. Just a bad dream.”

It took her a second before her eyes opened and focused. “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. Guess we're even when it comes to surprise kisses.”

“I don’t know what came over me.” Neither did he, but the effect lingered since she retained her grip on him.

“Seems to me like you were having a nightmare. Want to talk about it?”

She frowned. “You’ll think it’s weird.”

“You’ve been around me long enough by now to know my threshold for weird is high.”

“Good point,” her wry reply. “It was the strangest dream. In it, I floated in an empty space. No light, not even sure I had a body, although I could hear because a voice spoke to me. Asked me to set it free.”

“Whose voice?”

“I don’t know. I tried to reply, but it couldn’t hear me and it kept demanding I free it and then said, if I didn’t, the world would burn. And then suddenly it was as if I were aflame. The pain...” She trailed off and swallowed. “It was agonizing.”

“I take it you’ve never had this dream before.”

“No. I don’t dream much, if at all, actually.”

“We’ll have to tell Sage and Aries.”

“Why?” she asked. “It was simply a nightmare.”

“Was it? Best to not take chances.”

She sighed. “If you say so. What time is it?”

“Four a.m.”

“Ugh. Too early to get up.”

“Agreed.” Did she realize she clutched his shoulders still, as if she didn’t want him to leave?

“You should try to get back to sleep.”

“I guess.” She sounded uncertain.

“Worried you’ll end up back in the nightmare?”

“A little. I really hope not. It was really unpleasant.”

“Move over.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to stay here and keep you safe.”

She snorted. “What makes you think you being close will help?”

“You’ve read part of my namesake’s book. I’m a hero. It’s what heroes do, keep the bad shit away. So scooch.”

He expected her to argue. Instead, she shifted over enough for him to slide into the bed, staying over the covers. He draped an arm over her middle and tucked her close.

“This feels weird,” she murmured.

“Surely you’ve slept with a man before.”

“Not often and it’s been a while. You’re also a lot larger than the men I usually date.”

“More of me to love.” The words slipped out, and he froze. What the fuck had he just said?

“I thought you didn’t believe in love,” she countered.

“I don’t. Now quiet. I’m trying to sleep.”

“Okay.” Pause. “Thanks, Scorpio.”

Thank him for what? Being decent? Being present? Keeping his erection from pressing against her backside?

Lying with her so close proved a form of torture he’d never experienced. Sleep eluded him for a bit, even after her breathing slowed, showing she’d found slumber.

Truth told, he rarely—very very rarely—ever slept with his sexual partners. Much easier to fuck, say thanks, and leave.

In this case, he’d not even gotten past first base, although he took it as a good sign she’d kissed him first this time. She might deny the attraction, but she obviously felt it.

It took time, but he fell asleep, only to wake at a blaring siren.

He jolted hard and, being on the edge of the bed, promptly fell out of it. Stunned, he sat on the floor, and Doc dangled over the side a second later to ask, “What is that noise?”

“I’m fine, thanks for asking,” Scorpio grouched as he rose and rubbed his ass.

“Oh, did someone get a boo-boo on his tush?” She rolled her eyes. “What’s that alarm for?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never heard it before.” The hidden speaker in his room came to life with Aries barking, “Perimeter alert. All Zodiacs outside, now!”

The command widened his eyes. Never before had the tower been breached.

Scorpio didn’t pause to put on a shirt or even shoes. Wearing only his sleep shorts, he raced out of the bedroom and snared the weapons kept by the door. He threw the strap for his sword scabbard over his back and grabbed a rifle as he raced out into the hall. He saw Leo emerging from his suite, bleary-eyed with hair tousled.

“Who the fuck is attacking at this ungodly fucking hour?”

“No idea. Grab your gear and let’s go,” Scorpio shouted as he ran past.

Leo appeared to be hungover again. His usual state these days since the incident five years ago.

Scorpio began pounding down the stairs, only to whoop in surprise as the treads suddenly turned into a smooth ramp. He slid, picking up speed as he descended.

He also whooped because, fuck yeah, like snowboarding down a steep hill, this was fun.

As the bottom approached, he tensed his legs and leaped, landing with a slight bend before continuing to run. He emerged from the tower to find Aries already outside with Cancer, the pair of them shielding their eyes against the dawning sun.

“Where’s the enemy?” Scorpio huffed.

Aries pointed to the sky, where a tiny dot hovered.

“I fell out of bed for a fucking bird?” Scorpio complained. He’d been looking forward to waking with a snuggle.

“Not a bird, a drone,” Aries flatly replied. “And before you ask, it’s not ours.”

“A drone? Here? How?” Because the tower had shields against outsiders, whether living or mechanical.

“I don’t know, and I don’t like it.”

“Let’s find out who it belongs to.” Scorpio raised his rifle and took aim.

Bang .

His bullet snapped a moving rotor blade, and the drone began to drunkenly weave as it lost height, heading for the new moat, the surface of it a still and bright green.

“Don’t let it hit the acid,” Aries yelled as he bolted for it.

They all sprang into motion, splitting apart as the drone zigged and zagged, left and right, unable to control its direction with the broken part.

Don’t touch. Don’t touch. Scorpio kept repeating that as he raced along the moat’s edge keeping pace with the drone. When it dipped low enough, he leapt and reached, his fingers brushing against the solid material of the invader before gripping it tightly. Only as he began to descend did he realize he’d overextended with his leap.

Before he could find out just how bad the acid would be for his skin, Aries snagged his foot and managed to yank hard enough Scorpio landed on solid ground. With the drone, he should add.

Other warriors converged, everyone curious, which led to Aries barking, “Leo, Cancer, and Virgo, run a circuit around the tower. See if there’s any more eyes in the sky.”

Off they jogged, leaving Scorpio and Aries with the catch.

The device stopped whirring abruptly, the red light of its camera going dark.

Aries pointed. “I recognize that symbol.”

Scorpio had a second to mutter, “Fucking Cetus,” before the drone exploded.

CHAPTER 12

While Scorpio raced off, Rebecca took longer to follow—because no way would she stay huddled in Scorpio’s room wondering what happened. She hit the bathroom for the clothes she’d stripped the night before, simple leggings and a long-sleeve shirt, to find them replaced with new undergarments, khakis, a T-shirt, and sturdy running shoes, all perfectly sized and totally her style.

“Thank you, Tower,” she murmured aloud because it seemed rude not to say anything. She dressed and exited, those few minutes she’d taken putting Scorpio long out of sight. She began trotting down the stairs, when suddenly she didn’t have to. The tread she stood on widened, and the handrail she held remained attached to it as it zoomed her to the bottom level. Not quite an elevator, but it worked. She stepped foot on the marbled floor in time to hear an explosion.

She raced out the pair of doors that swung open to reveal the dawning sky and immediately saw Scorpio sitting on the ground, holding his hand.

A hand dripping blood.

“What happened?” Rebecca yelled as she raced for him.

“Your company sent a drone to spy, and it didn’t like being captured,” his explanation, a calm statement that belied the seriousness of his injury. His hand had been shredded, the wound deep enough that bone peeked through the open and bleeding flesh.

“He needs a doctor,” she stated to Aries, who stood to the side with a phone to his ear.

“I’m fine,” Scorpio insisted.

“Your hand looks like hamburger,” Rebecca snapped, tugging at her sleeve.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting something to wrap around it and apply pressure. You need a hospital. Where’s the nearest one?”

“No hospital,” Aries stated as he put his phone away. “Just help him get inside. Scorpio can guide you from there to the Stardust room.”

“The what?” she blurted out.

“Stardust room,” Scorpio repeated as he stood with his dripping hand. “It’s next door to the portal room. Wanna come and see how a Zodiac Warrior gets patched up after a battle?”

“Are we talking about magic?” He might be injured, but she still had to move quickly to keep pace with his long stride.

“Of sorts. Given our affinity to the stars, chunks that fall to Earth can provide certain extras. The dust, for example, can be sprinkled on wounds to quicken the healing of it.”

“You’re going to dump some dirt on your mangled hand?” She tried to not sound skeptical and failed. She couldn’t help but be bothered by his casual disregard.

“Yup. Works like a charm,” he announced as they entered the tower. “It’s right beside the portal room, making it close for the missions that go sideways.”

“Portal room?” She felt like a child constantly asking questions.

“Where we arrived when I starbeamed us.” He inclined his head to a large arch carved with symbols.

She’d been unconscious for that, which meant she’d never seen this level with its grand foyer lined in arches and a staircase running up the middle. The floor gleamed, the white marble pristine but of a type she’d never seen, given its silvery flecks.

“What the heck happened?” she grumbled.

“I told you, your company sent a drone.”

“Was that what caused the explosion and injury?”

“Yup. I shot it down and retrieved it. Damned thing blew up in my hand. Guess they didn’t want us playing with it.”

“How do you know it was from Cetus?”

“Saw the logo before the kaboom,” he stated, entering through an arch with an exploding star above it. The room beyond looked more apothecary than medical clinic. It had a lounge-like chair that could recline and a wall of shelves filled with glass jars holding dirt.

Scorpio plopped onto the seat and lay his forearm on the armrest before he pointed with his good hand. “Grab one of the dust cannisters, would you?”

“Any particular one?”

“Nope.”

She went to the wall and pursed her lips. They looked mostly the same with slight variations, the contents lighter in some, two even sparkled. When she hesitated, one of the jars rattled slightly, the tower helping to make the choice.

She grabbed the vessel and brought it to Scorpio. “Now what?”

“Take off the cap and dump it on my hand.”

“Seriously? We’re not going to rinse it first or…”

“Nope. You’ll see.”

Guess she would. She stuffed her skepticism and did as he asked, sprinkling the dust onto his open wounds, trying to not cringe as it entered crevices and mixed with blood to form a muddy paste.

“More,” he grunted, his face twisted with pain.

She paused. “Why does it seem like you’re in more agony than before?”

“Did I forget to mention rapid healing hurts? Don’t worry. I’ll survive. It’s already starting to mend the flesh. Now, shake some dust, Doc.”

She drizzled until his hand was entirely caked and the blood stopped dripping. Then she hugged the empty container to her chest.

“How long does the healing take?”

“Depends on the size of the wound. Something like this, an hour or so.”

“Anything else I can do? Do you need water? A shirt?”

His mouth quirked. “Are you offering to do stairs and bring me breakfast?”

