

Andy's Woodsy Adventure

Chapter 1

It was one of those days when I just wanted to be outside. The sky was blue and there weren't any clouds to be seen. The temperature on the thermometer read close to 70 degrees on this Saturday in early June.

Saturday was normally the only day of the week that I ever got to spend a good bit of time outside behind my house exploring the adjacent woods. I really looked forward to doing this each week because of all the friends I hung out with in there. You see my friends aren't actually those kids in my neighborhood playing games and riding their bikes around with each other. Those guys generally just make fun of me and tend to think I'm rather strange because I talk to the trees and plants and insects and create my own world out there in the woods. But that's ok because I don't think much about them at all once I cross the edge of the grass in my backyard and enter that first row of trees aligning the woods.

My thoughts of those kids quickly evaporated as I raced out my backdoor to begin my weekly adventure. My mother who was busily reading her latest and most likely quite boring romance novel shouted that I needed to be home by 5pm before the door came to a complete close. I quickly glanced down at my red watch that had a lightning bolt in its center to see how much time I had left. It was only 1pm, plenty of time I thought...

It wasn't long before the sticks from fallen branches were crunching beneath my feet as I entered the darker canopy of the surrounding woods. I immediately headed south towards an area that had become my fort of sorts over time. I guess you could say it was more of a solid structure because it was a gigantic odd-shaped rock I had found sitting there deep in the thick of the woods last year. The rock itself was close to 30 feet high and 100 feet wide and at its base lay the place I did most of my exploring and playing. I always wondered how this huge monstrosity got to be in the middle of a forest all by itself. Sometimes I liked to pretend it housed an alien spacecraft either inside or beneath it and other times I imagined wizards used it long ago. But more than not, I just found ways to create my own fantasy world with the rock being at the center of it.

By the time I reached it, I glanced down at my watch again and saw it was already 1:30. Thankfully, I still had plenty of time to do the task I wanted to take on today. I had brought a small shovel to accomplish it because I wanted to dig directly in front of a section on the rock where there were several strange markings. They had always been there since I had first discovered the large boulder and although I had assumed it was just some graffiti made by a few of those neighborhood kids, I had decided I was still going to pretend I was digging for buried treasure.

I had once watched a bunch of workers a few years ago dig out some holes in my backyard when they built our porch, but I never knew how much work it actually was.

"Phew! This is totally exhausting!" I said aloud as if the birds were listening overhead.

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Note to self. Never do a job in life that ever involves digging any huge holes!!!

An hour passed by with me eagerly digging away, which was beginning to take its toll on me since I had yet to find anything interesting at all. I was also covered with dirt from head to toe that I'm sure my mother wasn't going to be all too happy about. While I had dug considerably deeper than I thought I could, I was about to throw my shovel down in sheer frustration when...

"CLAAAAANNNGGGGGG"....

The sound rang out all around me making my heart suddenly skip a beat.

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Chapter 2

At first I thought I was just imagining I had hit something with my shovel. I mean after all there were plenty of small rocks I had come across already in my digging process that had made similar noises. But sure enough, after clearing away enough of the dirt, I discovered a large rectangular piece of metal that reminded me quite a bit of my next door neighbor's outside entrance to their basement. It appeared to be about 4 feet wide and about the same in length.

It was definitely very corroded and I began to wonder if that's all my buried treasure was going to end up being, just some rusty piece of metal that had lay dormant below the earth for years. But as I brushed away the last bit of dirt off the top of it, I noticed something else. There was a small bent piece of metal raised above the rest that looked a lot like a handle to a door.

I'd seen many movies previously in life where someone had discovered some hidden cave or secret passageway and it never seemed to turn out well for those who ever explored any of them. My heart was beating a mile a minute and every rational sense in me said to leave it alone and cover it back up with all that dirt lying around me in piles. But I didn't, almost as if my right hand were on autopilot.

My fingers clasped the cold raised piece of metal and pulled upward while I pondered the thought that it would probably be too heavy for me to lift. Ironically, it was just the opposite. It felt as if I had temporary super strength as I watched the large piece of tarnished looking metal fly straight up in the air and come to a rest against the huge rock wall behind it. A square of darkness was all that remained now in front of me and from what it looked like, several steps descending down into it.

My heart was still racing a mile a minute, but since nothing scary had flown out at me, I could feel it starting to calm down a little. As my fear subsided, anxious curiosity of what lay below me replaced it. I quickly glanced at my watch to see how much time had passed and saw it was only 3pm. I was grateful I still had two full hours to explore. At twelve years old, I really felt like I was a young Indiana Jones ready to take on his first true adventure.

Thankfully, I always carried one of those LED flashlights on my keychain so I knew I wouldn't have to begin it in total darkness. I swiftly clicked it on as I took my first step downward. The gravel and dirt on the steps grinded beneath my shoes and echoed slightly into what I was descending upon. I moved my flashlight left and right with each step I took, counting them aloud as I proceeded.

"1..."

"2..."

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"3..."

"10..."

"15..."

It felt as if the steps were never going to end. I turned around to see the light from where I had entered and it was growing dimmer with each step.

"20..."

"30..."

"31..."

"32..."

"33... *Whoa!!!*"

I fell forward and landed on a cold surface realizing I had finally reached the bottom of whatever it was I had entered. Moving my flashlight around in front of me, I saw there was a large cavernous room made completely of an uneven white rock-like surface, which also appeared to be of the exact same dimensions as the huge boulder that lay right above it. I took my first footstep forward heading into the room when a number "1" abruptly began to glow in a purple light directly beneath my left foot. As I shined my flashlight onto the floor, I noticed the rest of the room appeared to be filled with many more numbers sitting in the center of various odd-shaped tiles. I decided to immediately try stepping on another one, an "8", to see if it too would glow purple, which it did, much to my delight.

You would think a kid like me who loved Indiana Jones so much would have been a lot more cautious having watched all the perils he faced in each of his treasure hunts. But I wasn't being that at all as I hurriedly stepped on a "19" directly to my right. This ended up creating so much of that purple light that my flashlight was no longer needed. After clicking it off, I glanced around me and saw lucky number "77" waiting nearby. As soon as my right foot came to a rest upon it, all of my delight rapidly turned to shock as a wall slammed down to the ground blocking my exit to the steps above.

And if things couldn't have gotten any worse, they did as I watched in horror while each of the numbers I had stepped on suddenly began to extinguish one by one plunging the whole room back into complete darkness...and me into total fear...

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Chapter 3

“AHHHHHHH!”

“AHHHHHHH!”

“AHHHHHHH!”

I screamed at the top of my lungs several times hoping that each might do something, anything, like possibly reopen the entrance to the cave. But nothing happened of course, except for me growing hoarse, and my heart racing quite a bit more. I became totally frozen in fear half expecting to suddenly feel some warm heavy breathing on my cheek.

Note to self. STOP WATCHING SCARY MOVIES IF I EVER MAKE IT OUT OF HERE ALIVE!!!

I frantically fumbled in my pocket for my small flashlight only to hear it crash to the floor due to my hands shaking so badly. Now I had no way of seeing anything other than the thick blackness around me. A few tears dripped from the corner of my eyes as I began to wonder whether I was going to perish in this dark prison. But then I remembered the numbers of the floor and how they lit up in purple each time I had stepped on one of them. Maybe if I just slowly moved in one direction, I'll walk on one again making it re-light?

My left foot slowly crept forward in the direction of where I thought the room's opening had once been. Then I moved my right foot. And then the left again. Surprisingly, a very dim purple glow abruptly appeared. I looked down to see it was the number "8" relit again, which helped me to breathe a small sigh of relief.

While there was still a considerable amount of blackness surrounding me, I was at least able to see my small flashlight lying nearby. I quickly grabbed it and turned it on, grateful not to see any weird creatures staring and snarling at me anywhere in the large cavernous room. After taking a few deep breaths hoping it would stop my heart from feeling like it was going to jump out of my chest, I pondered what to do next.

Somehow these numbers on the floor are a puzzle. But how do they work?

Ugh! I never really liked puzzles much. They always hurt my brain. I fondly remembered one time taking an old Rubik's cube that I had grown tired of trying to solve and peeling its colors off just so that I could put them all back together on each respective side. A smile briefly lit up my face with the thought, and with it thankfully came a spark of inspiration.

Scurrying over to the closest number nearby, I illuminated a "16" after placing my foot upon it. I rapidly then jumped onto the "19" again, which was still only a few feet away as well. Now both were lit up causing the room to mostly be visible again in that bright

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purplish color. This time I didn't extinguish the light from my flashlight though as I stepped on the "77" once more. One by one the lights of each of the numbers disappeared again descending the room back into the same darkness as before with the exception of the small light still emitting from my flashlight.

"8-16-1977" I said aloud. Like anyone was really listening to me...

"1-8-1977" I repeated the other number combination aloud as well hoping desperately to find some type of connection. I got they were dates. But what kind of dates?

"I REALLY HATE PUZZLES!" I screamed at the top of my lungs hoping the cave would understand my frustration and help me out.

Dates. Dates. Famous dates? Dates of...UGH! I don't know!!!

"WHY DOES IT HAVE TO BE A STUPID PUZZLE?" I shouted angrily at the cave. I half expected it was going to talk back to me. It didn't of course.

"Birth dates???" I mumbled to myself.

Hmmm...Birth dates...I moved my flashlight around the room and thought about my own birthdate. It couldn't be that easy...could it?

Looking around I saw the "6" not too far away and stepped on it watching as it began to emit that eerie purple glow. The "11" was on the other side of the room though, which forced me to tiptoe around a bunch of other numbers to get there. After doing the same on my way back to get to the "19" again, I observed how most of the cave and myself were basking once again in that almost soothing purplish color.

But where is the number 72???

I panicked for a moment and then I saw it...tucked away almost all by itself in one of the far corners of my current prison. After reaching it in somewhat of a weird movement to get there without touching any other number, I slowly placed my right foot down upon it, causing it to burn purple like the rest of the numbers I had already pressed.

At first I thought nothing was going to happen other than them all going out again, but then...

I began to hear separate noises from two different locations around me. Both were similar to each other and similar to something I had heard not too long before. It actually sounded as if large rocks were grinding and crunching against each other. Relief started to set in as I watched the granite door reopen to the cave, emitting a very dim light from way above. And then I saw it...the source of the other similar noise.

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A clear crystal pedestal, about the height of one you would see in a church for baptism, slowly emerged from the floor, directly in the middle of the cavern. And directly in its center was a much tinier crystal pedestal several inches high and wide. At its top lay a brightly glowing purple crystal. It was slightly larger than the size of a golf ball and shaped with many sides positioned in weird angles.

As the pedestal came to a complete rest at its full height, the enchanting radiance of the purple crystal beckoned me to come closer...

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Chapter 4

The whole cave was shimmering now in an incredible display of purple beauty. I was so entranced by it I was completely ignoring the fact that the entrance to where I first entered my temporary prison was now opened. It almost felt as if the odd-shaped crystal that lay atop the tiny pedestal was slowly pulling me towards it one step at a time and away from that opening and my escape.

"I know I should leave right now while I have the chance..." I muttered to myself. Yet the glow and draw of the crystal appeared to be far more powerful than any sense of rationality I had left in my brain.

A few more steps and I'd be within arm's reach from touching the shiny object that had my complete focus at the moment. Thoughts of Indiana Jones and Raiders of The Lost Ark quickly flittered across my brain, as it desperately tried to remind me of that huge rolling ball that chased Indy out of a cave once he took the sacred sparkly object from its place of long dormancy in the movie. None of that felt like it mattered though because the closer I came to the purple crystal, the more calm I seemed to become.

And there it was, right in front of me now. I could feel my right arm rising up, hand opened, ready to grasp onto its magnificence. I honestly couldn't tell if I was even in charge of my own body anymore as I watched my hand reach up to take it away from its silent resting place. While my fingers gradually clasped around it, I noticed it felt overly warm to the touch.

For as much as I've watched Indiana Jones and various other treasure hunt based movies, you would think I'd have been more cautious taking this crystal into my hand, but heck I was a 12-year old kid! I didn't know any better.

At the precise moment I drew my hand back towards me, crystal clenched within it, that very familiar grinding and crunching rock noise suddenly started. I looked over in horror to see the doorway beginning to come down ready to seal me back within this tomb. This time my brain jolted me with a huge surge of fear and adrenaline, which was enough to get me to race towards it.

"YOU'RE NOT GOING TO MAKE IT!" my brain screamed at me. *"RUN!"*

For a moment, I truly thought I really wasn't going to make it because there were only a few feet left before the cave was completely sealed once again. So I dove to the floor and rapidly rolled sideways watching as the bed of rock loomed just inches above my body. My right arm and hand, which was still clutching the glowing crystal, barely escaped from being crushed, but my trusty flashlight that had been a part of so many of my previous adventures didn't fare as well. It had fallen out of my pocket during my diving roll and gotten smashed into smithereens when the doorway came fully to a close.

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I didn't care though. I WAS FREE. And I had my treasure...whatever it was...