“Food would be a good idea, and coffee. Lots of coffee,” she muttered, exiting the Stardust room to see Aries standing with Sage in the entrance. The seer appeared upset.

“I don’t know how I didn’t see it. A direct threat to the tower. I should have known,” Sage insisted, wringing her hands.

“You can’t see everything,” Aries tried to soothe.

“What else haven’t I seen, though? Is my gift failing me, or is this other seer somehow blocking me?” Sage’s lips trembled with agitation.

Aries noticed Rebecca. “How’s Scorpio?”

“Dusted,” her dry reply. “He’s hungry, so I was going to get him something to eat.”

“Go with Rebecca,” Aries suggested. “Have breakfast.”

“Eating won’t help me,” Sage grouched.

“Then do it for the baby.”

“Fine,” a reluctant agreement. “But then I’m meditating in the conservatory. Maybe I’ll see something useful.” Sage joined Rebecca, and they headed for the stairs, which, once more, turned into a lift, meaning they didn’t have to climb.

“Thank you. I needed this,” the seer stated, patting the rail.

“The tower really does adapt on the fly,” Rebecca remarked. “It’s pretty amazing.”

“Only for those it likes. The tower can also make living here uncomfortable for those it doesn’t approve of.”

“Does that happen often?”

“No, but that said, it has occurred a few times. Not everyone can live isolated from the world. Some become grumpy and unpleasant. In that case, the tower does what it can to convince them to leave.”

“And if they don’t?”

“A person can only stand so many bugs served for meals and other discomforts before they realize they’re better off elsewhere.”

“I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation with Aries. Surely you don’t blame yourself for Cetus spying.”

“I’m supposed to be the Zodiac’s prewarning to big events. Something like the tower having its first documented intruder should have triggered my power, but it didn’t. I woke to the alarm like everyone else.” Her lips turned down. “Maybe the pregnancy is affecting my gift.”

“You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself. After all, you did predict Scorpio would find that artifact.”

“True, but I can’t help but wonder what I haven’t seen. There was a time in my youth where I wished I didn’t have this power, and now I’m whining because it might be

failing.”

To change the topic, Rebecca revealed her nightmare. “This is a bit off topic, but I had a weird dream last night, which Scorpio said I should tell you about.” She related what happened, and Sage’s face became pensive.

“A voice in a nothing place,” Sage mused aloud. “That’s interesting because I’ve had visions of a prison, although prison might be a misnomer. There is a sense of something trapped, wanting to escape. I’ve also seen some futures where the world is aflame, but I never connected the two.”

“Could it be related to the orb we found?”

“Possibly.” Sage’s expression turned dreamy as their lift stopped at the dining level. “The alignment of the stars will be in one not seen for thousands of years. It will bring change. Some good. Some not. The warriors will be tested. To prevail, they must right a wrong.”

“What wrong?” Rebecca asked as Sage shook her head.

“I don’t know. But I’ve been getting variations of that prophecy for the last little while. It just doesn’t give me enough imagery to understand what it means. Although...” Sage looked right at Rebecca as she said, “Your face did appear, and I know for a fact you are involved in what will come.”

Ominous, but not as chilling as Sage’s next words: “If you fail your part, you won’t be the only one to burn alive.”

CHAPTER 13

Scorpio thanked the stars Rebecca left, as the accelerated healing had him sweating and squirming. Stardust could accomplish miracles, but did it have to hurt so fucking much?

Leo stomped in wearing his usual dark, brooding mien. “You good, bro?”

“I will be. Didn’t expect that hunk of junk to try and take my hand. Who the fuck puts explosives on a drone?” To think he’d been more worried about falling in the moat.

“You’re surprised? These are the same people who tried to kidnap you, duh.” Leo rolled his eyes.

“You heard?”

“We all did. Aries just briefed us about the run-in you had with that company. Sounds like they need to be dismantled.”

“Agreed.” First and foremost, because anyone who could bypass their security and reach the tower posed a danger.

“Let me know when you’re going. I could use some distraction.”

“Will you be sober enough?” Scorpio didn’t coddle the man. Leo needed the tough love.

Leo's head dipped. "Gonna do my best to not let the demons control me." He rubbed a hand over his unshaven jaw. "Aries' been bugging me to see a shrink."

"Might do you good to talk to someone."

Leo snorted. "Ah yes, let me explain to a human doctor about the monster I failed to stop in time and the babies it killed because I couldn't do my job." What Leo left out? Not just any babies. The monster that had eluded them for weeks killed Leo's wife and infant daughter.

Sage had cried for days because she'd not predicted it and blamed herself. Conversely, Leo thought himself at fault. He remained convinced if only he'd done more, they'd still be alive. Scorpio couldn't blame him for the guilt he carried around. However, when it came to missions, he needed to know he could rely on Leo to be in fighting condition.

"It's not like you didn't try. We all did. But some evils are just harder to vanquish."

Leo's lips turned down. "I wish Kylie would have agreed to relocate to the tower. I don't understand why she refused."

No one did. It would have been temporary. But Kylie had been adamant about not leaving their home in the outside world. What hurt Leo even more was they never found the remains of his wife and daughter, just bloody clothes in the monster's lair.

"At least you ended it. No one else has to suffer."

"Ended it?" Leo barked a harsh sound. "I suffer every fucking day. Sometimes I wonder why I even bother." Not the first time Leo had expressed those kinds of dark thoughts.

Scorpio rose from the chair to put a hand on his shoulder. “Because the world still needs you, and you’re not a coward.”

“I hate it when you say shit like that,” Leo grumbled.

“Love you too, brother.” Scorpio slapped his back.

“I’m sorry. Am I interrupting?” Rebecca appeared in the doorway to the Stardust room with a tray.

“Nah. I was leaving.” Leo stomped off without a goodbye and Scorpio couldn’t help staring after him, worried about his friend. Years later and the grief still overwhelmed the man.

“Who was that?” Rebecca asked, looking for a place to set the tray. She chose the chair he’d vacated.

“Leo. Don’t let his scowl scare you. He’s dealing with some rough shit.”

“I brought you food. But don’t ask me what. The tower presented me with this tray.” She indicated before pulling off a dome to reveal pancakes. There was also syrup, freshly cut-up fruit, and coffee, a huge carafe of it, which Rebecca poured into a mug and guzzled.

“That’s better,” she sighed.

“Yup. Way better,” Scorpio muttered, although he was looking at his injured hand.

“I take it the pain isn’t so bad anymore.”

“Nope. The worst of it is over. A hot shower to rinse and you’ll never know I was

hurt.”

“That’s insane it heals so quick. Any idea how the dust thing works?”

“What did you call it? Space fairy magic?” his grinned reply.

“Something like that.” She laughed. “What’s on the agenda for today? Because I don’t get the impression you’re going to take it easy.”

“You already know me so well, Doc. I’m hoping Aquarius has cracked the server for Cetus so we can see what’s going on.” He paused before adding, “By the way, I received news your apartment was broken into.”

“What?” she screeched.

“Police don’t have any suspects, but it doesn’t appear as if robbery was the motive.”

Her lips pinched. “They were looking for me.”

“Most likely.”

“Guess you’re pleased that you were right.”

“Not really. I’d rather live in a world where evil corporations don’t try to kidnap scientists and steal artifacts for who the fuck knows what.”

“Are you still planning to go after the orb?”

“I have to.”

“Do you still want my help?”

He stared at her. “What happened to no fucking way?”

“Having had a bit of time to think, I’m not happy about everything that transpired. Using me under false pretenses, attempted abduction, and now ransacking my home and sending a bomb.” She eyed his caked hand. “A company capable of that obviously doesn’t have the world’s best interests at heart, no matter what they publicly claim.”

“Hell yeah, partner.”

“Don’t get too excited. By help, I mean looking into what they’re doing, not strapping on a gun and going in barrels blazing. I’m a scientist, not a warrior.”

“I’ll take any help you have to offer.” He gave her a dazzling smile. “Let me hit the shower and change, and then we’ll pop over to see Aquarius.”

They headed for the stairs, and she groaned at the sight of them.

“What’s wrong?”

“Guess the tower no longer thinks I need a lift,” she grumbled as she began to climb.

“Think of the steps as your own personal trainer to keep you fit.”

“I know how to stay in shape.”

“So do I, and this is part of it.” He sprinted up the stairs, taking them three at a time. He stopped at the landing and waited for her.

She glared. “Showoff.”

“That? Nah. This is showing off.” He grabbed hold of Rebecca and tossed her over his shoulder before bounding up the steps again.

She squealed. “Are you insane? Put me down.”

“I thought you wanted a ride?” he cajoled.

“I do, so you know what? Carry on.”

He made it to his floor before setting the doc on her feet. “Home sweet home.”

“You know, it’s surprising to me that in a place this big, you and I have to share a suite,” she remarked as they entered.

“Technically, we do have guest rooms.”

“And you chose to not put me in one because...”

“Because I like having you around.” An admission that had him fleeing to his bathroom and taking a cold shower. Very cold. However, that didn’t stop the truth.

He liked Rebecca.

And he didn’t know what that meant.

CHAPTER 14

Talk about dropping a bombshell. Rebecca could only gape as Scorpio admitted to enjoying having her nearby and then left.

Left to shower that naked hunky body. Not an image that helped.

What also didn't aid? She kind of enjoyed his presence, too, and this despite him not being anything like the men she usually dated. She tended to veer toward intellectuals who enjoyed fine dining and wore button-up shirts, not a guy who could have been a Viking with his tall blond bulky build. At the same time, he wasn't a dummy. Scorpio might not have a college degree—according to what she'd learned in his book—but the man possessed a brain and a sense of honor she admired. He chose to be a hero, not because he had to, but because he wanted to. Despite the fact Cetus tried to kill him, rather than be scared off, he appeared more determined than ever to go after them.

It was inexplicably hot.

Like her. She fanned herself as she waited, trying to not imagine the water sluicing over those toned muscles and slick skin. Failed, because when he emerged, she remained flushed and bothered.

“You okay?” he asked, towel-drying his hair while bare-chested and wearing hip-hugging combat pants.

“My body is still adjusting to the abrupt change in climate,” she lied.

“Give me a second to find a shirt and boots and we’ll head over to see Aquarius.”

Scorpio disappeared for a moment and emerged clothed, but it didn’t matter. She could still picture him in the buff.

“How many flights of stairs this time?” she asked for distraction.