I raced up the long set of stairs towards the dim light, grateful to be alive and not sealed away in some dark prison forever. Somehow I just knew that my birthday numbers wouldn't have opened that doorway a second time. As I took several sets of steps at a time, I shoved the crystal into one of my pockets fearful I might drop or lose it on my ascent. And there it finally was, the sun, still glistening through the treetops there in the woods, except I could tell that it was now much later in the day.

I quickly looked down at my watch and saw it was 5:40pm.

"CRAP!" I yelled out quite loudly hoping that might help me somehow from getting grounded by my parents once I got home. At this point, I was going to be an hour beyond my curfew even running at top speed. I instantly started racing back into the woods heading towards my home, not even looking back once at the large rock, the rusty metal hatch, or my shovel that I forgot to grab, which had been resting on the second step just inside the hatch.

It was 6pm by the time I reached the edge of my backyard. I had already tripped and fallen a number of times that I'm sure with each, the animals in the woods and all the trees around me had laughed at my clumsiness. I had spent the entire 20 minutes getting there thinking of ways to explain why I was late, but honestly, I still had no idea what to say.

I sprinted up to my backdoor and attempted to turn the knob. It was locked.

"That's funny." I thought. It never gets locked until after I get home from playing outside. I wondered if this was a tactic to scare me because I was so late.

BANG. BANG. BANG. I knocked on the door rather loudly. No answer. *BANG! BANG! BANG!* I knocked again, even louder.

A figure then appeared that wasn't my mother or my father. It was a woman I didn't recognize.

"Can I help you?" she asked with a puzzled look on her face after opening the door.

"Who are you?" I responded as I started to walk in to my house.

"WHO ARE YOU?!" she said slightly perturbed pushing me back outside.

"I live here!!!" I said suddenly feeling a little scared.

If this was actually a joke then my parents were taking it a little too far I thought.

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"I'm Mrs. Sampson, and I think you have the wrong house young man!"

"MOM! DAD!" I shouted into the house hoping they would suddenly appear.

"What's your name son?" she asked in a much more inviting tone, noticing I was getting really scared.

"I'm Andy. Andy Dawson."

Her mouth suddenly dropped with a look of shock.

"Andy...where...Oh My God! Harold! Call the police!" She immediately shouted into the house behind her.

"Andy, please come in. I'm so sorry for being a little rude...I...didn't know it was you..." She reached for my hand to bring me into my house. As soon as I took a few steps into my family room, I saw nothing was how I remembered, causing tears to well up in my eyes.

"I don't understand..." I said trying desperately to hold them back.

"Andy, I don't know any other way to tell you this...but...you...went missing... three years ago..."

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Chapter 5

"Three years?" I said in disbelief. *"This is ridiculous! I've only been gone since 1pm!!!"* I said angrily.

"Please calm down Andy, obviously you're in a bit of shock right now," Mrs. Sampson said, trying to comfort me as best as she could.

"The police are on their way Mary," said Mr. Sampson emerging suddenly from the kitchen.

"Andy why don't you just sit down here and relax. Maybe you'd like something to drink?" said Mrs. Sampson. I knew she was just trying to help me not feel so scared, but it wasn't working and it was obvious to me now that this wasn't some elaborate joke either.

"I'm not thirsty! I just want to go to my room and lay down right now and yet you're telling me this isn't my home anymore. I'm so confused! I left here at 1pm to go play in the woods ma'am. My mom told me to be back by 5pm, but I lost track of time because of this cave and these numbers on the floor and a door that locked me in, and well...a bunch of other stuff that's too hard to explain right now. I know I may be an hour late but come on, three years late???"

I pinched my cheek rather hard hoping somehow I wasn't going to be able to do it or feel it, given that's supposed to mean a person is dreaming. But ouch! It really hurt!

"Andy, how about watching some television until the police arrive? And try not to worry, I'm sure they've contacted your folks by now..." Mr. Sampson chimed in with hope in his voice seeing his wife feeling somewhat helpless.

I watched as this stranger in my home turned on a TV I had never saw before. And as I sat down on a couch that wasn't the one there when I had left five hours earlier, Mr. and Mrs. Sampson stared at each other with blank expressions making me feel even more uncomfortable. I decided it might be best to not say anymore until either my parents or the police arrived. Thankfully, twenty minutes later, a loud knock on the door broke the tension.

"Evening ma'am. I'm Officer Wooten and this here is Office Bogart. You called about one of our missing person's cases, an Andy Dawson?"

I quickly sprinted off the couch and ran to the front door hoping to see my parents standing behind the officers, but sadly they weren't there.

"Well hey there son, I'm..." Officer Wooten started to introduce himself.

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"I don't care who you are! Where are my parents? This is my home! These strange people are in my house!"

"Calm down, calm down..." Officer Bogart said gently.

"I'm Andy Dawson! I live here! I've lived here for 12 years! I went into the woods at 1pm to play and got caught up in a cave with some weird numbers and a door that locked me in and by the time I got out of there, I was late by an hour, but these weird people said it's been 3 years and that it's not my home anymore!"

I had to take a deep breath because it felt like I was beginning to hyperventilate. I know it probably sounded like I was crazy to all of them, but in my head I just recapped my entire afternoon, which unfortunately was now turning into a nightmare instead of an adventure.

"Andy, do you know your parents names?" Officer Wooten asked.

"Of course I do! Pam and Lewis! And I have a sister named Laura! She's three years older than me! My room is upstairs at the end of the hallway and hers is right next to mine! What more do I have to do to prove to you that I'm me and not crazy!"

"Andy please, we're only trying to help you. But we're going to have to take you down to the station, which is where your family is going to meet you. How does that sound?"
Officer Bogart said calmly.

"Fine!" I said storming out of the house.

I so wanted this to be a dream. But apparently it wasn't. Mr. and Mrs. Sampson weren't my parents and this wasn't my house and because of it, I couldn't even look back at them. In all honesty, I was downright scared, which is most likely why Officer Bogart let me ride in the front seat all the way to the station. Normally, I would have found this to be a pretty cool experience, but given the situation, it felt like an eternity getting there. Fifteen minutes later we finally pulled into its parking lot and there it was, my parent's silver Toyota Camry. I only recognized it because of the bumper sticker my mother had put on it long ago that said "DeColores". I immediately raced out of the patrol car once it was safely parked and into the station, not waiting for the officers to accompany me in.

"Mom! Dad! Laura!" I yelled as I burst through the station's front door, not even knowing where they were.

"Andy???" A timid sounding voice came from behind me, which sounded a lot like my mother's. I quickly turned around and there was my family.

"Oh thank God!" my mother said wrapping her arms around me as she began crying. I was crying as well, but I didn't care. I never really liked hugs before, except this one felt long overdue and much needed. My father and sister soon joined in, embracing the both

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of us and for a brief moment, I completely forgot about Mr. and Mrs. Sampson, the house that was no longer my home, and the three years I had supposedly lost.

"Are you ok son?" I looked up at my Dad who was asking me the question. I honestly had no idea what to say.

"Not really Dad. I went outside to play in the woods like I usually do on Saturdays at 1pm today. Mom saw me leave. I was hanging out at this rock like always and decided to dig for buried treasure. I found this hatch, which led into a magical cave and there were numbers on the floor in there and..."

I stopped talking because they were giving me that same look like both the Sampson's and the police did, that look like I was making everything up.

"Fine, if you don't believe me, look at this crystal I found in the cave!" I pulled it out of my pocket to show them and noticed it was still glowing purple.

I hadn't really had a chance to inspect it up close because of my abrupt departure from there when the cave door was coming down. Ironically, I was able to see now that there were symbols on each of its smooth sides and recognized a few of them as ones from the zodiac.

"Andy, it's just some rock..." My father said. *"You're obviously just a little overwhelmed right now."*

"It's not just some rock! Look, don't you see these zodiac signs on here? Don't you see how it's glowing purple?"

"There's nothing on the rock Andy..." My mom said beginning to cry again while my sister looked at me worriedly.

"Look it's right here! This symbol is a scale, and I know that's LIBRA!" I said quite loudly.

Suddenly I heard a loud *"WHOOSH"*, like the air was being sucked out of something, and then everything became weirdly silent. The scale symbol immediately disappeared on the crystal I was still holding up for my family to see. Except now they weren't moving, and neither were any of the officers around us who had been listening in on our reunion. In fact, everyone in the room was looking like mannequins stuck in strange poses, faces frozen in various expressions. My heart began racing again as I noticed a stream of coffee was hanging in mid air between a pot and a mug that Officer Bogart was holding nearby...

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Chapter 6

I rubbed my eyes to make sure I wasn't imagining what I was seeing. It really did look as if everyone were a mannequin posing in odd ways. For a moment, I began to consider whether I might actually be going crazy. But given everything I had gone through in that cave, finding out three years had passed since leaving it, and learning that my home was no longer my home, I quickly pushed aside any of those thoughts seeing how crazy my whole day had been already.

"Mom?" I said somewhat timidly, hoping somehow she might respond. She didn't and neither did she when I lightly touched her arm either, which honestly felt no different than what any person's arm feels like when touched.

I repeated the same process with my father, my sister, and even with Officer Wooten and Bogart, but nothing happened with any of them either. Even weirder were those people in the police station who had been talking just a second earlier. Now their mouths were wide open as if they still were, yet nothing was coming out of them.

I waved my hands, jumped up and down and then screamed at the top of my lungs hoping one of them would make some sort of a difference, except none of it did. Ironically, I wasn't panicking though and neither was my heart racing. After what I had already gone through so far today, this seemed much less frightening. Somehow this magic crystal was responsible for what was happening, but how? As it continued to glow that purple color in my hand, I saw the spot was still blank where the Libra symbol had been.

"What does Libra have to do with any of this?" I said aloud hoping to get an answer out of one of the creepy police officer mannequins I had just walked up to.

WHOOSH...

"Son, you know you're not supposed to be back here..." The creepy mannequin suddenly had come to life causing me to let out of blood-curdling scream.

"AHHH!"

Officer Wooten immediately came running over and asked what was wrong and how I had gotten back there. I didn't say anything. I mean how could I, as it didn't make any sense to me either. He promptly escorted me back over to my family who were all looking at me now as if I truly was crazy. I looked at the crystal in my hand and noticed the Libra symbol had now re-appeared back in its original spot.

"How did you get over there?" my sister said pointing to where I had just been. *"I mean weren't you just in front of us?"*

"Don't you see the symbols on this crystal?" I said holding it in front of her while my

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parents and the officers just shook their heads.

“Andy, I don't see anything other than a gray rock...” Laura said sadly.

“There is! Look closer! This is definitely a Libra!”

WHOOSH...

Everyone abruptly became a mannequin again as the Libra symbol disappeared.

“LIBRA!” I said the Zodiac word again seeing if my hunch was correct.

“Andy, it's ok, I'm sure you've been through...” Office Wooten started speaking. The symbol re-appeared.

“LIBRA!”

WHOOSH...

Mannequins, no Libra symbol.

“LIBRA!”

“a lot...” Officer Wooten finished.

I smiled as I saw the symbol re-appeared once more on the crystal. While I was far from understanding anything that was going on, I was excited about this new ability. For the next few minutes, I continued to mutter the word “Libra” repetitively watching everyone become mannequins and then return back to life. It appeared as if saying the word ‘Libra’ really did freeze time and was somehow tied to the crystal, as the symbol would come and go each instance I said it aloud. I ultimately decided to put it away though when my mother asked me to stop saying the word Libra because from her perception, I'm sure it must have looked like I was just going nuts saying it over and over again.

After what seemed like an eternity, my family was finally allowed to take me home, or at least to my new home that is. I was totally exhausted. After having repeated my story countless times to everyone in exactly the same way, which recounted my entering the woods and then re-emerging a bunch of hours later, it was decided that I was in shock and didn't know what I was saying. It was obvious to me now that I was the only one who could see the true nature of the crystal, which made me wonder what other secrets I might find contained within it.

As I hopped into the backseat of the Camry, I thought about what Officer Bogart has told me during what felt like an interrogation. He said that the woods had been fully searched

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for many months after I had disappeared three years ago and that the only thing they had found was the huge rock I was speaking of and nothing else. The thought briefly crossed my mind that maybe they hadn't been able to see the secret hatch just like they hadn't been able to see my crystal.

The car ride to my new home was rather uneventful other than my sister continuing to stare at me like I was an alien. I managed to chuckle once though after making a creepy face at her, which had totally startled her. She looked so much older to me now, and I could tell that three years had done her well. I'd probably never admit it to her, but she did look a whole heck of a lot prettier now. My parents on the other hand both seemed to have aged, more than what three years should have brought them. Each had a ton of gray hair and wrinkles all over their face. By the time we pulled in to the driveway of my new home, everyone had stared at me and smiled in silence dozens of times, all of it having felt so very uncomfortable.

After the car was parked in the garage, I asked if I could go lay down given how tired I felt. I had been so tired I hadn't even paid much attention to the details of my new home when we had pulled in the driveway. Thankfully my parents agreed to my simple request without any further questioning and led me to the guest room where they told me it would now be my own room. I plopped down on the bed after they closed the door and pulled out my mysterious crystal that only I could see. Its purple glow soothed me and I was thankful that it was proof on some level that I truly wasn't going crazy, even if I was the only one who could see it.

"I wonder..." I said noticing my Zodiac symbol, the Gemini.

"Gemini!" I said aloud.

Suddenly I heard a *"POP"* that sounded a lot like a cork coming out of a bottle of wine.

"Hi Andy! How's it going?" An exact duplicate of me was now sitting on the bed directly next to me smiling.

As I looked down at the crystal and noticed the Gemini symbol was now the one disappeared, I grinned in excitement knowing the upcoming school year couldn't come soon enough...

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Chapter 7

"Are you really me?" I said to Andy #2 poking him.

"Of course I'm you silly!" Andy #2 said laughing.

"Well if you're me, then what number am I thinking right now?"

"11!"

"Cool! Ok, so what's my favorite food then?"

"Peperoni, cheddar, and green olive thin crust pizza well done!"

"NO WAY!!!"

"Andy, what's going on up there?" My mom suddenly shouted. I could hear her footsteps coming up the stairs. Obviously she had heard me talking to me #2.

"I'll have to catch up with you later..." I started to say quickly to me #2 knowing I didn't want her to see my duplicate.

"Gator..." me #2 finished what I would have said.

"Gemini!"

POP...

My bedroom door abruptly opened with a very concerned looking mother now looking in.

"Is everything ok? I heard you talking and laughing in here?"

"Yeah, I'm just trying to get back to my usual weird self Mom. Don't worry about me. I'll be ok." I knew my words weren't going to reassure her much. After all, she was seeing me for the first time in three years. In my mind though, it had only been a bunch of hours.

"Ok honey, dinner will be in an hour. I'm making your favorite chicken dish, Chicken Marsala. How's that sound?"

"Sounds great Mom! Thanks!" I said smiling as she closed my door again. I absolutely loved Chicken Marsala and only ever got it on very special occasions.

Hmmm, maybe I should disappear more often I thought with a grin. I looked down at the crystal that was still in my hand and decided it was best to put it in the bottom of my sock

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drawer for now. I really didn't want to have anything strange to happen over dinner. I had so many questions and so few answers, but for now, I was happy that a few good things had come out of such a terrifying and overwhelming day. My meal later that night was awesome as always and it didn't take long after it to fall asleep. I was totally exhausted from all the day's events and while my bed was not the one I remembered, it was exactly what I needed...

Thankfully, life didn't throw me any more curve balls the next day or the next week for that matter. I had chosen to keep my magic crystal hidden in the bottom of my sock drawer the entire time, mainly due to the lack of free time. I had spent all of Sunday with my family going to church, having lunch afterwards, swimming in the in-ground pool my new home had, having a barbecue later that night, and then playing cards to end the evening. As for the past five days, I had spent each of them in a YMCA day camp. I think my parents thought that sending me to camp would make it easier for not only me, but for them as well. I usually spent most of my summers in them anyway, so it was fine.

I noticed it was another hot Saturday in August as I set my arts and crafts projects down from camp and opened my bedroom window. Summer was just about over and in just about two weeks, I'd be starting school again. While it was hard to think about all the kids I once knew now being in their second year of high school instead of the 7th grade with me, I was somewhat relieved to realize my former bullies wouldn't be there anymore either.

The numbers on the clock in my bedroom read 10:15am. I had slept in much longer than I normally did. The faint murmur of my parents talking to each other outside drifted up through my opened window. They had definitely been overly protective of me since coming home, allowing me to only play in the front or back yard where they could see me. I didn't blame them for being that way though given how long they said I'd been missing. Fortunately, they weren't asking me anymore what happened out in the woods because they could see how upset I got each time I told them, mostly because they didn't believe me. I had also learned in passing from my sister that they had moved two years after I disappeared, solely for it having been too painful for them to remain there. And although I had been gone for as long as I was, she told me none of them ever gave up hope that I'd eventually be found.

It was kind of hard for me to understand what they all went through given my perception of time being quite different from theirs. Regardless, I was doing my best to get used to life at my new home, and I was more than glad to have a huge in-ground pool to play in on a hot day like today. Interestingly enough though, the pool pretty much took up the whole backyard and there were no woods to be seen beyond it, just another house instead.

As I put my bathing suit on, I decided to take my crystal out of the drawer for the first time since placing it there. It was still glowing purple, even though it appeared I was the only one who could see that. I was truly looking forward to trying something with it today that had come to me when swimming with my family last weekend. Sprinting down the stairs with it now in hand, I waved at my parents as I ran past them sitting on

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the back porch. I was told to be careful and slow down while heading down the deck stairs and into the pool area. My sister was nowhere to be found, so it looked like as if I had the whole pool to myself, of which I was glad for. The water was somewhat cool to the touch, but I knew it would be a welcomed relief from the blistering sun. After placing my towel and the crystal on a chair, I took a running jump and did a huge cannonball into the pool.

When I re-emerged to the surface, I noticed my mother and father were now peering down at me obviously making sure I was ok. It took about 15 minutes of me swimming and playing safely in the water for them to stop checking on me, which finally gave me the chance I needed. I silently got out of the pool trying not to draw my parent's attention and dried myself completely off with the towel just to make sure I hadn't. After picking up the crystal and making sure all the Zodiac signs were still present and accounted for, I looked for the one I was most curious about today, the "crab", mostly because I knew the sea creature to be aquatic-based.

"Cancer!" I said just loud enough for only me to hear.

Suddenly I found myself gasping for breath while the symbol abruptly disappeared on the crystal. I couldn't breathe at all. It was as if the passageways through my mouth and nose were completely blocked. It also felt as if something were now moving on either side of my neck. My gasping grew louder and louder, until it drew the attention and horror of my parents. I never knew what it felt like to not be able to breathe, but now I did, and the only thought crossing my mind at the moment was whether I was about to die of asphyxiation...

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Chapter 8

"C-AN-CER!" I somehow managed to sputter the word out just in time before my parents reached me and probably before I would have passed out from the lack of oxygen.

Suddenly my lungs seemed to work again allowing me to take in a huge long gulp of air.

"ANDY, ARE YOU OK???" My mother asked looking quite distressed.

"Yea, I had some water go down the wrong pipe Mom, no big deal." I lied of course. I mean how could I explain this in any other way?

"You had us kind of scared there for a moment son..." My Dad said giving me an uneasy smile and a few pats on the back.

They ended up staying at the poolside with me for the rest of the time I swam that day and ended up doing the same each time I had gone swimming during the last few weeks of summer. Soon the pool was closed and my days at camp were behind me. Life now had me back on a bus heading to my first day of the 7th grade. I thought about my crystal for a moment as I sat there and looked out the window and knew my fear of choking to death had totally kept me from playing around with it since that day. Nothing else worth mentioning had really happened since that incident other than noticing my family had actually started acting a lot more normal around me. Unfortunately it seemed as if the rest of the world wasn't, because the kids at the bus stop that morning had all been whispering and staring at me, which made me worry whether everyone else at school would be doing the same. I didn't have much time to ponder the thought though because we had just pulled up to the front of the middle school. With backpack firmly in place, I nervously headed off the bus and through the school's front doors.

"FREAK!" I had only taken a few steps into the school when I heard the word come from behind me rather loudly. Turning around, I saw a few kids snicker at me before they went off in the opposite direction. I guess that pretty much answered my question...

By the time I found my homeroom, it seemed as if everyone else was already there. The only remaining seat was up front and after sitting down there I could feel everyone's eyes staring at me from behind. Even the teacher sitting at his desk almost directly facing me seemed to be doing the same. I blame all those reporters for this because my sudden reappearance had become major news headlines for a bunch of days. They had warped everything I told both them and the police and truly believed my story was merely a concoction arising out of shock and fear, which unfortunately is what my family continues to believe as well. And according to the articles I read about me, there was no evidence found in the woods to support any of my claims. I'm guessing this is why everyone has asked me more times than I can count if I was kidnapped and how it's ok to tell them the truth. Several times I wanted to lie and give them what they desired, but I didn't. Now everyone just thinks I'm nuts, including my parents, but at least they haven't

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forced me to go see some type of children's psychologist.

Luckily, the morning bell finally rang, breaking the huge chain of stares at me. As the teacher began calling out names for attendance, I secretly wished I had the ability to become invisible.

"Amanda Ashford?"

"HERE!"

"Jonathan Bader?"

"HERE!"

"Mary Crawford?"

"HERE!"

"Brian Davidson?"

"HERE!"

"Andy Dawson?"

"Freak!" Someone from behind me muttered it loud enough for most everyone to hear.

"Here..." I responded slumping down into my seat while listening to their giggles, already beginning to dread the new school year.

As the teacher droned on name after name, I reached into my backpack to pull out a notebook for my first class, which was English. For a second I saw the warm glow coming from the crystal lying at the bottom of my bag and was comforted in knowing I really wasn't crazy. I was glad I had placed it there that morning but sadly, it looked as if everyone else would never know the truth and would always look at me this way.

Thankfully English came and went, followed by Math, then Social studies, all without incident, other than the constant staring and occasional snicker. Lunch and recess were next, which normally was one of my least favorite times of the day only because I usually got picked on quite a bit during it in past years. I had just grabbed my tray in the cafeteria line and filled it with some chicken fingers, fries, a vanilla pudding, and some milk. After paying for it with the money my parents had given me, I ventured into the sea of tables looking for a place to sit. And then it happened like it always did every single year. A foot appeared out of nowhere catching my leg as I moved forward. The plate of food on my tray began to fly off of it as thoughts of being laughed at by everyone in the cafeteria

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quickly crossed my mind.

"Libra!" I muttered in desperation hoping somehow it might still work even though I wasn't holding onto the crystal in my hand.

WHOOSH...

Time suddenly stood motionless, much to my unexpected delight. My plate of food now hung in mid-air, fingers, fries, pudding, and milk appearing like a suspended piece of artwork. To my right stood the same kid from the morning who had called me a freak, grinning from ear to ear, along with a few of his friends.

I smiled knowing I finally had a way to even the tide for once.

First, I unbuckled the tripper's pants and pulled them all the way down to the ground. I had to laugh when I saw his pink tighty-whities lying underneath. Next, I did the same with each of his friends, all having pretty ridiculous looking underwear as well. And finally, I placed my food and drink safely back on the plate and on my tray and then moved a few steps away from the still frozen grinning kids.

"Libra!" I said now smiling from ear to ear myself.

WHOOSH...

And it was right then I decided the world was now going to start knowing a new me, Andy 2.0...

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Chapter 9

The entire cafeteria suddenly erupted in laughter at the ridiculous sight of the gang of underwear buddies who had tried to have fun at my expense. Each of their grins immediately faded into looks of horror and embarrassment, especially the one who had tried to trip me. Everyone was mostly pointing at him and his pink tighty-whities. And it was me now who was the one grinning from ear to ear, as the four of them quickly pulled up their pants and ran outside to the playground hoping to escape the thunderous laughter surrounding them. I secretly celebrated my victory and even though no one knew how or who had done the hilarious prank, it still felt pretty darn good inside.

The rest of my first day back at school seemed to zoom by after that and I'm grateful to report there were no other incidents to speak of. Soon I was back home sitting on my bed looking at the crystal that had saved me and was slowly transforming me into Andy 2.0. I thought about how it had worked in the cafeteria even though I hadn't been holding onto it and wondered just how far away I could be from it to still work. I decided this was as good of a time as any to figure that mystery out because no one was home at the moment.

After setting the crystal down on my desk, I walked out of my room and stood right outside the door. I grabbed the quarter in my pocket that was left over from lunch earlier today and threw it up in the air.

"Libra!"

WHOOSH...

The quarter lay motionless in the air at almost my eye-level.

"Libra!"

WHOOSH...

I caught the quarter as gravity took back hold of it and next headed down the hallway to the top of the stairs. I couldn't see the crystal anymore of course and was probably a good 20 to 30 feet away from it now. I then tossed the quarter back into the air.

"Libra!"

WHOOSH...

My quarter was frozen once again, hanging in the air right before my eyes.

"Libra!"

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WHOOSH...

I caught the quarter again and decided this time to try it just outside the front door of my house. As I stood there on the porch and threw the quarter up in the air again, I half expected it wasn't going to work this time.

"Libra!"

WHOOSH...

Cool! I was totally shocked to see the quarter hovering in mid-air and began wondering if there were any limitations with distance from it at all? I decided to try one more test.

"Libra!"

WHOOSH...

After catching the quarter I walked down the street all the way to the bus stop, which was a pretty good hike from my house. I felt kind of stupid standing there with no one around as I tossed the quarter back into the air.

"Libra!"

WHOOSH...

It still worked! I couldn't believe it! I flicked the suspended quarter with my finger in delight, half expecting it to then fall to the ground. But ironically, it only moved forward a few inches and remained motionless in mid-air. Huh. That interesting I thought and made a mental note of it.

"Well it appears there's no limitations with distance..." I said aloud as if anyone could be listening with time being paused.

I wonder...