“Not many,” he replied with a grin. “But say the word and I’ll carry you.”

“I can climb on my own,” she grumbled, ignoring the temptation to say yes.

As they exited his room, she asked, “Do you really think your friend will find anything about the orb and why they wanted it so badly?”

“Depends on how cocky they are about their server security. Many criminals don’t trust computers to keep their secrets, and at the same time, having information accessible via a network makes sharing simpler.”

“I am struggling to see how a metal ball can be so important.”

“I would imagine it’s what’s inside they’re after and, before you ask, no clue what that might be. All I know is Sage really thinks it’s important we be the ones to have it in custody instead of them.”

The floor he stopped climbing at proved more modern than she’d seen thus far. A copy machine sat against a wall. There were screens on the walls displaying news channels from around the world and clocks showing the various time zones.

She craned to look around. “Is this like Zodiac Command Control?”

“Yup. As our head dude, Aries has that big office over there.” Scorpio pointed to a

closed door. “The computer lab is here as well.”

“If this tower isn’t visible or accessible to the outside, how do you get internet and electricity?” she asked.

“Space fairies,” he replied with a straight face.

She snorted. “You’ll never let me forget that term, will you?”

“Nope.” He laughed. “As with all other things, the tower gives what we need.”

“And that doesn’t bother you? Don’t you want to know why? Who made the tower? How does it work?”

“I don’t need to know how to make bread to enjoy eating it,” he replied, leading her into the computer lab, filled with, you guessed it, computers and screens and a thickly muscled fellow sitting in a chair that spun as he turned to greet them.

“Good timing. I was just about to buzz.” The man’s smile widened. “Oh, hello. You must be Dr. Guthrie.” He stood and held out his hand. “I’m Aquarius.”

“Nice to meet you. Call me Rebecca.” She shook his extended hand. “I hear you’re the tech guru.”

“Guilty as charged. And you’re a pretty well-known scientist.”

“I don’t know if I’d say that,” was her demure reply.

“I read some of your published papers. I can see why you graduated top of your class.”

Scorpio cleared his throat. “Sorry to interrupt, but hoping for good news. Did you get into Cetus’ server?”

“Yes and no.” Aquarius sat and spun back to his screen. “I’ve managed to get past the first few firewalls. I’ve currently got access to employee files and scheduling, lab results, purchasing orders, even a few of their current projects.”

“I hear a but,” Scorpio stated, leaning against a desk with arms crossed.

“I encountered another firewall, a good one, I might add.”

“Can you crack it?”

“Most likely, but it will take me a bit more time,” Aquarius stated.

“Any idea of what’s hiding behind?” Scorpio questioned.

“Could be something, could be nothing,” Aquarius shrugged. “Won’t know until I get past it.”

“Well, that fucking blows,” Scorpio grumbled.

Rebecca jumped in. “In the stuff you have access to, did you find anything about my trip to Antarctica?”

“Nope, and I’ve been looking.” Aquarius tapped at his keyboard. “Guess them keeping it a secret isn’t too surprising, given their true mission involved the orb. Oddly enough, while there is nothing about your work down there, you do exist on their payroll as a contracted employee.”

“What about their second facility?” Scorpio asked.

“Wait, what second facility?” Rebecca exclaimed. “I thought they had only the one office.”

Scorpio glanced at her. “Turns out they’ve got some kind of hush-hush location in Area 51, on loan to them from the government.”

“Area 51? You’re kidding, right? I thought that place was a hyped-up myth.”

“It exists, although they no longer have any alien organic samples or equipment to test. We cleared them out in the seventies,” Scorpio replied.

So matter of fact, Rebecca blurted out, “Why would the Zodiacs do that?””

“Sage saw bad shit happening if humanity copied the tech.” Aquarius waved his hands. “Something about us not being ready for advanced alien technology.”

“The Area 51 aliens actually existed,” Rebecca mused aloud. “Were they super tall and gray like the rumors claims?”

“Not quite. The aliens started out as larvae. Once they attached and gained control of their host, their feeding and growth process shifted the appearance of the person they leeched onto.”

“You’re saying the gray men I’ve seen portrayed were human?”

“Yup.” Aquarius nodded. “That’s what they end up looking like after a while.”

“If there’s nothing alien there, why would Cetus want to use the Area 51 facility?” she wondered aloud.

“Privacy? Labs?” Aquarius rolled his shoulders. “Who knows? I’m going to assume

info on it, as well as your mission, are behind the mega firewall. I've never seen anything like it."

"Fucking computers," Scorpio complained once more.

"Give me a day or two. I've yet to meet a..." Aquarius trailed off as his gaze returned to his screen. His fingers began tapping rapidly but not as quickly as the screen rolling gibberish in front of them.

"What's happening?" Rebecca asked, recognizing the numbers and letters as lines of code.

"Someone's trying to hack the tower mainframe," Aquarius exclaimed, sounding incredulous. "That should be impossible. I've got safeguards in place to ensure no one can back-trace." Aquarius' fingers flew on his keyboard.

"You must have triggered something," Rebecca murmured, the lines of text moving too fast, not that it would have mattered. She couldn't read computer code.

"It must have been subtle as fuck," Aquarius exclaimed. "I'm going to sever their access."

A tense silence descended, broken only by Aquarius' furious typing.

Then the screen went dark.

"Did you stop them?" Scorpio asked.

"No." Aquarius looked pissed. The Cetus logo suddenly popping into view on all the monitors didn't help.

“Fuck me, they’re in.” Aquarius swore a second time before all the screens went dark. The humming machines all died at once.

“What just happened?” Scorpio asked.

Aquarius leaned back in his chair with downturned lips. “I was out-hacked.”

“Are you saying they stole our information?”

“Nothing important. As a precaution, we don’t keep any Zodiac stuff on any computers with outside access. Not that it would have mattered. They didn’t even try to copy or download the files I did have. Whoever hacked us wiped my hard drives clean. Sorry, bro. I won’t be much help until I get my shit formatted and loaded.”

“Meaning we’re fucked,” Scorpio huffed.

“Yeah, at least for a day or more. Luckily, I’ve got backups that aren’t connected, so I should be able to restore, but it won’t have the access I hacked into Cetus.”

“Bloody hell,” Scorpio paced, his body tense with agitation.

“One thing’s for sure, this Cetus isn’t some do-good climate group. That was some slick work, the kind that takes big bucks.”

Scorpio rubbed his chin. “I hate having to enter blind. Not to mention, where do I go? Office building or secret facility?”

Rebecca chewed the end of her thumb. “There must be another way to find out where they took it.”

“The longer we take, the more time they have to secure the orb, or hide it.”

Scorpio ranted the entire trip back to his suite. He paced, bristling with anger. “Fuck. I can’t believe they caught Aquarius poking. That’s never happened before. But even worse, they apparently know a little too much about us.”

“How would they have found out? I thought the whole Zodiac Warrior thing was a secret?” Rebecca flopped onto his couch.

“Who knows? Maybe they found an ancient text. Or someone broke their oath and opened their big yapper.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, but they’re aware we’re onto them so their guard will be up. I should have hit them yesterday before they had a chance to beef up their security.”

“Um, unless they’re beaming across the planet, you do realize it’s something like twenty-plus hours to fly from Antarctica to the USA. More if there’s layovers. The relic is still most likely in transit.”

His lips pursed. “I hadn’t thought of that. But it gives me an idea.” He pulled out his phone, and his fingers flew.

“Who are you texting?” she asked.

“Aquarius and copying in Aries. Telling them to check for any planes registered under Cetus. Flight plans have to be registered, and something coming from Antarctica will stand out. If we can see where the plane goes, then we might still be able to intercept the orb.”

“Assuming they don’t offload it beforehand.”

He cast her a glare. “Not helping, Doc.”

“Sorry. Just pointing out possible outcomes. It’s a science thing.”

“You’re right. They could very well dump it to throw us off the scent, but finding their plane is the only possible clue I have right now.”

Only following up on it proved difficult. The computers remained inoperative, with Aquarius predicting at least twelve hours or more before he had them up and running again.

Scorpio didn’t handle the delay well. He wouldn’t stop pacing. A man too agitated to relax. It proved contagious, leading Rebecca to gnaw her thumb and tap her foot.

When his phone dinged, he read the text and smiled. “Bingo. Cancer called in some favors and might have found the plane. A private jet registered to Cetus left Ushuaia, which is on the tip of South America, and is heading to Maine, with three stops to refuel. We just missed the last one. According to its flight plan, it’s going to land at a private airfield in the next couple of hours.”

“Are you going to intercept it there?”

“Where they’re likely to have heavy security?” He shook his head. “Nope. We’re going to have it come down before that.”

She gasped. “You’re going to crash it?”

“No. But it’s going to need to do an unscheduled landing.”

“How?”

“They’re not the only ones with drones.” He grinned.

“How is a drone going to stop a plane?”

“Easy. By smashing into its engine.”

“Will that work? Drones aren’t that big. Won’t it mash it up and chew it out?”

“It will work. It has to, and when it does, we’ll be on the ground waiting for it to emergency land.”

“I guess you’ll be starbeaming to get there in time.”

“Yeah, but not the kind that needs math, thank fuck. There’s a portal near their route. We beam in with the toys, get them in the sky, sabotage the engines, force them to the ground, and bam, the orb is ours again.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“In theory it should be.”

“You won’t go alone, right?” She couldn’t help but sound worried.

“Nah. I’ll bring a few of the bros with me. Rather have too much firepower than too little.”

“Be careful,” she murmured.

“As if,” he scoffed but then more softly, “Don’t worry about me, Doc. This isn’t the most dangerous thing I’ve done.”

“When do you leave?”

“Soon.” He tapped on his phone. “Just putting a message out to the crew to pack up their gear and be ready to go within the hour. That should give us at least another hour before the plane enters the target zone.”

An hour before he left and, while he appeared confident, she couldn’t help her fear. What if he miscalculated and didn’t come back? What if the last time they’d kissed was because of a nightmare? What if they never got another chance?

Rebecca wasn’t one for brash and bold action.

Until now.

She launched herself from the couch and stood in front of him, staring up. “How much of that hour do you need to get ready?”

“Not much. My gear’s pretty much packed already. Why?”

Rather than reply, she grabbed his head and yanked him down to press her mouth against his, murmuring, “Got ten minutes to spare so we can have a proper goodbye?”

“Ten’s kind of rushing it,” he replied as he kissed her back. “But I think we can make it work.”

His hands spanned her waist and lifted her. He kept his lips locked to hers as he strode for the bedroom.

Her heart raced, anticipation and desire filling her. She could honestly say she’d never desired a man as much as him. Still almost a stranger, and yet he attracted her on a primal level that didn’t require a prerequisite number of dates. Wanted him

despite the fact she didn't even know if they had a future.

Needed him.

And for once in her life, she was going to be bold and throw caution and reason out the window and indulge in pleasure.

Scorpio lay her on the bed, but before he joined her, he stripped, revealing that sexy body of his, the muscles tempting enough her mouth watered. Her lower lips also got slick with anticipation.

He leaned down and undid the button to her khakis then the zipper. She lifted her hips to make it easier for him to tug them from her legs. She yanked at her shirt, pulling it off so she lay there only in a sports bra and panties.

"Damn, Doc," he said, his voice low and growly.

She'd never felt sexier. A frisson went through her, not of cold but arousal. Blame the smoldering intensity of his gaze.

"I hate we have so little time. I want nothing more than to explore your body. Learn every inch of it. What makes you moan. What makes you wet," he stated as he slid his hand up her calf.

"Guess you'd better come back in one piece, then," she quipped, feeling her breath catch as he stroked over the crotch of her panties.

Did he feel the dampness?

His fingers twisted in the fabric, and she gasped as he tore them from her and tossed them aside.

She should have felt shy at being exposed to his gaze. She'd never been one to flaunt her body, yet under his avid stare, she writhed.

Her bra joined the panties on the floor, and her nipples puckered, and he growled. "Tasty."

He covered her body with his, skin to skin, the coolness of him a perfect complement to her feverish flesh.

Trapped between their bodies, his erection pulsed. He shifted his body until the tip of his cock rubbed against her clit, the simple touch enough to have her arch against him, thrusting her breasts against his chest.

Braced on a forearm, he leaned back and captured an erect nipple, his teeth lightly grazing, before he latched on and sucked.

A jolt shot through her, and she moaned as she grabbed for his head, her fingers gripping his hair, pushing his mouth against her breast. He opened wide and sucked even more of her erect nub, tugging at her flesh before unlatching enough he could swirl his tongue around the tip. She whimpered at the sensations he roused, which doubled when he switched his attention to the other breast, paying it the same erotic attention.

While he sucked and teased, the head of his cock slid slickly back and forth across her clit, a pleasure that had her tensing her pussy, feeling herself close to orgasm. And with only foreplay!

She whispered, "I want you inside me when I come."

His turn to groan. "Just be warned, I don't think I'm going to last long. You're too damned sexy, Doc."

She almost came at his words.

The engorged tip of his shaft parted her nether lips, nudging at the entrance to her sex. Her hips wiggled and lifted, until the head of him was engulfed.

He leaned his forehead against hers and shuddered as he slowly slid the rest of his cock into her pussy, sheathing himself fully. And she loved it. Her channel clenched around him, vibrating with a mini climax at the sensation.

He began to move, grinding deep, pushing and teasing her G-spot. She clung to his shoulders, her nails digging in while her legs locked around his waist. She squeezed him tight, tight enough he moaned. She rocked in motion with his short thrusts, her breathing ragged as pleasure overwhelmed.

“Fuck me, I don’t think I can hold on,” he gasped.

“Then don’t.”

He pulled back, and her pussy clenched at the loss of his cock then pulsed as he slammed back in. A quiver went through her. He retreated again before thrusting back in, hard and deep. He did that over and over. His strokes fast, his cock hitting her sweet spot over and over.

And...

Rebecca screamed as she climaxed. Screamed and arched as she exploded. But she wasn’t the only one who went supernova. He joined her, grunting and going stiff, their bodies locked in a moment of pure pleasurable perfection.

Rather than collapse on her as the waves subsided, he rolled to the side and dragged her with him so she lay atop him, nestled on his wide chest.

He growled, “I swear I won’t be so quick next time.”

“Mmm, I don’t think I would have lasted had you tried. That was...” She lacked a word, so he supplied some.

“Amazing. Stupendous. Holy fucking incredible.”

She laughed. “Yes, it was. At least for me.”

His hand stroked down her back. “You might not believe this, but that was the most satisfying sex I’ve ever had.”

“Oh, and what makes it different?” she asked, propping herself up to see his face.

“Because I want to do it again. And again.” His hand reached to cup her cheek, his thumb lightly brushing it. “You’re something special, Doc.”

“Careful, you’re starting to sound like a man falling in love.” Lightly said, and yet her pulse pounded.

“I’m starting to think that might not be so bad.”

Her heart stopped. She might have replied eventually, but a voice emerged from the speaker.

“Hey, Scorpio, I know you said we’re using drones, but should I bring my rocket launcher too?” asked a male.

He sighed. “Guess our ten minutes is up.”

She kissed him lightly. “When your mission is done, we’ll try for twenty.”

“How about hours?”

“I doubt it will take that long for me to climax.” She chuckled.

His lips curved, and he purred, “Why have one O when you could have multiples?”

“That’s a myth.”

“I can’t wait to show you scientific proof, Doc.” He kissed her hard and hugged her even tighter before groaning, “Fuck, I better get going, or I’ll never leave this bed.”

A part of her almost asked him to stay. He was going off into danger and might never come back.

She had to remind herself he was a warrior. The same way she didn’t want to change for someone, he shouldn’t have to give up who he was either.

Holding in her anxiety, she watched him gear up and kissed him extra fiercely before whispering, “Don’t die.”

His reply? “That’s the plan. Keep the sheets warm for my return.”

Then he was gone.

Gone, leaving Rebecca stuck waiting.

To distract, she went to the library, but she hadn’t even started browsing the shelves when Sage entered.

“Hey, Sage. You okay? You’re looking pale.”

The other woman's expression held a haunted look that went well with her chilling statement. "You shouldn't be here. Without you, Scorpio will fail."

CHAPTER 15

The crew exited via the East Coast portal, and thirty minutes later, Scorpio, along with Cancer, Leo, and Aries, stood in a farmer's field with their equipment—which did include the rocket launcher. Aquarius had stayed behind to provide technical support via a laptop that hadn't gotten wiped. It wouldn't give him the full capabilities he had with his full system, but he could at least track the plane so they could position the drones properly when the time came.

The air held a chill to it, not that Scorpio minded. It felt balmy after his stint in the Antarctic but not as hot as the moment he'd shared with Rebecca. He'd not been lying when he claimed he could spend hours pleasing her. As a man with much—much—experience, he had no trouble admitting there'd been something different about sex with the doc. He'd reached a level of satisfaction he'd never imagined. More than just release, he'd felt a connection with her, and now that they'd parted, he couldn't stop thinking of her and what he'd do when he got back. And not just naked-times stuff. He wanted to get to know her. Listen to her talk. Play video games with her. Teach her about the Zodiacs, maybe take her on a tropical vacation that would include some exploring.

Cancer grumbled. "Fucking clouds. They better not mess up the signal for the drone." He fiddled with his remote as the device lifted into the air.

The second one was being controlled by Aries, who stared at the sky as if he could see the blocked stars.

Leo knelt on the ground, rocket launcher in hand. There'd been some arguing on

whether they should use it, with Aries stating, “We could accidentally destroy the artifact on board,” to which Leo replied, “Then at least they won’t have it.”

It didn’t help that when Sage was asked before departure if she could clarify its use or not, she burst into tears. According to Aries, she’d been having trouble with her visions.

No problem. They’d winged missions before.

Scorpio had neither a drone nor a rocket launcher, seeing as how he sucked at guiding the one, and as for the latter, Leo had better aim. Scorpio did, however, hold a rifle because, once the plane landed, more than likely there’d be some mercs on board with the sole task of guarding the orb. They’d see how they liked having a gun pointed at them. Yes, he remained salty about the ignoble incident by the glacier.

His earpiece vibrated as Aquarius gave them an update. “Plane will be entering the target zone in ninety seconds. Up-to-date coordinates sent to your remotes.”

Cancer viewed the update and whistled. “I’ll be damned. Seems like the plane is doing us a favor and is coming in lower than expected.”

“They might have started their descent early,” opined Aries.

Scorpio, however, frowned. With favorable weather conditions, why would the pilot deviate from standard protocol?

The rumble of a vehicle had him whirling to watch as a pickup truck in major need of a muffler zoomed down the road bordering the field. It didn’t slow, but he still watched it until the taillights and the noise of its failing exhaust system disappeared.

But silence didn’t return.

Whump . Whump .

“Is it me, or do I hear a fucking chopper?” Cancer exclaimed.

With his belly tight, Scorpio snarled, “Get ready. I think we’re about to be ambushed.”

Aries swore. “Leo, soon as you get eyes on it?—”

“Fear not, boss. I will knock the birdie from the sky,” grunted the man getting into position with his heavy duty artillery.

“Cancer, ignore the chopper and you stay focused on guiding your drone. I’m sending mine in to sabotage the left engine.”

“Already aiming for the right,” a concentrating Cancer muttered.

“Chopper in sight,” Leo advised as the blinking of its lights became visible. “Get ready for fireworks, boys.”

The boom as the rocket launcher fired didn’t startle. They were used to the noise of heavy munitions, and Leo’s aim proved true. The smudge in the sky turned into a fireball as the munition struck and exploded it. The deafening sound had Scorpio’s ears ringing, and he could barely hear Aries yell, “I just lost control of the drone.” He shook his remote, as if that would help.

“Fuck me, mine’s not responding either,” Cancer hollered in reply.

“Heads up. Incoming!” Aries hollered as the drones, no longer under their control, dove at the Zodiac crew.

Scorpio used the rifle to bat one out of the sky, even as the knot in his stomach tightened. It would seem Cetus' seer had predicted their operation. Worse, they'd coordinated an ambush of their own that included more than just the single chopper. More whomping could be heard.

Leo confirmed it a moment later. "There's another bird in the sky. Make that two." The blinking lights pierced the light mist.

"Abort," Aries shouted. "Mission is compromised. Everyone, get your asses back to the tower."

Frustration filled Scorpio at yet another failure.

"Zodiac that, boss." Cancer was the first to turn into a streak of light that disappeared. Leo stood with his big toy and a scowl. He beamed out a second later.