"Gemini!"

Nothing.

"Gemini!!!"

Still nothing.

"Libra!"

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WHOOSH...

"Gemini!"

POP...

"Hey Andy! What's up?" said Andy #2 suddenly appearing to my right as he caught the quarter before it hit the ground.

"Not much! Man this is so weird talking to myself!" I said laughing. *"Hey, I've been playing around with my crystal and seeing what it can and can't do. Do you know anything else about it?"*

"How could I know anything else about it? I'm you and know as much as you do silly! Like the fact you've been doing this quarter test now since you got home from school. And like the fact that you're at this precise moment starting to think about trying to pause time with me still here with you, right?"

"Stop doing that!"

"Stop doing what?"

"Stop reading my thoughts!"

"How can I be reading your thoughts if I'm you?"

"Ugh!"

"Libra!"

Nothing.

"See, I told you so!" said Andy #2 grinning.

We both started laughing when a voice suddenly came from behind.

"What's so funny?" said Chris, a fellow 7th grader from my neighborhood who I didn't really know all too well, as he walked around me and was now standing directly in front of us. *"Hey, I never knew you have a twin brother?!"*

I looked over at Andy #2 and knew exactly what he was thinking, especially because of the look that was now on his face, which I'm sure matched my own. My mind began racing on what to do and in all honesty, I'd probably get in trouble and have my mouth washed out with soap if I were to say the word I really want to say right now...

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Chapter 10

Chris was staring at me waiting for a response. He then looked over at Andy #2, and then drew his attention back to me again.

"Can you keep a secret?" I said nervously, feeling like I had no other choice.

"Yes..." Chris said smiling.

"Seriously, I really need to know I can completely trust you won't tell anyone else at all what I'm about to say..."

"Geez...it's that serious huh? Yeah, you can trust me. The fact is I don't really have any friends I could tell anyway. So what this big secret with your twin brother here?"

"I have magic powers and can create a duplicate of me whenever I want..."

It sounded totally ridiculous after I said it and I could see Chris wasn't buying it either by the expression I was now seeing on his face. He then started to laugh.

"Really, I'm being serious! I'm not lying!" I said rather irritated.

"Look, I'm not stupid!" Chris said sounding like he was starting to get irritated as well.

"I am being serious and I can prove it!"

"Oh yeah, how?!"

"Gemini!"

POP...

"What the...where...did...he go?" Chris stammered, looking around and feeling confused.

"I told you I had magic powers..."

"Come on, seriously...HEY YOU CAN COME OUT NOW!" Chris shouted loudly, looking off into some nearby bushes thinking the other me was hiding there.

"He's not hiding. He's part of me..."

"Gemini!"

POP...

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"Hey Chris, what's hanging bro?" said Andy #2 as he rapidly appeared out of thin air directly in front of Chris.

"What the! How are you doing that?!"

"I told you it's magic. I still haven't figured it all out myself."

I ended up having to demonstrate it a few more times before Chris finally believed me. I decided after he did though that it was best to have me #2 go away for now.

"Gemini!"

POP...

"That's awesome!!! To think of all the cool things you can do with a duplicate of you!"

"I know right! Now do you understand why I need you to keep this a secret?!"

Chris has so many questions for me. He wanted to know everything and was asking me one thing after another. I figured it was going to take a little while to tell him so we sat down on the grassy hill nearby where I started from the beginning. I told him about the large rock I used to play at in the woods by myself and about the secret hatch I unearthed the day I went missing. I told him about the cave I found underneath it and almost getting stuck in there forever because of the puzzle on the floor. I told him how solving that puzzle with my birthdate led me to finding the crystal and how time passed so quickly in the real world while I was down in that cave for just those few hours. And then I explained to him how I first discovered the power of the crystal when I was in the police station trying to show everyone the symbols on it. Finally I told him about the powers I had learned of so far, including almost passing out at my pool and how it appeared that I didn't need to have the crystal on me to use the abilities it gave me.

"So I'm curious on one thing..." Chris said while laughing. *"Why didn't you jump into the pool dummy when you said Cancer! It sounds like you had gills on the side of your neck that probably would have helped you breathe under water silly! And most likely your normal air passage ways were closed off to make all that work correctly."*

"Yeah, I kind of thought about that after the fact, but at the time it was a little hard because I was gasping for breath and my parents were about to discover my secret." I said laughing with him.

It really felt good having someone to talk to, someone who finally believed me.

"So what do you think happens if you pause time and your touching someone?" Chris said.

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"I don't know? I never tried that. Let's see..." I said as I swiftly grabbed Chris's arm.

"Libra!"

WHOOSH...

I looked over at Chris, expecting him to be frozen now, except he wasn't.

"I don't feel any different..." Chris said, looking around and touching parts of his body.

I was truly amazed to see it actually had worked, but Chris still didn't think anything was different.

"Look up..." I said as I stared at the bird hanging in mid air almost directly above us.

"Holy crap!" Chris pointed at the bird and then noticed a plane even higher in the sky that was motionless as well, almost like a mobile above a baby's crib. *"So do you have to be touching me as well to go back to real time?"*

"Libra!" I said standing near him but not touching him at all.

WHOOSH...

The plane continued on its way while the bird flew off in the direction it was heading and thankfully I noticed Chris was moving around with me once again.

"You are so dam lucky you know? To have all these powers... But hasn't it been killing you not knowing why it picked you, where it came from, and why the hatch or cave no longer seems to be there in the woods?" Chris said inquisitively.

"Well duh! Yeah, but how am I supposed to figure all that out?"

"Maybe all those answers will come to you when you say one of those zodiac names?"

"Huh, I never thought of that. I guess I was sort of scared after that Cancer incident."

Immediately I started gasping for breath again and felt those gills appear on my neck.

"Say Cancer again you idiot!" Chris said with a huge smile.

"CA-AN-CER!" I choked the word out of me like before and then took a big gulp of air.

"Wow, I guess I can see why you'd be freaked out not to try some of the others. But hey look, you've got me now to help you through this right? We're a team now. You're

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Batman, I'm Robin ok?"

"Yeah...except no stupid costumes ok?" I said laughing.

"So are you up for trying a new one just to see what happens?"

"I guess so..." I said nervously, but felt a little better that Chris was there.

"How about Capricorn? That's my sign..." he said.

I looked briefly at my watch and knew I needed to be getting home because my parents would probably freak if I weren't there when they walked in the front door. But I figured I had enough time to try at least one new symbol.

"Capricorn!" I said as I thought about my mother coming in the front door and calling for me.

Suddenly I saw a vortex of spinning light appear out of nowhere along with a weird "VAVOOM" sounding noise. I hoped Chris could see it, as it looked so beautiful and appeared to have the whole set of rainbow colors circling it. In what was probably no more than a blink of an eye, it completely enveloped me and for a moment or so, I found myself being thrust down a long tunnel lit in a spectacular display of millions of colors, all moving in the direction I was. Then without warning, the end of the tunnel rapidly zoomed towards me. VAVOOM... Immediately I was thrust out of it and toppled to the floor of the hallway right inside my front door. And there in the kitchen directly in front of me just a few steps away stood my mother with her back to me...

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Chapter 11

"What on Earth are you doing and where have you been young man!" said my mother in a very concerned tone of voice, as she turned around and saw me lying there on the floor.

"I was upstairs..." I said lying through my teeth and hoping she hadn't see the spinning vortex, which had just spit me out by the front door.

"Don't you fib to me Mr.!" My mother said sounding obviously very upset. *"I called your name and looked all around the house for you, you definitely were not here!"*

"You're right Mom! I'm sorry. I went down the street and was hanging out with someone from school. His name's Chris."

"Well why didn't you just tell me that in the first place. You know we just got you back honey and you really had me scared! I was about to call the police!"

I could tell my mother was beginning to soften up by her tone. I truly felt a little bad though for not leaving her a note on the kitchen counter like I normally would. But I did feel a lot better about telling her the truth just now, that's for sure. Honestly, I feel like I've had to lie quite a bit lately to everyone ever since leaving that cave.

"I'm sorry Mom. I was afraid you'd be upset that I hadn't stayed inside the house. I was kind of bored and decided to venture down the street and just so you know I was only at the bus stop area. But hey, I can't believe I tripped through that front door you know?"

Ok so it wasn't the entire truth, but what else could I say? That I arrived home by way of teleportation through a spinning vortex? Yeah, I'd definitely be committed to an asylum then!

"Well honey, next time will you please leave a note?"

Phew, I dodged a bullet there didn't I? I guess she hadn't seen or heard the vortex after all.

"Ok. Hey, is it alright if I head upstairs and start doing some of my homework?"

My question was mostly true, but I had a more pressing matter to take care of first.

"Ok hon, I'll call up for you when it's time for dinner..." She said as I sprinted up the stairs and into my room, making sure to close my bedroom door behind me.

"Capricorn!" I said picturing the bus stop in my head.

VAVOOM...

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The vortex quickly sucked me in and then spit me back out onto the hard ground where I had just been a few minutes earlier, announcing my presence with the “VAVOOM” again. As I picked myself up from the ground, I could see Chris walking down his driveway.

“Hey Chris! Wait up!” I said running over towards him.

“Whoa! What happened to you?” He said as he turned around and saw me.

I gave him the quick rundown on the teleportation power, explaining how it worked and then said I couldn't stay because my mother was home. After getting his phone number, I knew I needed to immediately get back to my house before I encountered any more problems.

“Capricorn!” I said picturing the bed in my room, and watched as Chris smiled from ear to ear while I disappeared into the colorful vortex.

The next few weeks seemed to fly by pretty fast after that. I finally had a friend to hang out with both at school and at home. Thankfully, neither that kid nor his cronies had picked on Chris or I since the first day of school. Chris had already put two and two together as to how their underwear had gotten exposed in the cafeteria that day and we both had shared a good laugh all over again.

It was already into the beginning of October and becoming rather chilly outside. The leaves were starting to fall off the trees and I had just arrived for a sleepover at Chris's house late on a Friday afternoon. My parents had actually given me permission to stay over at his house for the night. It was the first time it seemed like I had been able to do anything fun apart from them and I was very grateful for that.

I had brought the crystal with me for Chris to see, having taken it out of my drawer for the first time since that day I met him. It was currently sitting in my overnight bag in his bedroom. Other than us hanging out with Andy #2 on a few separate occasions, we hadn't explored any more of its powers yet, but we had planned to do that very thing during this sleepover. We did learn last week though on one of those occasions that no matter where Andy #2 was, even if I wasn't in the same room as him, that we could hear each other's thoughts and tap into seeing what each other was doing just by closing our eyes. Oh, and we also discovered I could teleport anyone I touched, as well as how not to fall each time we did.

“So what sign do you think we should try first?” asked Chris snapping me out of my thoughts, as he pushed me on the huge tire swing in his backyard.

“I don't know? I'm still a little nervous about doing it.”

“Yeah, I know. Mr. Fish Gills!”

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We both laughed pretty hard, but inside, I really was kind of nervous. I mean anything could happen. For all I know I could become some weird animal who couldn't talk and have a way to change back.

"How about trying my sister's sign, which is Leo?" Chris said oblivious to the fact that I felt somewhat queasy inside at the moment about the whole powers thing.

"Ok." I said and then took a deep breath after stepping out of the swing.

"Leo!"

Nothing happened. No weird sounds, no spinning vortexes, no birds hanging in mid-air. Nothing.

"What do you want to have for dinner tonight?"

"Pizza! Most definitely!" I said looking over at Chris.

"Pizza? What? How does that have to do with Leo?" Chris said staring at me strangely.

"You asked me what I wanted to have for dinner tonight?"

"No I didn't?"

"Yes, you did!"

"NO, I didn't!" said Chris sounding slightly irritated.

Suddenly I started hearing voices coming from every direction. It was like I was in a crowded mall during the Christmas shopping season. I covered my ears up and looked down at the ground and saw an ant crawling along it like it was mere inches from my face. I then began to notice smells from all around me too such as coffee, popcorn, hot chocolate, and a bunch of other things that were very stinky like dog poop and garlic.

"Andy, what's going on? Talk to me!"

It sounded like Chris was shouting at me at the top of his lungs even though he was only a few feet away from me.

"I don't know! It's like my senses are going crazy! I'm hearing all these voices and seeing things extremely up close, and smelling the worst of smells right now!"

"It's a sensory power Andy, focus only on my voice!!!"

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I did as he said and just listened to his voice while he kept on talking. Thankfully, the incredible noisiness in my ears then began to dissipate.

“Hey, you know your breath stinks man!” I said. *“Did you eat a bunch of garlic today or what?!”*

“HA! I had a leftover piece of garlic bread right before you got here.” Chris chuckled. *“Hey, so, you must have heard my parents inside talking to each other about dinner tonight? Can you hear them now?”*

“Hold on a second, let me see.”

I closed my eyes to focus my sense of hearing, even though I felt like gagging with all the overpowering smells all around me.

“Andy seems like a nice kid. I’m glad Chris finally has a friend to hang out with. You know he’s spent too much time alone for far too long now Frank.”