Not Scorpio. He clenched his jaw as he watched the pair of choppers coming in low. From this height, he could see the merc behind the mounted machine gun.

"Let's go," Aries yelled. "We lost the plane. No point in being target practice for these assholes."

The man had a point, even if it burned. A reluctant Scorpio began the activation of his tattoo, only to pause as he noticed the lights of a vehicle that slowed on the road. The dark SUV, identical to the one they'd used to come to the field, halted, and from the passenger seat spilled Doc just as Aries winked out of sight.

She ran for him, and Scorpio didn't realize he did as well until he was close enough to see her frightened face. "What are you doing here?" he snapped.

"Sage said I had to come, or something bad would happen." She came to a panting

stop in front of him.

“Too late.” He glanced past her to see Capricorn exiting the SUV. The culprit who’d brought her to the ambush. They’d be having words later. “We have to get out of here. It’s a trap.”

Her eyes widened. “I’m too late.”

“I don’t think your presence from the start would have mattered. They knew we’d be here.” He tucked her against him. “Head to the tower,” he shouted to Capricorn. “Mission is a bust.”

His friend glanced at him then the choppers in the sky before disappearing. Wild how they could get back home from anywhere with pretty much a simple thought but actually getting somewhere required either intense math or a permanent portal.

The wind from the chopper blades whipped Rebecca’s hair around her face, and he couldn’t help but be surprised the mercs hadn’t started shooting. The delay worked in their favor.

“Hold tight,” he exclaimed as he went to draw from his tattoo to beam them back home.

Only, just like in the ruin, it didn’t respond. Probably because the fuckers in the helicopter launched a net. It settled over him and Rebecca and quelled his ability.

“Fuck!” he swore.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“They came prepared.” This time Cetus had made sure he couldn’t simply vanish

from their clutches. The netting had somehow been woven with bits of meteorite. He couldn't leave.

Couldn't do anything as men dropped to the ground and ran for them.

Could only hold Rebecca tight and murmur, "Sorry." Looked like they wouldn't be celebrating naked later on.

If ever.

Tranquilizer darts hit them, their content potent enough to take even his ass down.

He woke in shackles in the back of a moving van, but even worse, he wasn't alone.

A frightened Rebecca sat tethered across from him and, as if to taunt their impotence, within a glass case strapped between them, the fucking orb.

CHAPTER 16

I am such an idiot. Rebecca couldn't help the feeling, seeing her current dilemma. In her defense, hearing Sage's ominous words in the library had sent Rebecca into a panic. "What do you mean Scorpio will die without me?"

The woman had ducked her head and whispered, "I see an ominous future if you're not by his side. Death. Destruction. A world in flames."

"But how am I supposed to help? I'm not a warrior. I cringe when I kill a bug."

At that, Sage had shrugged. "I don't see the why, just the result." She put a hand on her belly. "There will be no hope for any of us if Scorpio doesn't retrieve the relic."

"Well, maybe you should have stressed that before they left," huffed Rebecca, slightly miffed. "It's too late now. Even if I hopped the fastest jet, I wouldn't make it in time."

"Not true. There is one left who can take you."

It took her a moment to blurt out, "Do you mean Aquarius?"

"No, he's needed here, but another has just returned from a sabbatical. Capricorn can take you."

"Assuming he agrees."

“He already has. I spoke to him before finding you. He’s waiting in the portal room. Hurry. There is little time to stop what is to come.”

With that warning, Rebecca had bolted from the library. She put her feet on the stairs but didn’t have to do anything, as the tower took over, zooming her to the bottom, where a burly fellow, his face covered in a shaggy beard, stood waiting by a pile of luggage.

“You must be Rebecca. I’m Capricorn. I heard you need to go through the portal in Maine to meet up with the crew.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to impose,” she’d stated.

“When Sage speaks, we listen.” His lips quirked. “Although, at times, I think she uses that to her advantage. The things she had me buy while I was away...” He indicated a bulging knapsack.

“I don’t see how I can help, though,” Rebecca had grumbled as she walked quickly to match his long stride.

“We often don’t know what we’re capable of until put to the test,” his words of wisdom.

“Yeah, well, I don’t see how I’ll be able to do much, seeing as how the last time Scorpio starbeamed us, I passed out for a bit.”

“Starbeaming is hard on unmodified bodies. Portal travel, however, is much gentler. You should be fine.”

He entered a room that had her gaping. Scorpio had mentioned the portal room when they’d passed it on the way to the stardust room, but he’d not said anything about the

size of it. Massive. As her gaze moved around, she noted thirteen free-standing arches formed a crescent-moon shape on the back end. Embedded in the floor before them, on a stone dais, all but one of them carved with a zodiac symbol. The thirteenth was blank.

“What’s wrong with that spot in the floor?” She’d pointed.

“Nothing. It’s always been like that. A tower quirk, I assume.”

“Where to?” she asked, eyeing all the doorways.

He pointed to one on the far left. “This will take us where we need to go.”

“Only thirteen portals to cover the entire world. That doesn’t seem like enough.” She babbled to hide her nervousness as she followed him across the room.

He shrugged. “Yeah, not sure why that number. These were here long before I came along. It is an oddity, though, especially given the distance between some. The boys were lucky the Maine one worked for their mission because the only other one in North America is situated on the West Coast.”

“Couldn’t they have starbeamed?”

“Yeah, but bringing equipment can be tricky if you get the math wrong.”

A reminder of how she’d first met Scorpio.

Capricorn paused in front of the arch. “You ready?”

She glanced upward at the structure, a good ten feet tall and made of sparkling stone. Deep breath in. Exhale. In again. She did her best to quell her quivering nerves before

she said, “Let’s do this.”

“I’ll need to hold your hand, if you don’t mind.”

“Is that enough? Scorpio had me plastered to him last time.”

Once more, Capricorn’s lips tilted. “For this, yes. The portal isn’t as finicky as starbeaming. It just needed to be activated by someone with the Zodiac genes. Technically, we don’t have to touch, but if we don’t go through together, at the same time, it can get messy.”

Her eyes widened.

“I’ve never seen it happen,” he’d hastened to add. “Rather not, either. Still ready?”

No, but she kept that to herself as she clutched his calloused hand.

“On the count of three, step with me. One, two...” On three, they both moved forward, passing through the arch.

Disorientation hit as she went from staring at the wall on the other side of the room to blinking at an orange velvet couch and an honest-to-goodness avocado-green shag carpet. In good news, she remained conscious. In the bad, her stomach protested.

She held in her dinner and asked, “Where are we?”

“Zodiac safe house.”

“In what year?” she asked, glancing around at the seventies décor.

Capricorn chuckled. “We haven’t gone back in time, despite the look of this place.

We've owned this house since it was built to protect the portal. Used to be where Pisces lived back in his disco days."

"Where to now?"

"Aquarius gave me the coordinates to the farmer's field, where they're waiting."

"How are we getting there?"

"There should be a second SUV in the garage. All safe houses have a pair in case we need to transport the entire crew at once."

In moments, they were on the road, Capricorn somehow managing to catch all the lights green, getting them quickly out of the town and into the country, where darkness encroached on the land.

"How far is it?" she'd asked.

"Half-hour."

"Will we make it in time?"

He'd grinned. "It will be tight, but don't worry, I'll get you there."

And he had, exceeding speed limits, whipping them down single-lane roads that had her fearing for her life. If anything had wandered out in front of them...

They didn't hit anything or crash, and she knew they neared the place when she saw a distant explosion in the sky.

Her mouth rounded. "They did it. They took down the plane."

“That wasn’t a plane,” was Capricorn’s grim prognosis.

When he’d skidded to a stop, she’d tumbled from the car, recognizing Scorpio’s distinctive bulk against the backdrop of a burning wreck.

She’d run for him. Happy to see him alive. Then scared because he barked they had to go.

Only they didn’t escape.

A net fell upon them, Scorpio couldn’t beam them out, and next thing she knew, she woke in the back of a cargo truck, hands tied together in her lap. Ankles tethered too. Across from her, a scowling Scorpio. Between them, the orb.

“Hey, Doc. How you feeling?”

“Groggy. Dumb. So much for Sage’s prediction you needed my help,” she grumbled.

“I can’t believe she told you to come after me.”

“I had to. She said you’d fail without me. Guess I got there too late.”

“I doubt it would have mattered. The entire thing was a trap.” He leaned his head back. “Cetus knew we’d be there and came prepared. The net they used on me was threaded with meteorite and impeded my ability to beam. The cuffs appear to be made of the same shit.”

“Everyone else escaped at least.” She tried to inject something positive, despite her own fear.

“Not really. They caught you.” His lips twisted.

“Caught us . And it’s my fault. You would have escaped if I’d not distracted you.”

“Maybe.”

“Where do you think they’re taking us?”

“Nowhere good, I imagine.” He inclined his head at the glass box. “Nothing like the enemy taunting you.”

“At least we know where it is.”

He uttered a short barking laugh. “True. Problem being, how we can escape and take it with us?”

The truck slowed and stopped. A rattle at the rear doors had them opening to reveal four mercenaries wearing helmets and holding guns.

“Get up,” barked the burly fellow with a green stripe on his arm.

They had to shuffle to reach the door, and then Rebecca was grabbed and placed on the ground. Not Scorpio. He scowled and leaped, despite his tied ankles. He bent his knees as he landed before standing and towering over the men.

“Move.” The guy in charge pointed with his weapon at a steel door flanked by a facial-recognition scanner. He had to raise his visor for it to read his features.

They were prodded inside and led along a corridor with plenty of closed doors to an elevator, which took them down a level. From there, they were placed in cages.

Actual cages.

For some reason, this more than anything that had happened thus far had her trembling. It didn't help they appeared to be in a pristine lab. Gleaming counters, spotless floors. Machines waiting to be activated.

The guards left without untying them, making it feel so much worse.

"What do they want with us?" she whispered, despite knowing anything she said or did would be seen most likely by a security camera.

"Nothing good, I imagine," Scorpio drawled.

"I'm scared," she admitted.

"I'm sorry, Doc. You shouldn't be here."

"Neither should you," her hot retort.

"I can handle whatever they dish out."

"You shouldn't have to handle anything. This is illegal."

"Pretty sure they don't care about laws."

She grimaced. "Obviously." She wanted to ask him if he thought the other Zodiacs would come to the rescue. Most likely, yes, so no reason to have those listening beef up their security. As it was, the location appeared well-guarded.