“Yes Linda, I know. Ever since we lost our daughter...”

I could hear Chris’s mother fight back some tears.

“Maybe this is exactly what will help Chris come out of his shell dear.” Chris’s father said reassuringly.

There was a long pause that I could only assume was Chris’s father giving his mother a big hug.

“I should probably go order those pepperoni pizzas from Antonio’s ok? And maybe when the kids are in bed later, I’ll give you a nice long massage dear, I know how that always helps get you in a good mood, if you know what I mean...”

“Gross” I immediately said aloud. *“Leo!”*

I decided to stop the sensory power before I heard anything else I would totally regret hearing.

“You sister died Chris?”

“Yeah...wow, I...umm, hey let’s go upstairs ok?”

I could see I touched a nerve; one he obviously wasn’t ready to talk about with me. I followed him into the house and saw there was a bowl of popcorn on the counter and a few steaming cups of hot chocolate next to it. Chris’s parents were sipping some coffee on the couch nearby and told us the pizza would be here in less than 30 minutes. We then

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headed upstairs and into Chris's room with our snack and hot beverages in hand. I really wanted to apologize about bringing up his sister, but decided against it for now.

"Hey, let me see your crystal ok?" Chris said breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"Ok, but all you're going to see is a stupid rock, at least that's what everyone else has said when I showed it to them!"

I pulled it out from my overnight bag and felt it's soothing energy as it now lay in the palm of my hand, its purple color radiating outward.

"Andy, you won't believe this..."

"Believe what?"

"I...can...see it, the symbols, the purple color, it glowing... oh my gosh, you weren't kidding when you said how beautiful it is..."

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Chapter 12

"What? Wait a second. You can see it? Yeah right!" I said rather sarcastically thinking Chris was just pulling my leg.

"I'm being totally serious! Look right there is Libra, and there's Gemini, and..."

"Ok. I believe you!" I cut him off after seeing him point to the precise spots where the Libra and Gemini symbols were on the crystal. *"So how do you think that's possible when no one else has been able to see anything but a rock?"*

"I have no idea. But there's got to be some reason." Chris said as he continued to look intently at the crystal in his hand when suddenly he shouted *"GEMINI!"*

It had actually been rather comical watching Chris do this. He had held the crystal outward like a magic wand, expecting something to happen when he said the word Gemini, but nothing did.

"So I'm guessing you thought in saying Gemini that..."

POP...

"...since you could see the crystal's symbols, you might have the powers too..." Andy #2 appeared finishing my sentence.

"I was about to tell him that!"

"Sure you were..." I said as both Andy #2 and myself started laughing uncontrollably.

"Come on guys, be serious. I thought it might actually have worked..."

"It was a very valiant effort indeed Chris!" said Andy #2 sounding like he was from medieval times.

"Hey, in all seriousness do you know what this specific symbol is? I'm pretty sure I know what all the zodiac signs look like and I've never seen this one." Chris said pointing at one I hadn't noticed on it before.

The symbol looked a lot like a very tiny wheel. It was a circle with spokes all connecting to an even smaller circle in the middle of it.

"Let me see that." I took it from him and immediately the symbol disappeared.

"Whoa!" said Chris seeing it had disappeared in my hand.

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I handed it back to him and it immediately reappeared. We did this a few more times until Andy #2 broke the silence.

"And there we have it folks, a really exciting game of hot potato..."

"He's definitely got more your sarcastic side that's for sure..." said Chris rolling his eyes.

"You think?" I said with a grin.

"Let's look up the Zodiac on the Internet and see what we find."

"Gee, that sounds soooooo fun..." Andy #2 said somewhat cynically.

"Gemini!" I was actually starting to get a little annoyed myself, with myself, as if that was even possible.

"Awww..." said Andy #2 with a huge smile, just before he vanished.

POP...

"Finally, some peace and quiet. You know you can be totally annoying at times..." Chris said jokingly.

"I know right!"

Chris then sat down and logged into his Apple desktop computer, while I pulled up a chair next to him. I watched him Google the word "zodiac", and scanned the first page of results along with him. He chose to open up the first of those results, which was from Wikipedia, and there on the upper right-hand side of the page, was a picture that was pretty darn close to the symbol on the crystal. But before I had a chance to say anything, Chris swiveled his chair around and directly faced me.

"Hey I really need to say something before we proceed into this any further...I feel kind of bad about how I handled what you said to me a little bit ago..."

"You mean about your sister?"

"Yeah... it's...kind of hard to talk about..."

I could tell as Chris's eyes started to tear up and turn red.

"It's ok, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to." I said reassuringly.

"No, I do, I mean I need to talk to someone about it, because I haven't really, since it happened."

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There was a long pause where I actually thought Chris was going to start crying, but instead he took a deep breath and began talking.

"I had a twin sister who died in the beginning of last year. Up until then, she was my only real friend and we used to hang out all the time together. Our family was headed out to dinner like we frequently did on a Friday night. And one of the things we always did before every car ride was battle each other for the seat behind our mother, because there was more legroom there. My father is pretty tall if you hadn't noticed and has to put his seat all the way back when he drives. I hadn't even given my sister a chance that night to battle me for that desired seat and instead had just sat in it. Midway to dinner, a drunk driver came across the road and hit us head on pretty hard, causing my father's seat to come undone, which ended up crushing...my...sister...to death next to me. We had just been playing a game of rock-paper-scissors when it all happened..."

Chris couldn't continue. He began crying pretty hard, and I wondered if this was the most he had opened up about his sister's death since it happened. I decided it was best to remain silent for a few minutes, especially because I didn't know what to say. Other than losing a grandparent I wasn't that close to, I hadn't experienced much in the way of death yet.

Once Chris's sobbing had stopped, I decided it was a good time to finally say something that might help him feel more comfortable.

"Hey, thanks for sharing that with me man. I know that must have been very hard for you to do. But you know it's not your fault right Chris?"

"I know, that's what my parents have told me countless times..."

"Look, I know it sucks, and I can't imagine what it feels like. I really can't. But if you had been behind your father's seat, I wouldn't be here right now hanging out with you. And maybe, just maybe, you were the one who was always meant to live because you have a purpose. After all, you've been the only one other than me who has been able to see this crystal, and now you even have a symbol on it meant just for you..."

"Thanks Andy. I guess I never thought about it in that way..."

"Well look, if you don't cheer up, I'm going to get Andy #2 back here to annoy the crap out of you..."

"Nooooooo!"

And just like that, it felt as if the two of us had really bonded into best friends for life.

"So it appears as if this symbol is the actual Zodiac symbol doesn't it?" Chris said turning his attention back to the Wikipedia page.

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“Well it obviously doesn't do anything because you've already said the word 'Zodiac' a bunch of times and nothing happened.”

“Hold on a second, look, it says right here the word 'zodiac' is derived from the Greek word 'Zōidiakos', which means “'circle of friends'.”

Suddenly the crystal flew out of his hand with a mesmerizing hum and started spinning around in mid-air between us, faster and faster and faster, until neither of us could see anything but its blur. Loose papers and other light objects began flying around Chris's room as we both looked over at each other in total shock. The blur began to expand, growing bigger and bigger until it completely enveloped us, causing his room to become blurry instead. It was almost as if we were in the center of a tornado, although thankfully I had never been in one of those to have known. And then as quickly as it started spinning, it rapidly slowed down until it stopped altogether dropping back down into Chris's hand. Except we both then noticed we no longer were in his bedroom. Instead we were sitting on our two chairs in what appeared to be a large room with all black walls. In place of the ceiling though was the sky and stars, and surrounding us was an immense circular table with from what I could tell, had 12 beings equally positioned completely around it now keenly fixated upon us...

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Chapter 13

"Whoa..." said Chris and I in almost complete unison as we slowly swiveled our chairs around while looking at the large circular table and each of the beings seated at it.

It was a little difficult to fathom what my eyes were actually seeing. All of the "beings" were extremely tall and shaped in human forms, but their bodies were completely translucent and shining in a very luminescent white light. Even stranger was how it appeared as if I was staring into outer space when I looked through each of their bodies. Their faces also had no eyes, no ears, no noses, and no mouths yet I could see they were all staring at us somehow, like they were deeply examining us. It didn't seem to bother me though as I felt amazingly serene and peaceful like I did anytime I held my crystal. It was then I noticed the engraved purple-glowing zodiac symbols on the outside of the table directly in front of each of these beings of light. Suddenly a very soothing female voice from behind me broke the silence. It was coming from the being with the Capricorn symbol.

"I am Capricorn and we welcome you both to the Council of the Zodiac. As you can see we encompass each of the 12 astrological symbols. Andrew, you have been chosen to be a Keeper of the Zodiac, which is something that has been going on for countless millennia across many universes. And you Christopher have been chosen to be a Guardian of the Zodiac, as well as a guide and teacher of its gifts for Andrew. We know you both have many questions, and it is our intention to answer what we can. But do understand there are things we cannot say, as doing so could alter the entire time-space continuum. The most important thing we must tell you is that there is forces of darkness at work everywhere, consistently trying to undermine the Light. This is where the abilities of the crystal are meant to help, as you have been tasked to fight this darkness and protect the Light. Know this won't be an easy task, not as a Keeper, nor a Guardian, as these forces of darkness will attempt to thwart your every move."

I looked at Chris and didn't know what to say. For a guy like me who always seemed to have an answer for everything, Capricorn's message had left me totally speechless.

"Why were we chosen?" said Chris thankfully coming to my rescue.

But it wasn't Capricorn that answered him, instead a deep masculine sounding voice would, and it came from Aries.

"There is great purity and good in each of your hearts and we have seen this in the past, in the present, as well as in the future. Christopher, you are a very protective spirit, able to nurture and care beyond most, and a noble teacher as well, one who can give great guidance and direction to another when needed. Your true nature will unfold the more you become a Guardian of the Zodiac. As for you Andrew, you are a born leader who sees the good in everyone. Your desire to bring peace and harmony to the world is why you were chosen to be a Keeper of the Zodiac. While we have seen you already use the crystal for a single moment of self-gain, know that it cannot continue to be used in this

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way. For the heart will fall prey to the forces of darkness, the more the powers of the Zodiac are used for one's own glory. And be forewarned if that is to happen, the crystal would cease to work and you would no longer be Keepers and Guardians of the Zodiac."

Although I was remaining amazingly calm to everything being said, I had a question I needed to desperately ask.

"Did you create the cave where I found the crystal? And if so, why didn't you just bring me here to give it to me directly, instead of putting me through something where I lost three years of time?"

A second feminine voice as soothing as the first spoke next, this time coming from Taurus.

"We learned long ago that it is always best for a Keeper and their Guardian to find each other as they always do, and then for them to discover us when they become ready. Doing it any other way has only ever incited panic and fear in both. As for the three years you lost in the cave, know it existed out of your own space and time. It was something we created for you to find and when you entered it, you stepped outside the boundaries of what you perceive as time. But as we can see into the past, present, and future, we also knew your family would still be there for you when you exited the cave three years later. And speaking of this, we must also warn you that you cannot remain here for very long, because this same principle holds true for here as well."

"What??? My parents are never going to let me out of their sight again if I were to disappear for another three years!" I said half jokingly, half serious.

"That is precisely why we recommend you use the power of saying 'Zōidiakos' sparingly and only when you absolutely need to. Christopher, this is just one of the many important assessments a Guardian will make throughout their journey in this role. It is crucial to make each of them wisely and never in haste. We will say once more, our concept of time is quite different than yours, and to prevent too much of your time from passing again, we recommend only one more question to be asked."

One more question? I had like a thousand questions I wanted to ask. But I didn't want to see another great lapse of time pass on by either. I also could see that each of my questions were probably just going to lead to that many more questions, which is why I was glad Chris decided to pose the final one for us.

"Are there other Keepers and Guardians who can help us on our journey to protect the Light?"

Wow! What a great question. I guess that's why they chose Chris to be the Guardian!

A final masculine voice answered, this time Sagittarius, whose voice greatly reminded me of a narrator I often heard in previews for upcoming movies.

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“There are many Keepers and Guardians throughout the Universes, and your path will naturally come across them when it becomes essential in your fight against the darkness. Look around you now and you will see many of them already engaged in this age-old battle.”

Suddenly the black walls behind the table surrounding us began showing images of other Keepers and Guardians, each doing something completely different. Ironically it felt for a moment as if I was fully immersed in a theater all around me. There were Keepers flying through the air and swimming underwater at exceptional speeds. There were Guardians training Keepers in huge fields and other large venues, helping them learn their abilities, many of which I hadn't even explored yet.

Image after image of creatures, species, and beings from places most likely light years from my planet flashed before my eyes. Several even looked a lot like human beings but I never got a long enough look at any one of them to truly know, which made me wonder if there were other Keepers and Guardians on Earth.

“Andrew, we have to go. Now!” Chris said as the images continued to flicker on the black walls all around us.

“Have faith in your journey ahead and know that we love we...” said the whole Council of the Zodiac in a pacifying chorus of feminine and masculine-based voices.