"Listen, Doc, whatever they ask of you, just tell them."

"Tell them what? I know nothing."

“Exactly. Don’t resist.”

She arched a brow. “And are you going to follow that advice?”

His lips quirked. “Not a chance. But no point in both of us being tortured.”

Hearing him say it brought back the trembles. “You think they’ll hurt us?”

“I’d count on it,” his grim response.

“Way to reassure,” she grumbled.

“Would you rather I lie?”

“No.” A sigh escaped her. “How long do you think they’ll keep us waiting?”

“Given the late hour? Probably until morning. You should get some rest.”

“I doubt I’ll sleep.”

A sudden hissing had her tilting her head to see the vent over the cages spewing a whitish fog.

“What is that? Is it poison?”

“Don’t panic. It’s sleeping gas,” Scorpio stated just as her eyelids began to flutter.

She woke to find herself still in the cage, lying on the floor, no longer in her clothes but a set of light blue scrubs. In good news, her tethers were gone and the door to her cage was left open. In the bad... Scorpio appeared to have disappeared from his prison.

It took a moment to realize they'd moved him to a hospital bed, one with built-in restraints that held him starfish style.

"Oh no," Rebecca huffed as she stumbled to her feet, still woozy from the drug. She tottered from her cage and passed machines that hummed as they processed whatever samples had been inserted. Judging by the tray of tools beside a strapped Scorpio, she could easily imagine what some of those samples were. The needles and bloodied scalpel told a story, as did the oozing wound on his forearm.

His eyes were closed, but as she neared, they flashed open, full of rage that tempered to concern as he saw her.

"Hey, Doc. You okay?"

"I'm the one who should be asking that," she chided softly as she reached for some gauze and began patting the spot where they'd taken a chunk of his flesh.

"Bah. It was just a few needles," he scoffed. "The most traumatizing thing thus far was having some dude holding my dick and telling me to pee in a bottle."

"Have you found out what they want?"

"Other than a lab rat?"

Before she could reply, a voice boomed, "You are much more than a rat. Your kind are so very interesting. Born human—your genetics don't lie—and yet there are differences that go beyond chromosomes. DNA changes the likes of which we've never seen but suspected since we discovered the existence of the Zodiac Warriors."

Rebecca whirled to see the same older man she'd met in Antarctica. "You again."

“Yes, me. Dr. Augustus Monroe. We never had a chance for a proper introduction since you abruptly left our last meeting. Luckily, you were drawn from your hidey-hole so we could continue with the project.”

“This is kidnapping. I demand you release us at once!”

“You are in no place to ask anything,” snapped Monroe. “On the contrary, either you cooperate, or face the consequences.”

“What could be worse than being held prisoner?”

“I can think of a few things. How attached are you to your limbs?”

Her heart stuttered. “You’d maim me?”

“I would do a great many things in my pursuit of science. So either you aid us, or suffer.”

“Help you with what? I know nothing.”

“You found the orb,” reminded the doctor.

“By accident. And only because you sent me to that location. You could have located it yourself.”

“Do you think we didn’t try? Years we’ve been searching. Our donors were beginning to grow impatient. Luckily, it was brought to our attention that we needed a specific set of people. A human bonded to a Zodiac, which turned out to be you, and the fellow who calls himself Scorpio.”

“What do you mean bonded? I barely know Scorpio. We’d only just met when you

found us.”

“While your meeting was recent, the bond formed immediately, even if neither of you yet recognize it. A strange quirk unique to his kind. Hence why fate acted to bring you together, or perhaps, in this case, you could blame the stars. Whatever the case, you found each other, a link between you formed, and that is why you could access the relic.”

“You have the orb. I don’t see why you need us.”

“The Zodiac is needed so we might research what makes him a star warrior. If we can reproduce the change in others, the applications will be endless and financially lucrative.”

“Test all you want, dumb fuck,” Scorpio spat. “Being a Zodiac isn’t something you can inject into someone.”

“I’m sure you think so, but I have some of the best scientists working with me. If there is a way to mimic the process that changed you, we will find it.”

“You have me. Why take Rebecca?”

“One, because her well-being will depend on your cooperation. My understanding is that bonded pairs don’t like to see their other half suffer. But the main reason we needed Dr. Guthrie is because she is the one who will open the orb.”

At his statement, she blinked and blurted out, “Excuse me?”

“Don’t play hard of hearing. I have it on good authority you will open it.”

“And exactly how do you expect me to do that?” She flexed her fingers. “Pretty sure

my blunt nails won't even scratch the surface."

"Don't be so sure of that. The orb isn't behaving like an object of this world would. Despite repeated attempts while you napped overnight, we've not managed to penetrate it, and not for a lack of trying. It cannot be x-rayed or scanned. We've tried cutting it with a metal-toothed saw, a diamond blade, a drill bit, even a laser. Acid just rolls off. We tried crushing it in a compacter, but it broke the machine. It neither heats nor cools, even though we submerged it in liquid nitrogen. Nothing we've tried even marred its surface."

"Maybe it's not meant to open."

"Don't be pedantic. It is merely a protective shell for what's inside, which you will retrieve, or else."

"If you couldn't do it, what makes you think I can?"

"Because it's been foretold," Monroe stated bluntly.

"You're insane."

"I like to call it determined. I am also impatient, so let's get to it."

"I don't know what you expect me to do," Rebecca grumbled, stalking for the orb.

"Touch it, rub it, spit on it, pee on it. I don't know, but do something!" Monroe snapped.

"And if nothing works?"

"Then you'll try again. And again. Oh, but each time you whine about failing, your

bonded Zodiac over here will lose a finger. Or a toe. I wonder if there's ever been a one-eyed warrior," Monroe mused aloud.

"You're a sick bastard." A rare expletive slipped from her lips.

"No, I'm a man who's been waiting a long time to find this relic, and I am out of patience."

"What's it supposed to hold anyhow?" she muttered as she reached for the orb. It vibrated faintly in her grip.

"As if you don't know."

"Would I be asking if I did?"

"What's your mate have to say?" Monroe glanced at Scorpio.

"Don't ask me. First, I heard of this thing was a few days ago when I was told to find it."

"Surely your seer had more to say," Monroe stated.

"Yeah, she said if we didn't get our hands on it, the world was fucked."

The reply punched Monroe's lips. "That's not what our seer has told us."

"Oh, and what exactly did yours say?" Scorpio asked.

"That it was one of three objects of immense power."

"Did you ever stop to wonder what kind of power?" Rebecca interjected. "Doesn't

seem like the good kind to me. Why else would someone have gone through the trouble of hiding them so thoroughly?"

"Because the Zodiacs think themselves superior to humans." Monroe sneered. "And yet, I look at this one, and I don't see it."

"Let me out of this contraption, and I will impress you with my special skills," Scorpio taunted.

"How about you be quiet, or I'll put you down for another nap," threatened Monroe before turning to Rebecca. "Open the orb."

She bit her lip, rather than asking how. She had no doubt Monroe would enjoy punishing Scorpio if she didn't at least try.

But try what?

The orb in her grip no longer vibrated, nor did it feel warm or cold for that matter. Her lips pursed as she lifted it to eye level. It definitely did not weigh as much as expected, nor did its metallic surface reflect anything. She shook it and heard nothing, no sloshing or rattling, making her wonder if it was even hollow.

"Would you stop screwing around?" huffed Monroe.

She paused. "How about you calm down? You asked me to open it. Since I haven't the slightest clue how, I need to study it first, see if I can figure out its puzzle."

"How long?"

"However long it takes," she growled. "Longer if you won't shut up about it."

Scorpio snickered, causing Monroe to glare.

“You know what would help? Food? I’m starved.” Not entirely false but not true either. While she knew she should eat, Rebecca had no appetite. What she really wanted was for Monroe to leave.

“You’re not in a position to make demands,” the piqued doctor huffed.

“Maybe not, but I’m also useless if I’m hangry,” she quipped.

Before Monroe could retort again, an alarm sounded; a strident blare that startled.

“Now what?” the doctor grumbled. He glanced at Rebecca. “Hands on the counter.”

“Why?”

“Do as you’re told.”

She placed them on the flat surface.

It shouldn’t have surprised her when Monroe pulled out a flex cuff and used it to attach her left hand to a ring bolted to the table’s front edge—a ring that she now understood. How often did they take people prisoner?

“Wouldn’t want you getting into trouble while I go check things out. Feel free to play with the orb while I’m gone, but keep in mind, you are on camera, so if you find anything, I will know. Meaning, don’t bother hiding it.”

With that final warning, Monroe left, and Rebecca glanced at Scorpio.

“What do you think is happening?”

His lips curved, and he sounded pleased as he stated, “Cetus is about to face the wrath of the Zodiacs.”

CHAPTER 17

Rescue was imminent, and Scorpio had never felt more the weak fool. A prisoner of the people he'd sought to bring down. His lover, threatened. His body bound and samples taken from it. Yet, what could he have done differently?

If he'd beamed out before they threw the net from the helicopter, it would have been Rebecca alone captured, and he had no doubt that sick fuck Monroe would inflict harm if she didn't do what he wanted.

Not while Scorpio lived. Monroe was a dead man walking. Soon as Scorpio got free, he'd make sure of it.

Speaking of getting untied, he eyed Rebecca, who tugged at her flex cuff to no avail.

"You need something sharp to cut it." He had to shout to be heard over the alarm.

"You don't say. Any suggestions or should I gnaw at it with my teeth?" She'd not lost any of her fiery spirit.

"What do you have in reach?"

"Other than this troublesome orb, nothing." She glanced around before frowning at the ceiling. "You really think it's your friends coming to save us?"

"Yes, but even if it's not, this is the distraction we needed to free ourselves."

“Not sure how this helps. I take it you still can’t beam out?”

“No, and I wouldn’t leave you alone if I could.”

“The drawers are locked,” she grumbled as she tugged the handles projecting under the counter.

“What about smashing the orb onto the ring holding the cuff?”

“Guess it wouldn’t hurt to try,” she said with a shrug before grabbing hold and slamming it down. It made little sound, definitely no metallic bong as she smashed it again and again. While she couldn’t get much force with her single-handed grip, in a stroke of luck, it actually worked. The bolts holding the ring snapped, and while she still wore the flex cuff, she could now move around.

“I’m loose,” she crowed, holding up her freed hand.

“See if you can free me now,” he suggested. As she went to join him, he added, “Keep the orb with you in case we have to make a hasty retreat.”

She tucked it under her arm before she moved to his side. A frown marred her brow as she eyed his restraints. Thick canvas straps threaded with meteorite.

“The buckles have locks on them,” she complained, rattling the tiny contraption.

“Smash ‘em.”

She bit her lip. “It’s too close to your wrist. I might hurt you.”

“Don’t worry about me. Better some bruises or broken bones than staying here.”

“Good point.” She held the orb two-handed and began smashing, hitting the little padlock over and over until it snapped. She smiled. “One down.” She tugged it from the loop and undid the buckle, freeing his hand before she moved to his other side to repeat the process. He didn’t tell her it would be faster if he did it, the few extra seconds it would take to give her a sense of accomplishment worth it in his mind.

“And there goes number two!” she crowed as the lock broke.

Soon both his hands were free, and he could flex his arms. “Chest next.”

Off she smashed while he glanced around for a weapon. No guns in sight; no surprise. No sword either, but the tray did have a scalpel stained with his blood.

The siren abruptly went silent at the same time the lights went out. Machines stopped whirring. A thick darkness fell that lasted only a few seconds before emergency floodlights kicked in but not the many appliances.

In that silence, and despite the thick walls of the basement level, he heard the distant pop of gunfire. Definitely his brothers.

Crack . “Got it,” she crowed, yanking the broken lock and undoing the restraint keeping his upper body prone.

“Give me a second to get my legs free and then we’ll blow this joint.” He grabbed the scalpel before he bent over and inserted it into the lock holding his ankle. He strained against it, using the scalpel as a lever. The loop on it snapped.

“Can you undo the buckle while I do the other?” he asked.

“On it.” She knelt and was finished by the time he’d broken the last padlock.

Freed of restraints, he rolled out of the bed and stood, ready to rock—and roll some heads.

“What do you say we get out of here?” he asked, reaching for her hand.

“We can’t leave soon enough,” her high-pitched laughed reply.

Only it wouldn’t be that simple. His tattoo still didn’t respond. The lab had obviously been built with the imprisonment of Zodiacs in mind.

“Looks like we’ll have to leave the basement before I can beam. Stay close behind me.”

“Who’s holding on to the orb?”

“You. I want my hands free in case we have to fight our way out.”

Before he’d taken two steps, he heard a door open, not the one he’d aimed for. As he whirled, he caught sight of Monroe.

The doctor snarled. “How did you get free?”

“Did you really think you could hold a Zodiac Warrior?”

Monroe’s brow creased in anger. “I should have kept you drugged. Hand over the orb.”

Rebecca hugged it to her chest. “I don’t think so.”

A gun emerged from Monroe’s lab pocket. “Hand it over or I will shoot.”

The man probably would anyhow, but while Scorpio could handle bullets, Doc wasn't as tough as him. He grabbed her and used his body as a shield just as Monroe fired.

The searing pain went through his midsection—right through—which meant it hit Rebecca too.

She gasped, and the coppery stench of blood filled the air. She hit the floor on her knees, and the orb fell out of her grip and went rolling on the floor.

Ignoring it, Scorpio dropped beside her. "How bad is it?"

She pushed him away. "Forget me. Don't let him get the relic."

At her words, Scorpio glanced over his shoulder and saw Monroe diving for it.

"Like fuck, asshole." Ignoring his own wound, Scorpio rammed the so-called doctor with enough force the man went flying and hit the bed Scorpio had just escaped.

Scorpio stalked for Monroe, who held up his hands and whimpered, "Don't. Take the orb. Leave."

"So you can continue being a sick fuck? Don't think so. Hope your affairs are in order." Because this was the end.

Scorpio didn't screw around, not with Doc bleeding. He grabbed the other man, lifted him, and then did a famous wrestling move that involved slamming him down on his knee. Only he didn't hold back and fake it. Crack . The spine snapped, and a moment later, so did Monroe's neck.

Scorpio dropped the limp body to the floor and scooped the orb before he returned to

Rebecca's side.

"Hold on, Doc. Let's go find you someone who can stitch you up."

"It's bad, Scorpio," she whispered, fear trebling her words.

He could hear it, a hissing of air indicating a compromised lung. "You'll be fine. Promise."

She tried to laugh, but blood bubbled past her lips. He crouched and handed her the orb. "You hold this while I carry you, okay."

"M'kay," she murmured. While she clutched the orb tight to her bleeding chest, the rest of her was limp as he lifted her in his arms.

Hands full meant he had no defense when a door slammed open. To his relief, Capricorn stood there with a semi-automatic rifle.

"Guess I shouldn't be surprised you're playing the hero without us," his friend quipped.

"Some hero. Doc got shot. I need to get her to a hospital."

"Fuck. That's going to be a problem. Our storming of the Cetus headquarters didn't go unnoticed. Cops have started to arrive. The building is surrounded."

Meaning they couldn't leave without being seen or caught.

"I don't know if the tower can do anything for her." Stardust didn't work on humans.

"If it can't, then you can hop into another portal. The one in Vancouver has a medical

clinic nearby.”

“Yeah, well, that’s a bit of a problem seeing as how I can’t currently beam to the tower.”

“Not from this level you can’t,” Aries advised as he arrived. “Basement has traces of meteor in its walls, but the first floor doesn’t seem to have that issue. Soon as you hit the lobby, you should be able to beam.”

“What about the cops storming the place?”

“They’ve not made it inside yet. Cancer and Leo are popping off just enough to keep them hunkered behind their cars. They’ll soon realize they’re not shooting to kill, though, so let’s get our asses out of here before we do have to use deadly force on the good guys. Follow me.”

Aries led them from the lab and down a hall to a door marked EXIT and Stairs, currently propped open with a body. They emerged from the stairwell to find themselves in a lobby. Scorpio’s gaze went to the elevator, beside which sat a head, but no body.

“Talk about losing your head,” Scorpio quipped.

“We were using it with the scanners to open doors until the power went out.”

Pop . Pop . A glance showed Cancer and Leo kneeling and taking random potshots, not at the cops—Zodiacs didn’t shoot the good guys doing their job—but at their parked cars and the lights.

“Everyone prepare to beam out,” Aries shouted.

“Is that wise?” Scorpio asked. Much as he wanted to leave, duty did remind him of a few key things. “If we go, the cops will confiscate everything here as part of a crime scene, meaning they’ll discover what Cetus was really up to.”

“They won’t be finding anything,” Capricorn announced as he emerged from the stairwell with a grin. “Explosive are set. Just tell me when and this baby is going to blow.”

Aries glanced at Aquarius, whom Scorpio hadn’t seen sitting behind the reception desk, his face bent over his laptop. “Are the civilians cleared?”

“Yup. As far as I could tell, they all evacuated when the alarm went off. Should just be us left and maybe a few stray mercs that got scared and hid,” Aquarius replied, slamming the laptop shut before standing.

“Good enough. Zodiacs, move out.”

Usually, Scorpio would be last to go. Not today. Hugging Rebecca tight, he called on his tattoo, pulled on the power of his constellation, and beamed home.

Only to arrive at the tower empty-handed.

Not only was the orb gone, but Doc was too!

CHAPTER 18

The pain in Rebecca's chest from the gunshot went from sharp, and whimpering-worthy, to nothing.

Probably because she died. A valid assumption, seeing how Rebecca floated in a dark place. No body to see or feel or hear. Nothingness everywhere...

Hold on a moment. Was that the orb floating in front of her? But not the same orb she recalled. No longer did it appear made of dull metal but rather it twinkled like a miniature star.

Finally, the first piece.

The voice she'd heard only once before in her dream sounded pleased.

What is it?

Rebecca tried to speak, and while the words didn't emerge aloud, the entity in this place heard her this time.

It is the beginning.

Of what? she asked through her thoughts.

My escape.

The claim held an ominous ring, but Rebecca found herself more concerned by the spinning orb. It whirled, faster and faster, shooting off streaks of light. If she'd had arms, she would have held them over her face to protect it. At least the sparks didn't cause her harm.

What's happening?

The voice didn't reply as the orb glowed brighter and brighter, a miniature sun preparing to go supernova.

Despite having no body, Rebecca closed her eyes, to no effect. The brilliance expanded, much like a bubble overfilled, before exploding with a shock wave that sent her incorporeal form tumbling.

When she returned to simply floating, the dark nothing had resumed, and the orb was gone, but the voice returned, stronger than before.

And so it begins.

What's going on? Where am I? Who are you? Am I dead? A flurry of questions erupted.

You are not dead, simply in a place outside of time and not for much longer. You've completed your task. Time for you to go while I wait for the next piece.

Go where? Where are you sending me?

Back to where you belong.

Before Rebecca could ask another question, she found herself being tugged, as if drawn through a dark tunnel, terrifying. Where did she go? What would happen to

her? What?—

“Doc! Can you hear me?”

Rebecca blinked at the bright sunshine on her face before her eyes could focus on Scorpio leaning over her.

“Where am I?” she murmured. “What happened?”

“You’re at the very top of the tower,” Scorpio exclaimed, dragging her into his arms. “How did you get here? I thought I lost you when I exited the portal and you were gone.”

“I... I...” She scrunched her face as she tried to recall. There was a fleeting memory of darkness and a bright light, vague and already fading, which led her to mutter, “Last thing I remember is you holding me tight and the pain from being shot.” A pain she no longer felt.

She shoved at Scorpio and went to tug at her shirt, only to realize she wore nothing. Not a single thread. Astonishing, but even more surprising?

Her unmarred chest. She ran her fingers over the flesh. “I thought I was injured.”

“You were,” Scorpio stated in a low voice. “Badly, too. I wasn’t sure you’d live. Wherever you went healed you.”

“How long was I missing? There’s not even a hint of a scar.”

“A few hours, during which I panicked, trying to figure out where you ended up, only to have the tower suddenly go bonkers. I was climbing the stairs to the command level when it wrapped me in a pod and shot me up to the top.”

His explanation didn't ease her confusion. "But how did I get here? I thought you said no one used the top floors."

"No one does, so you can imagine my surprise when the tower insisted on bringing me here. Once I saw you, I understood."

Rebecca pushed herself to her feet and glanced around. The rooftop appeared made of solid stone that sparkled. The blue sky stretched for miles around. What she didn't see?

"Oh, no. The orb!" She glanced at her hands as if it would magically conjure it.