I had no idea what “we love we” meant and as I began to ponder those three words, Chris shouted out, *‘Zōidiakos!’*

The crystal once again flew out of his hand with that mesmerizing hum and started spinning around in mid-air between us, faster and faster and faster, until neither of us could see anything but its blur. The blur began to expand, growing bigger and bigger until it completely enveloped us, causing the circular table, the Council of the Zodiac, and the walls still portraying those images of the Keepers and Guardians to become blurry as well. And then like it did before, it rapidly slowed down until it stopped altogether dropping back down into Chris's hand. We had returned to his room, still in our chairs, which now looked as if a small tornado had struck it. I quickly pointed at the clock on his desk to show that 4 hours had already passed. It was after 10pm.

“We have a lot of training to do to get you ready...” said Chris just as his parents abruptly opened the door to his room, both looking overly concerned and maybe even slightly angry.

I started to wonder how my new Guardian was going to find a way to explain this one...

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Chapter 14

“CHRISTOPHER MICHAEL RILEY, WHERE HAVE THE TWO OF YOU BEEN!!!” said Chris's mother sounding quite angry.

I thought for a second it might be the perfect moment to pause time and discuss this with Chris, but I didn't get the chance.

“Andy and I were transported to some other realm where time and space exists quite different from here. In all honesty, we really were only gone for like 15 minutes but somehow that translated into over four hours once we returned.” Chris said without batting an eye.

I couldn't believe it. He had told them the truth. I at least would have come up with some elaborate lie.

“Young man, do not lie to your mother! We know you somehow snuck outside and went exploring in the woods. Just think what Andy's parents would have thought if we had called them when we couldn't find either of you anywhere! You're grounded starting tomorrow. Andy, I'm sorry but you won't be able to see Christopher for the next two weeks, as he will be quite busy with a long list of chores I'm going to be preparing for him as his punishment. So you two better enjoy tonight for it's going to be a little while before you two will be hanging out again. Now I suggest you both come get a few slices of cold pizza, as I'm sure you're probably starving...”

Mr. and Mrs. Riley then promptly walked out of Chris's room and headed downstairs.

“What just happened exactly?” I said feeling completely dumbfounded that his telling the truth had actually worked somehow.

“I told the truth. I'm the Guardian remember and I have lot more faith and integrity to uphold and hopefully teach you. Because I know you most likely would have told some ridiculous lie like we were playing the world's longest game of hide and go seek or something else pretty silly.”

“Come on, give me a little more credit than that!” I said laughing, as the two of us headed out of Chris's room and downstairs to have dinner, which for us was really at the normal time we would have been having it, if we hadn't headed into some other dimension that is...

Chris spent the rest of the evening, after we had returned upstairs, talking about my future training plans. Thankfully his parents hadn't pressed us any further about the missing four hours while we had eaten our cold, but still delicious pizza from Mama Mary's. Frankly, I was feeling a little overwhelmed by the whole Guardian and Keeper idea. A few months ago, I was just an average kid that had no friends, was constantly picked on, and was about to enter the 7th grade. But now I was supposed to be some hero divinely

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picked by 12 celestial beings to help protect my planet. Me, a rather tall scrawny 12-year old boy, I mean, what good could I do?

“Are you even paying attention to what I’m saying???” Chris said snapping me abruptly out of my wandering thoughts.

“How I am supposed to be a hero at 12 years old? I think they picked the wrong guy.” I said to Chris somewhat dejectedly.

“I know this all must seem crazy Andy. But look, they picked the two of us for a reason. And I think you are exactly who is meant to be the Keeper, just like I am beginning to fully accept myself as the Guardian. I promise you the training will help you feel a lot more confident. But the first thing we need to do is...”

WHAM!

Chris suddenly hit me in the face with his pillow, which then led to an all out pillow war causing me to completely forget for the moment about the worries I was having. Soon after that we got the “lights out” shout from his father. It didn’t take long for me to fall asleep, as everything that had happened between my visit to the other realm and listening to Chris’s long training lecture, had totally exhausted me.

Unfortunately, the next two weeks dragged by ever so slowly as Chris’s parents had remained true to their word with his punishment. The only time I got to see him was during school. There, I had been tempted on several occasions to pause time again and mess with the biggest school bully, the same one who had tried to trip me in the cafeteria on the first day. His name’s Trevor by the way, but Chris had to continue reminding me of the tagline I had always heard in the Spiderman comics, which was “With great power comes great responsibility.” I knew he was right every time he said that to me, yet it was so frustrating having the ability to do just about anything, but not being able to use it on people like Trevor who really needed to be taught a good lesson.

About the only time I really got to talk with Chris during those two weeks was during lunch. During each he only seemed to ever speak of more training ideas, none of which was actually sounding like very much fun to be perfectly honest. And since we weren’t even able to talk to each other on the phone at night, I had spent every one of them pondering his ideas and even toyed with the notion of trying a new Zodiac symbol completely on my own, but ultimately decided against it. After all I knew now that was supposed to be one of his duties as the Guardian.

When Chris’s punishment finally ended, it was a welcomed relief because I had grown bored of my own company and thoughts, and truly wanted to get this training started. And that was precisely what Chris had planned for that Saturday afternoon. This time he had asked for permission to go into the woods, even though we hadn’t even gone into them the last time his parents thought we had. They said it was ok and had given us a curfew of 5pm, as there was going to be a cookout my family was coming over for at that

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time. It was just around 1pm as we headed deep into the thick forest behind his house on a trail that appeared as if it had been walked on countless times. It vaguely reminded me of my original woodsy adventure that had led to me finding the crystal and on the path I was now on.

"Come on, hurry up, we don't have much time!" said Chris who was way ahead of me on the trail.

I picked up my pace and soon emerged into a large field in the middle of the forest that had knee high grass and a relatively clear pond next to it that Chris told me came from some underwater stream.

"You're first training begins in there by the way..." said Chris pointing towards the water.

"WHAT! No way, it's like not even 50 degrees outside and I don't think this water is much warmer than that." I said as I dipped my hand into it and felt how cold it was to the touch.

"Remember that Zodiac symbol Cancer that you epically failed at using?"

"Yeah...so?"

"Well if my hunch is correct, you're not going to feel the cold of the water at all."

"But I don't even have a bathing suit!"

"I do!" said Chris smiling as he pulled one of his out from the backpack he was carrying.

"Ugh! Of course you do. Just so you know, I think I'm already beginning to hate your training." I said with a frown as I grabbed the bathing suit and quickly put it on.

"Ok, now what I want you to do is say Cancer and immediately jump into the pond."

"Really, do we have to practice this one today?" I said shivering.

I was still feeling rather fearful about my choking incident at the end of the summer the first time I had tried to use this symbol.

"You'll be fine Andy. Ready?"

"No, not really, but whatever! CANCER!"

I quickly took a running jump into the lake half expecting it to feel like icicles were touching every part of my body, yet it was oddly warm and reassuring, like it might feel

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during a very hot August. As I looked at Chris giving me the thumbs up sign, I tried to take a breath in through my nose and started gasping again.

“Go under the water dummy!” said Chris noticing what was happening all over again.

I immediately dove straight down into the pond and tried to breath again, but this time felt oxygen rush into my body through the sides of my neck. I tried to touch the area with my hands where that was seemingly coming in but couldn't because my fingers were now all connected together with a strange webbing. I looked down at my feet and noticed the same was true there as well. Overall, my body felt strangely different as well, yet I was unsure of what actually had changed within it. It was then I remembered seeing the Keeper on the black screen behind the Council of the Zodiac racing through the water.

Hmmm, I wonder...

I placed my hands close together, in a streamline position, and began to kick my feet as hard as I could. Immediately I shot forward faster than I had ever swum before, so fast that the bottom of the pond almost became a blur as I raced over it. And within a matter of seconds I found myself already on the other side of the pond.

As I looked back across it underwater with eyesight that seemed enhanced as well, I started to think that maybe this training thing wasn't going to be so bad after all...

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I sprinted quickly under the water back to the other side and as the edge loomed near, I decided to try something. I kicked ferociously moving my body angled upward like a dolphin might and suddenly found myself flying into the air straight out of the pond and towards Chris.

“CANCER!” I said as I did a somersault forward and landed on my two feet.

“Show off!” said Chris.

“See I don't need any training, I got this!” I said feeling rather proud of myself.

“Sure you don't Mr. Air Gasper...”

“Hey, I would have eventually figured it out.”

“Uh huh. You might not get an ‘eventually’ in certain situations you know.”

“Alright alright, I get it, no need for a lecture, so what's next?”

“Are you ready to try a new Zodiac sign?”

“Absolutely!” I said extremely confident.

Having mastered the Cancer power I did feel rather assured that the rest of this training and becoming a full-fledged Keeper was going to be a walk in the park. Little did I know what was soon to come would absolutely test my limits.

“Ok, I want you to try Taurus. I'm pretty sure I know what it does.” said Chris as I changed out of the bathing suit and back into my normal clothes.

“Pretty sure? That's not very reassuring Chris.” I said sarcastically while tying my shoes.

“My gut tells me it deals with super-strength ok? Look, I'm just trying to go with my Guardian senses here, so cut me a little slack and don't worry, I'm positive it's not going to make you gasp for air,” he said snickering.

“Ha ha, that jokes going to get old real fast.”

“Not for me!” Chris said as he held his throat with both hands and pretended to gasp for air.

I wasn't amused.

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"Ok, see that huge boulder over there?" Chris pointed to a massive rock nearby that stood about 8 feet high and measured about 6 feet wide.

"Yeah..."

"I want you to try to lift and throw it once you activate the Taurus Zodiac."

"Alright...TAURUS!"

Nothing felt different after I'd said it. I paused for a moment waiting to see if anything would happen, but nothing did. My muscles didn't become huge monstrosities nor did my body change at all. In fact, I didn't feel any different.

"I don't think it did anything!" I said to Chris as I approached the boulder.

"Just try lifting it!"

"Well what if the power is something else, I could end up hurting myself!"

"Just do it and stop worrying!"

I wasn't really sure how I was going to lift this mammoth rock regardless if the Taurus power was super-strength or not because it was so dam wide. But when I saw an area at its base where I was able to slide my hand underneath, I figured I would do my best to lift it from there. I thought for a moment about the last time I sat at a weight bench trying to lift a measly 50 pounds and how hard it was, and figured this would be the same. As my the palms of my hands touched the rock's underside firmly at its edge, I pulled as hard as I could upward and suddenly the boulder flew straight into the air. I watched as it quickly passed the highest height of the trees surrounding me, rising hundreds of feet skyward until it eventually stopped its ascent and hurriedly began falling back towards the earth and back towards the precise spot where I now stood.

"Oh crap! Run!" I shouted to Chris.

"I want you to catch it," Chris said far too calmly.

"You want me to do what???"

"I want you to catch it!"

"You're nuts!"

"I told you your training would challenge you, but you didn't believe me!"

I really wanted to run. My heart was racing as I watched the rock get bigger and bigger, wondering if the velocity of it might end up crushing me. I placed my hands in the air,

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palms facing the sky and really wished I could somehow cross my fingers, but decided to close my eyes instead.

CRA-ACK!!!

I immediately opened my eyes looking to see what happened and saw the rock was now laying in two huge pieces, one directly to my left, and one directly to my right.

"I did that?" I said stunned.

"Well you were supposed to catch it, but yes. Good work though!" said Chris smiling.

I gently nudged the one piece of rock sitting on my left and saw it roll forward with ease.

"Hey Chris, you want to shake my hand?"

"Very funny and no, not really. And no pun intended, but you really gotta get a grip on how to handle this new ability Andy!"

"You think?"

I spent the next 30 minutes trying to do just that and managed to push one of the two huge broken pieces far into the pond by accident. On another attempt, I almost flattened Chris with the remaining half. But by the end of it I figured out how to lift it without breaking it, as well as throw it without dropping it, which left me feeling quite happy with my accomplishment.

"Very good! Now let's try to do a combo. I want you to put the bathing suit back on and go retrieve the part of the boulder you pushed into the pond."

"Seriously? Haven't we done enough training for today?"

"This is the last exercise for now I promise."

I quickly changed back into the bathing suit and managed to rip it in half in the process, completely forgetting about my activated super-strength.

"Now what?!" I said standing there in my boxer briefs.

"Just go in the water like that before you manage to destroy anything else!" Chris said as he rolled his eyes.

"TAURUS! CANCER!"

I swiftly jumped into the water and swam downwards towards the large piece of rock that now lay at the bottom of the pond.

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How am I supposed to get this up on land again? I thought to myself while staring at the half of boulder.

I wondered for a moment if the Cancer abilities also came with enhanced strength, but I only managed to move it slightly forward in the water when I tried. It appeared as if I did have some extra muscle, except it wasn't going to be enough to complete the task. Chris did say for me to do a combo, so maybe I need to take a deep amount of oxygen in and switch from Cancer back to Taurus.

I rapidly tried to inhale as much oxygen into me as I could and then muttered the Zodiac sign underwater, half expecting it not to work.

"CANCER!"

But it did, as suddenly my eyesight wasn't very clear. In fact everything was so murky now, I could barely see the boulder anymore.

"TAURUS!"

I immediately placed my hands around the submerged boulder knowing I didn't have that long to hold my breath. With as much force as I could muster, I jumped off the floor of the pond while holding onto it and found myself shooting straight up to its surface in an instant. And for a few seconds, I saw as every part of me rose totally out of the pond, all while gripping onto the large piece of rock. I then realized I needed to quickly throw it back onto land before it was too late. Unfortunately in my haste, I forgot all about just how strong I was and tossed it carelessly towards the edge of the pond.

I then watched in horror as I fell back into the water seeing the broken half of the boulder roll straight into Chris...

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“TAURUS!”

“LIBRA!”

I said it as fast as I could, hoping it wasn't too late and then I immediately headed towards the shore of the pond. It seemed like it took me forever to make it there though not having the Cancer ability enabled, but as soon as I reached the edge, I jumped out and raced over towards Chris, half noticing the few crows that were frozen in flight just above me.

“NOOOOOO!!!!” I screamed at the sight of Chris once I reached him. He was lying on the ground, legs both completely crushed and bones protruding outward in sickening angles.

I wanted to throw up at what my eyes were seeing and my heart was racing even faster than when I had been choking for air the first time I tried the Cancer zodiac. That boulder I had thrown carelessly was now resting at a 45-degree angle a few feet beyond Chris, leading me to believe it was still moving forward when I froze time.

I honestly didn't know what to do. If I unfroze time, Chris could die. It was obvious the boulder had done tremendous damage to both of his legs and there was blood already spilling out everywhere, but frozen in mid-stream as well. I thought about each of the remaining zodiac symbols I hadn't attempted to use yet and wondered if any of them could help me somehow. Then quite unexpectedly the image of Virgo, that symbol of the peaceful looking woman, appeared in my head.

Could it be possible the Virgo abilities could help fix this? I didn't actually know the answer to that question, but I had no other option and I knew I couldn't leave time paused forever.

“LIBRA!”

“VIRGO!”

Immediately the huge piece of rock I had thrown so hastily towards Chris flew forward and came to a rest a good hundred feet away, and was then followed by an intense and extremely distraught sounding voice.

“AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH” Chris screamed at the top of his lungs. He continued to do this over and over again as he looked down in horror at his crushed legs, with blood pouring out from each, It was then I began to notice my hands were heating up and vibrating as well, almost as if each of the molecules in them had unexpectedly come alive and were reaching a boiling point. My body then rapidly went into autopilot, somewhat making me feel like my actions were now out of my control. As I knelt down on the ground next to Chris, I placed my hands on his severely mangled legs and started to dry heave in the process. I became overly thankful at that moment for not having had

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anything to eat in a good while, as I definitely would have gotten sick all over him if I had.

At that precise moment, I so wanted to rub my eyes and make sure I was truly seeing what I was, but I couldn't as they were both held firmly in place on Chris's legs. Bolts of energy then began shooting through me that felt an awful lot like when I had put a fork in an electric outlet a few years ago, except this time it seemed as if my body was able to harness the energy somehow. In rapid fashion, time appeared to move backwards as I watched Chris's bones re-connect back together piece by piece. The blood that had flown out of his body then started moving backwards into him as well. I continued to dry-heave as the torn muscles and tendons in his body quickly snapped back into place. And finally, the skin on both legs closed itself up, leaving no trace or sign that any damage had ever taken place. The heat in my hands and the sense of vibration within them, along with any of those pulsations, then abruptly disappeared.

"WHAT WERE YOU THINKING!!!" Chris said angrily jumping to his feet and hitting my arm with a pretty good amount of force.

"OWW! Geez, what kind of thank you is that?" I said as I rubbed my arm.

"You almost killed me!"

"But I didn't!"

"That's not the point!"

"I'm sorry! It's not like I've had years to practice all these zodiac powers you know!"

"Fair enough, but I think we probably need to take things a little slower in your training from here on out."

"I agree. So I'm just wondering, would it be ok if I call you peg-legs from now on?"

"OWW!" Chris hit my arm again, this time even harder, as we both laughed off the whole experience and began walking back towards his house.

Chris spent the entire journey back talking about some more ideas for my Keeper of the Zodiac training. I actually didn't hear much of what he said at all because I was still deep in thought about how close I had come to permanently injuring or possibly even killing him. The image of his crushed and bleeding legs was plastered across my mind and I couldn't seem to think about anything else. I was grateful though when we re-emerged into his backyard because the sight of my family who had already arrived for the barbeque seemed to do take my mind off the whole incident. It was pretty close to 5pm and at the moment everyone was snacking on some chips and drinking some soda.

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"Well there you are! Did you two have fun exploring the woods today?" said Mr. Riley cheerfully.

"It was a blast Dad. Andy almost killed me, but it was definitely a blast!" said Chris with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

I jabbed Chris in the side and smiled nervously at his parents.

"What happened?" asked my sister.

"Oh nothing. We were just horsing around. You know how boys get, right Mom?" I said sheepishly.

"Uh huh." My sister and mother both said in unison as they rolled their eyes.

Thankfully no one else asked any further questions and shortly thereafter, we all were munching down on some exceptionally tasty cheeseburgers, potato salad, coleslaw, and corn on the cob. I didn't realize how hungry I was until I had the first few bites within me. Before all was said and done, I had consumed three burgers and had several helpings of everything else.

"Wow, where are you putting all of that Andy? Didn't you eat anything else today?" asked my mother with a smile, as I finished my third helping.

In all reality, I hadn't eaten anything other than a bowl of cereal that morning, which made me wonder if using the Zodiac powers were going to require a lot more food than I was used to consuming.

"Yeah, I kind of skipped lunch today Mom." I said while everyone stared at me.

"It's yes, not yeah young man!" my mother said sternly.

"Sorry!" I said turning red, as my sister snickered.

"Hey Dad, why don't you tell Andy's parents about that camping trip we're thinking about taking. Maybe we can all go?" Chris said coming to my rescue.

"What camping trip?" I whispered to Chris.

"I hadn't gotten a chance to tell you about it yet, given the fact I was so preoccupied with almost losing my legs you know." Chris whispered back with a chuckle.

Mr. Riley spoke about their annual upcoming late fall trip into the mountains where they always rent a log cabin for a long weekend. It sounded like it could be a lot of fun and appeared as if there would be plenty of room for my family to join them. My parents liked the idea, but it was apparent my sister wasn't all too enthused about it. The

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conversation ended when Mrs. Riley emerged out of the house and announced it was time for dessert.

By the time we all were done enjoying the warm apple pie and vanilla ice cream, it was beginning to get dark. Everyone then decided it'd be best to move the festivities inside and play some type of game together. As we all chipped in and grabbed something to help with the cleanup process, I picked up the remaining pie and tub of ice cream and headed up the porch stairs towards the kitchen. Unfortunately, I wasn't really paying attention to each of the steps I was ascending because I suddenly found myself falling forward, while the pie and ice cream flew out of my hands and into the air.

"Oh Crap!" I shouted as my hands lunged for them.

Instantly, that strange vibration-like sensation then quickly returned to my hands, making me realize I had never turned off the Virgo sign. And that's when I noticed there in front of me the pie and tub of ice cream motionless in the air, about a foot off the porch's floor. Except there was no way time could have been paused seeing everyone was still moving. In fact they were all heading up the porch steps right now and from the look on my sister's face, I could tell she had already seen what was lying stationary in mid-air directly in front of me...

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“Virgo!” I muttered it as quickly as possible and in the lowest tone as well, hoping my sister wouldn't hear me. I then watched as the remaining pie and tub of ice cream toppled onto the porch deck, pieces of apples and crust spilling out everywhere.

“What did you just do!?” my sister Laura asked quite pointedly.

“I tripped, isn't it obvious?!” I responded a little too sternly.

“That's not what I'm talking about and you know that!”

“What's the matter dear... Oh!” said my mother who had just come up the porch stairs herself and noticed the contents of the pie now splattered everywhere.

“I'm sorry, I was a little too clumsy I guess...” I said feeling bad.

I waited for my sister to say something to my mother about what she had seen, but she didn't, much to my surprise. Mr. and Mrs. Riley then told me not to worry about the accident as they had just come up the steps themselves, while Chris looked over at me and then at my sister who was still intently staring at me. Her eyes said everything and I knew she wasn't going to let this one go.

After my mess was cleaned up and everything put away, I tried to put off my worried thoughts of when Laura was going to approach me again about what she might have seen. Thankfully, a game called Telestrations was able to distract those worries for a good hour or so. It was a lot of fun and dealt with combing sketching and that old kids telephone game of passing a message along. Our evening at the Riley's soon came to an end not too much longer after we had finished playing the group game. As I was walking out the door with my family and saying my goodbyes to everyone, Chris abruptly pulled me aside.

“Did your sister see you use your powers?!” he whispered in an overly concerned tone.

“Yeah, I'm pretty sure she noticed the pie and ice cream hanging in mid-air...”

“Are you friggin' serious? That might be a big problem.”

“I know, but she hasn't said anything else about it,”

“Yet... Well just do what you do best if she asks about any of it.”

“What do you mean? Lie? I thought you said I shouldn't do that?”

“Well I'm making an exception here.”

“Ugh, you make no sense. What kind of Keeper advice is that?”

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"Just don't do anything stupid."

"Like what?"

"Like anything..."

"Whatever, I'm sure I'll handle it just fine."

"Ok, call me tomorrow and let me know if anything happens."

"Alright. Later..."

I then headed out the door, and silently walked home with my family, noticing my sister still looking over at me with that look like she knew something. When we arrived home, I immediately decided to call it a night, hoping that would alleviate any possibility of my sister cornering me about what she may or may not have seen. After saying goodnight to my parents, I just about ran up the stairs and brushed my teeth as fast as humanly possibly and then jetted into my bedroom, making sure to close the door firmly behind me. It wasn't even two full minutes before my door suddenly flew back open.

"Talk or I'm telling." My sister demanded.

"Tell you what?" I tried to play dumb.

"You know what I saw!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Stop lying and stop playing stupid!"

"Well, what do you think you saw?"

I really wished Chris were here right now because I knew the inevitable was about to happen.

"I saw that apple pie and tub of ice cream suspended in the air when you were reaching out for it. How did you do that?!"

"I think your eyes were playing tricks on you Laura..."

"STOP IT! I know you had something to do with it! When we were back in the police station on the day you reappeared, I also saw how you were right next to me and then somehow in the blink of an eye, got to the other side of the room. You were telling us the truth the whole time about what happened to you in that cave weren't you? And that crystal you showed us, it really does have each of the zodiac signs on it doesn't it?"

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I couldn't lie anymore and something inside me was telling me I should trust her. For the first time in my life, I decided to try.

"Yeah Laura, you're correct...about everything."

"I knew it! Show me how it works!"

"I'm still trying to figure it all out, and honestly, Chris has the crystal right now?"

"Why does he have it?"

"He's considered the Keeper of the Zodiac and is its guardian."

I then had to spend the next 30 minutes telling her everything, rehashing just about the entire story from the beginning when I had gone into the woods back during the summer to play at my favorite spot. I told her about almost getting trapped permanently inside that cave. I told her about how it had only been hours for me when I re-emerged, while it had been years for everyone else. I told her about the powers I had learned so far, including almost choking to death the first time I had tried the Cancer power. I told her about Chris's special ability that took us to the place where we met the Council of the Zodiac. And I even told her about my first real day of training that had happened earlier today, where I had nearly killed Chris from throwing that huge boulder.

"Wow, all of that is really true?!"

"Yeah and sometimes I find I still can't believe it myself."

"Can't you show me how one of your powers works? Do you have to have the crystal on you?"

"No, I don't need to have the crystal on me and I guess it really wouldn't hurt to show you at least one..."

"How about my sign? What does Leo do?"

"Yeah, you don't want to see that one because all it does it increase my senses and your perfume might stink me out too much if I did." I said laughing.

"Very funny. Ha ha. Seriously, how about showing me again what Virgo does?"

"Well I thought that one only had the ability to heal others, but it appears as if I can do telekinesis as well. Ok, let me try. Let's see if I can lift that book off my desk."

"Virgo!"

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I then looked at the book, and pointed my right hand towards it, trying to direct all my energy on it. As I did, I thought about whether I was making a mistake or not. Should I really have told her everything? I looked over briefly at Laura and then thought about Chris. I could only imagine what he'd be saying to me right now. My sister had this look of excitement on her face and I wondered if I shouldn't have told her the whole story and instead, kept on lying like Chris had told me to do. I wished for a moment that she had never noticed me using the Libra or Virgo abilities. But so far, she seemed totally cool with everything. I shrugged off my worry and then refocused my energy back onto the book, and watched as it levitated a few feet off the desk when suddenly Laura screamed in delight.

"Oh my God Andy, you're back! YOU'RE BACK! I thought I'd never see you again," she said as she grabbed me and gave me a huge hug. *"Where have you been? When did you get home? How did I get in here? And holy shit, how is that book floating over the desk!"*

"Laura, what's wrong? What's going on up there?!" my Mom shouted from downstairs obviously hearing her scream.