"Guess it got lost in the transition."

"I'm sorry." Her lips turned down.

"Don't be. Fucking thing's been nothing but trouble. The important thing is you're here. safe and unharmed. Although you're probably freezing." He stripped his shirt and handed it to her, but she shook her head.

"I'm not actually cold." A strange thing to say since she could feel the coolness of the air.

"That's weird."

"No weirder than any of the other stuff that's happened," she quipped.

"Well, even if you aren't getting frosty, we should head inside and let the others know to call off the search. The crew's been popping in and out of portals, trying to see if you accidentally ended up somewhere else. Aquarius has been scouring the web for news of an injured woman suddenly appearing. while Aries has been trying to get

Sage to clarify.”

“Clarify what?”

“She kept saying ‘All is as it should be.’ Which wasn’t helpful, I’ll admit.” He tucked his shirt around her. “While you’re not cold, you might want to wear this unless you want to give the boys a show.”

Still somewhat discombobulated, she slid her arms into the sleeves. A dazed feeling hung around her mind, tickling her with the sense she’d forgotten something. But did it really matter? She was alive. Healed. Safe.

With Scorpio.

He linked his hand with hers as he directed her to the stairs that descended from the roof into the tower. The chamber they entered took her by surprise. Windows wrapped around the open space that held a massive bed, a pair of couches and chairs, bookcases, a dining table, and a bathroom area that had its privacy curtain pulled open. “Does someone live here?”

“Not that I know of.” Scorpio frowned as he glanced around. “We only use the first dozen or so floors.”

As Rebecca walked for the bookcases, drawn by the books, she suddenly found herself going backwards. A glance at her feet showed the stone underfoot transporting her.

“Scorpio, why is the floor moving?”

“If I had to guess, the tower doesn’t want us snooping around.” They ended up in the stairwell, where the stone suddenly encased them in a cocoon. She might have

panicked, except Scorpio held her against his chest.

“Now what?” she murmured, leaning her cheek against him, reassured by the steady beat of his heart.

“I think the tower wants us back where we belong.” A journey that happened quickly. Too quickly, given the distance, but she knew by now not to use logic where the tower was concerned.

When the cocoon peeled away, they found themselves on the office floor, which startled those milling around.

Aries spotted them first. “You found her!”

“More like the tower showed me. She was at the very top,” he explained.

“But how?” Everyone had questions, but Rebecca had no answers. She truly didn’t know how she’d ended up there or what happened to the orb, although every time she tried to remember, for some reason, she thought of exploding stars.

Weird.

With her safely returned, the Zodiac Warriors in residence ended up on the dining level seated at the massive table, where the tower had spread a feast. It also provided her with clothes, which she changed into when using the bathroom.

A famished Rebecca tucked into the food, hungrier than she ever recalled. Scorpio, by her side, only ate slightly more. The mood oozed jubilation, the crew celebrating what they considered a victory. The relic wasn’t in Cetus’ possession. As a matter of fact, Cetus had suffered a setback, given their main building was destroyed in what officials were calling a lab explosion.

The only oddity occurred when Sage suddenly stood with her glass of apple juice and said in that creepy voice she liked to use, “Celebrate today, for soon a new quest begins. Sins from the past return to test. The harshest trials are yet to come.”

Silence fell until Leo stood and said, “And on that note, I’m going to get drunk.”

He stalked off, and the party broke up with Scorpio and Rebecca heading to his suite. They both sighed as the door closed behind them then laughed.

“Is your life always like this?” she asked. “Since I’ve met you, it’s been nothing but danger.”

“Usually, we each do a couple of missions a year. This whole relic and an evil corporation out to get us is new.”

“With Cetus losing its headquarters, do you think they’re done with the Zodiacs?” she asked.

“I’d like to lie and say yes, but given the trouble they went to...” He shook his head. “They’ll be back, but this time, we’ll be ready for them.”

“Speaking of ready...” she purred. “I seem to recall someone promising me more than ten minutes the next time we were alone.”

His lips stretched into a wide smile. “Is that a hint, Doc?”

“More like me demanding you make good on your word.”

“You’re not too tired?”

“I feel better than I can ever recall.” And that was the truth. Nothing ached. On the

contrary, she felt strong, energized, and very, very aroused.

She grabbed him by the shirt she'd given back after the tower clothed her and yanked him until she could reach his lips.

He uttered a groan as she kissed him. Their lips meshed hotly and passionately. His hands cupped her ass and squeezed, sending a shiver of anticipation through her.

Their clothes went flying as they made quick work of the garments, eager to be naked, craving skin-to-skin contact.

Rather than make it to the bed, Rebecca found herself seated on the couch, Scorpio kneeling between her legs. His hands caressed her flesh, and his lips tickled a path as he made his way from her lips, down between the valley of her breasts, to her stomach. He didn't stop there. He trailed his mouth even lower, burying his face between her parted thighs.

His tongue speared her nether lips and teased, making her cry out. He licked her, teased her, flicked her clit until she writhed and panted.

When she begged him to give her his shaft and end the turmoil, he kept licking instead. Teased her until her body bowed and she came, a sharp cry slipping past her lips.

But he wasn't done. He kept going, toying with her sensitized flesh, taking the dying ripples of her first orgasm and stoking them, building up the tautness again, making her whimper with need.

Only then did he lift his head from her sex. He wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her to the edge of the couch, where his cock waited. He buried himself deep, and she sighed at the relief and pleasure of having him fill her.

Their lips joined once more as he pumped her pliant flesh. She moaned against his mouth as her pussy squeezed him tight. When she came for a second time, she clenched hard, and he shouted, “Fuck yeah.”

They came together in a big bang of an explosion that had her seeing more than just stars. She saw right into the heart of Scorpio. The man who’d changed her universe. A warrior who’d taught her courage. A lover who made good on his promise and pleased her for hours.

And what did you know. It was more satisfying than science.

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In the weeks that followed the Cetus and orb incident, things returned to normal. Kind of. Scorpio had changed, and he wasn't the only one.

It took a few days to notice Rebecca hadn't returned to the same person she used to be. On the contrary, it took Leo pointing out, "Your woman's got a sparkle to her now," for Scorpio to realize that whatever had happened during those missing hours had transformed her. While not a Zodiac Warrior, her genetics, once studied, showed signs of star enhancement. He should have known, seeing as how she no longer worried about hot and cold, she'd become stronger, and, even more astonishing, could use the portals without aid.

Libra, who took an interest in the biology of the Zodiacs, seemed convinced she'd enjoy the same long life span as them as well, which meant Scorpio, who'd always had a fear of commitment, didn't have to worry about losing her to old age. A good thing, since he didn't see himself tiring of her anytime soon.

Monroe might have been an asshole, but he'd been right about one thing. They were bonded. A man and a woman from two different worlds who'd found each other in spite of the odds and fallen in love.

It proved more fulfilling than expected, if bruising to his fists. He returned to the suite sucking his knuckles, which arched Rebecca's brow.

"Who did you hit this time?"

"Pisces."

“Dare I ask why?”

Because Pisces sang, “Scorpio and Rebecca sitting on the moon, both smiling like big buffoons. First comes love, then comes ? —”

Smack .

Since Scorpio doubted she’d understand why the smirk needed to be wiped from his bro’s face, he chose to reply, “It’s a guy thing.”

At his reply, she shook her head but smiled. “You can’t punch everyone who teases you about finally getting a steady girlfriend.”

“Yeah, I can,” his sulky reply.

“They’re just jealous.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Because you’re getting epic sex every night. Day. Morning.” Her lips curved. “It probably drives them nuts to see how happy you are.”

“I am happy.” More than he’d ever imagined, and he owed it all to his Doc.

He swung her around until she squealed. “Enough or I’ll puke on you.”

He stopped but only so he could kiss her and say the words he’d never thought would pass his lips: “I love you.”

Her amused reply? “I know.”

The weeks since they’d found the orb had left Sage out of sorts. Despite her claiming

pregnancy hormones, Aries had a feeling something more churned inside her mysterious brain.

She spent hours in the observatory, watching the stars in a trance, and he'd wager he knew why. The day they'd taken down Cetus and Rebecca disappeared with the orb—which was never recovered—he'd found his wife in the portal room, standing over the blank thirteenth dais. Only it was no longer blank.

“What's that?” he asked, eyeing the chunk of stone filling a third of it.

Sage had glanced at him, and her eyes glossed over with a faraway look as she murmured, “That which was lost is soon to be found. Chaos and turmoil will precede their arrival. The world shall tremble before their might. That which betrayal sundered shall be made whole, and the whole universe shall tremble as the thirteenth Zodiac returns.”

A thirteenth warrior?

No amount of questioning revealed anything further. Sage would shake her head and say, “Don't be silly. There are only twelve.”

But he had to wonder. Especially when Sage came to him a month after the Cetus incident and said, “It's time for the next warrior to leave on a quest.”

And this time, it was Leo's task to find it.

The world might be fucked.

Seeing Scorpio happy with his new doctor girlfriend and Aires blissful with a pregnant Sage roused all kinds of emotions in Leo. Most of them unpleasant.

He'd been happy once upon a time. Thought he'd been in love. Although that love

proved more complicated than expected. Some might even call it toxic, but that didn't lessen the pain when he lost it and the child born of that union.

A child he couldn't save.

A guilt he couldn't shake even years later.

So, when Aries called his hungover ass into his office and said, "Enough is enough. Time for you to get some help," Leo didn't argue.

"Any suggestions, boss?"

Aries slid a piece of paper with a name and address on it. "You need to talk to someone and get your head back on straight."

"Sure."

Aries blinked. "What, no argument?"

Leo had none. Not anymore. He tired of drowning his sorrow with booze. Wanted to move past the crushing grief and somehow find a way to forgive his sins.

The only comment he made? "You do realize it's gonna be hard for me to talk about what went down to a human."

"I'm sure you can find a way. Tell her you were a cop. It's not uncommon for criminals to go after their families."

A lie that just might work.

Not that Leo had a choice. The precipice he stood on was literally one of life or death, with him leaning toward the latter. With nothing to lose, he went to the brownstone in

New York to meet with the shrink...

And what happens is for the next book. Leo's will be a journey not just of emotions but one of discovery as he seeks out the next missing artifact. But he's not the only one on the hunt. Will he find the next relic and peace with his past? Find out in Sins of Leo .