I looked up at my sister as she wept on my shoulder and knew I was in serious trouble. Dam it, why did I have to show her one of my powers...

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“Where were you all this time?” My sister managed to say in between sobs, as she continued to hug me quite tightly.

“You’re just a little confused right now. I’ve actually been home for awhile.” I said feeling completely clueless on what to do.

“LAURA, IS EVERYTHING OK UP THERE?” My mother shouted again from downstairs.

“MOM, EVERYTHING’S FINE!” I quickly shouted back. *“Laura, you’re not going to understand this right now but somehow I accidentally erased your entire memory of me for the past six months.”*

“WHAT?” Laura’s sobs abruptly stopped.

“The only way you’re going to understand what I’m about to tell you is if I show you something first.”

I took the next few minutes to demonstrate the one zodiac power I knew wouldn’t make things worse, which was Libra. After pausing time while touching her hand and then showing her our parents downstairs completely frozen in mid-conversation, I was able to gain her undivided attention and could see she was now somewhat afraid. I then had to take the next hour to recap as best as I could the past six months from the precise moment I went into the woods. I re-told her all about the cave, the three hours of time that really was three years for everyone else, Chris finding out about my powers, learning of his Keeper role in my life, meeting the Council of the Zodiac, beginning my training as a Guardian in the woods, almost killing Chris in the process, her seeing my powers in action with the apple pie and tub of ice cream suspended in mid-air, and finally how I was trying to show her the Virgo ability when I secretly wished I had never told her anything, which somehow erased the entire past six months of her memories of me.

“I’m sorry, I really screwed things up this time. Chris told me not to play around with the Zodiac powers unless he was present, but I didn’t listen and now look what’s happened!” I said truly feeling awful inside.

“Maybe you should try doing the reverse?” My sister said rather calmly given her present circumstances.

“What do you mean?”

“Well why don’t you try using the Virgo ability again, but this time wish for all my memories of you to come back?”

“Do you really think that could work? What if it makes things worse?”

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"I don't think it could possibly get any worse than not remembering the past six months of you being around!"

"Are you sure?"

"JUST DO IT!"

"Ok, ok! Geez! VIRGO!"

I then looked at my sister just like I had before and wished she would remember me at the police station and every single moment I had been home ever since.

"Anything?" I asked, my heart speeding up slightly in fear.

"Who are you and what are you doing in my brother's room?" My sister demanded, looking exceptionally alarmed.

"Oh no! You don't know who I am now? I knew I shouldn't have tried this Virgo ability again! Dammit!"

"HA HA! Just kidding! Yes, I remember everything now Andy! I really had you going..."

My sister began laughing so hard she snorted.

"That's not funny!" I said, as I punched her arm.

"Oww! It kind of was actually!" Laura said as she rubbed her arm and grinned from ear to ear. *"Anyway, I think that's enough excitement for tonight so let's continue this tomorrow, as I want to know more. And don't worry, I promise I won't tell anyone, not even Mom and Dad."*

"Thanks. I'll see you in the morning."

"Night!"

"Goodnight Laura."

I made sure to deactivate the Virgo sign this time and then slept pretty restless the rest of the night. I have to say I did feel a whole lot better the next morning though when I saw my sister still retaining all of her memories of me. We ended up hanging out together for most of the day talking in great detail about everything I'd gone through so far since re-emerging from the cave. Chris came over that afternoon and hung out with us for a while as well, but wasn't all too happy when he learned Laura now knew everything. He was even more perturbed when he discovered I had wiped her memories of me while showing off the Virgo ability and gave me the "I told you so" routine because of it. Thankfully,

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Chris didn't hold onto a grudge and got quickly over it. By the time the day ended, it felt pretty good to know I now had two people in my life that I could be fully honest with about anything, especially with all this Zodiac stuff.

The next two weeks went by with nothing overly noteworthy to make mention of other than a few moments at school where I really wanted to play a prank or two on Trevor, the biggest school bully, along with his cronies. I was so tired of their constant picking on me that it made the allure of using the crystal to get back at them all the greater. I never did though, only because Chris continued to remind me of the great responsibility I had, as well as Council's warnings. I guess I should also mention he did have me do some more training over both weekends back by the pond again, while Laura tagged along and watched. We didn't try to take on any new Zodiac signs though, as Chris wanted to polish up the ones I already knew.

RING.... RING.... RING... "Hello? Oh, hold on a minute Chris, I'll see if he's ready."

The ringing telephone had interrupted the thoughts I was having of my most recent training exercises. My father suddenly peeked his head in my door and handed me the phone letting me know it was Chris. I was just about fully dressed in my Halloween costume, getting ready for my final night of trick-or-treating. Next year I'd be too old to do it, which is why Chris and I had decided to have one last hurrah with it tonight.

"Hello?"

"Are you almost ready?" Chris said somewhat impatiently.

"Just about. I could always pause time if you want me to speed things up."

"Ugh! No just hurry up!"

Ironically I was going as DC's The Flash for my final night of candy hunting, even though I was taking so long to get ready. Chris had opted to go this year as Batman, which I thought was quite fitting as well given his role as a Guardian.

"I'll be over in ten minutes Mr. Impatient."

"Ok. See you then."

I hung up the phone and then finished getting ready. After sprinting down the stairs and getting a 9pm curfew from my parents, I raced out the front door and headed immediately for Chris's. When I arrived at his house, he was already waiting at the end of his driveway, bag in hand.

"You know we could have had a lot more time to trick-or-treat if I had used my powers." I said as I greeted him with a fist bump.

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"Yeah, and you probably would have erased all your family's memories in the process..."

"Ha Ha. Very funny!" I said chuckling. *So where to first?"*

"Well it's 6:30pm, we have about two hours to get as much candy as possible, so let's go that way where there seems to be a lot more porch lights on."

We headed off in the direction he had pointed to and began filling up our bags quite rapidly, only because we did more running than walking between houses. The first hour flew by far too quickly, but what was pretty cool is that just about every house so far had complimented us on our costumes. We had actually spent week's prior deciding what to go as, using superheroes as the theme, and when we finally had made our minds up on what to go as, our parents ordered them for us online. They weren't the cheap kind of costumes either, as both were leather-based and extremely authentic looking.

Wooo... HOOOONK! HOOONK!

Wooo... HOOOONK! HOOONK!

Two fire engines suddenly screamed by halting our latest approach to the next house.

"We need to follow them!" Chris said unexpectedly.

"What???"

"Come on!" Chris said, as he began to run as fast as he could in his Batman costume down the road, while I tried did my best to keep up with him.

I'm sure it looked fairly funny watching two costume-laden superheroes race after those fire trucks. I tried not to think about it or how uncomfortable I was running in my leather suit. As we drew near the last place we had seen the trucks off in the distance, the stench of smoke filled the air.

"There!" Chris said, as he pointed to the next street over where the strobing lights of the fire trucks were still flashing brightly.

As we arrived on the scene, a large two-story house was completely engulfed in flames. Outside it was a middle-aged woman screaming over and over again at the firemen who were just beginning to douse it with a huge torrent of water from each of the truck's hoses.

"MY CHILDREN ARE STILL INSIDE THE HOUSE!!!"

"MA'AM WE ARE DOING OUR BEST TO CREATE AN ENTRANCE FOR US TO GO IN THERE AND RESCUE THEM."

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“OH MY GOD, JAKE, NOAH, OH MY GOD!”

“Andy, I think it’s time for you to finally become a real superhero...” Chris said turning away from the sobbing woman and blazing fire, now looking very intently upon me.

As the frantic woman continued to scream and sob for her two sons, I knew Chris was right. It was time to become a true Keeper...

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“OH MY GOD, OH MY GOD, PLEAAASE SOMEONE HELP!” The frantic woman continued to scream and sob.

“Ok, here’s what I want you to do.” Chris said trying his best to tune out the woman’s pleas for help. *“First use the Libra power so that no one sees you doing any of this. Next, go around the back of the house and deactivate Libra and then activate Taurus, as then the fire shouldn’t hurt you while you’re in the house looking for Jake and Noah...”*

“Hold on a friggin’ second. It SHOULDN’T hurt me? That’s not very reassuring now is it?” I said feeling somewhat concerned.

“LOOK, we don’t have time for this. Just trust me, it’s going to work. Once, you find the kids in there, take them out the back door, disable Taurus after you set them down, and then tell them to run away from the house towards the street and then to the nearest firefighter. Lastly, use Libra again, and then meet me on the corner of the next street.”

“Chris, for both of our sakes, I truly hope your plan works without any hiccups...”

“Have faith my friend...I know you can do it. Good luck.”

I knew I couldn’t waste any more time worrying whether any of this was going to work or not. Every minute I stalled was putting those kids more at risk.

“LIBRA!”

Chris was still staring at me, as I looked over his shoulder and saw the woman’s mouth opened in mid-scream. Just beyond her were the firefighters spraying water from two different hoses, one on the front door and the other through a broken window upstairs. The stream from both now looked rather like a long ice bridge suspended in mid-air. I quickly headed around to the back of the house and wondered if I could make this whole process much easier by leaving time frozen. Maybe fire couldn’t hurt me if time was paused? I decided to try it on a nearby torrent of fire that was coming out one of the lower side windows. It honestly seemed harmless enough, so I walked over to it and reached my hand up into the beautiful orange glow.

“OWWWWWW!” I retracted my hand as fast as possible, but not before it got burned pretty well. I guess that answers that question. Note to self, stick to Chris’s plan.

My burned hand was really hurting now as I reached the back door and lightly grasped its handle, which was surprisingly cool to the touch. Upon turning it, I discovered it was unfortunately locked. I had no other choice but to break it open.

“LIBRA!”

“TAURUS!”

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Immediately my burned hand completely healed itself, which was a huge relief. I wasted no time to reflect on it though, as I hastily turned the door handle with next to no effort, breaking the lock mechanism in the process. I then pushed it opened and instantly a wall of flames shot out, yet they didn't burn me this time. Instead, it almost felt like a warm breeze was passing through me. I couldn't say the same for my costume though, as small parts of it began to melt. As quick as I possibly could, I sped through the wall of flames and entered the kitchen, managing to stifle the parts of my outfit that were burning.

"JAKE! NOAH! WHERE ARE YOU?" I shouted as loud as I could with hope I would hear them shout back.

There wasn't any response though. I shouted their names again even louder, but still nothing. The house was rapidly becoming engulfed in fire and I could tell several wooden beams downstairs might collapse soon. Thankfully all the thick smoke surrounding me though wasn't affecting my ability to breathe and keep a clear head.

Strictly on impulse, I decided to run up the stairs to where the bedrooms most likely were. The first one I entered appeared to be the master bedroom, of which not much was left. The next one seemed to be an office, and there too everything was already fully entrenched in flames. Parts of my costume were now beginning to disappear because of the intensity of the fire and heat and I knew I didn't have much time left before I'd probably be totally naked. And that was definitely something I didn't want to happen! I promptly raced into the next bedroom trying to forget any worry of that occurring, but had no success there or with the bathroom across from it. I approached the last room I hadn't entered yet, except this one had its door closed. I swiftly kicked it open and there in the corner of it next to a bunk bed and some toys scattered about were twins Jake and Noah, huddled together, but definitely not alert. The smoke in the room was so thick I could barely see them through it, but thankfully it wasn't bothering my eyes. I raced over to them and shook them both, but neither stirred one bit. Shit, Chris didn't prepare me for this! I had no choice but to try something he hadn't laid out for me.

"TAURUS!"

"VIRGO!"

I instantaneously started coughing and my eyes burning with the heat just as excruciating. While lying as close to the floor as possible and praying I didn't pass out, I then reached out to place my hands on both boys at the same time. I really had no idea whether I could heal two people at once, but it was the only option I had. As soon as my hands were firmly pressed upon the chests of both Jake and Noah, that electricity-like feeling began to shoot through me like it had before when I healed Chris. The energy bolts then jumped down my arms and out my fingertips, causing my hands to become super-hot in the process. Suddenly both of the boy's eyes opened with each taking in deep breaths...

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"COUGH! COUGH! COUGH!" Jake and Noah proceeded to hack loudly like I already was.

"Are...you...here to save us?" One of the twins asked me in between coughs.

"Yes, Look, I'm about to do a little magic to get you out of here. Just trust me ok?"

"OK!" Both twins responded in unison. I could tell they were very scared. I was too, as the smoke felt like fire in my lungs with each breath I took.

"VIRGO!"

"TAURUS!"

Phew. I could breathe again and my watery vision cleared itself up as well. I then hurriedly picked up Jake and Noah and placed one under each arm, as if I was carrying two bundles of wood. They were definitely a few years younger than I, but based upon their size, I would have guessed they were each at least 60 pounds, although it felt as if I was holding onto two kids that weighed next to nothing.

As I flew out the door, both of them started screaming due to the intensity of the heat. The stairs were now completely buried in flames and I knew there was no way I could take them through that wall of fire. I had only one possible exit at this point, the bathroom. It appeared to be the only thing that wasn't on fire and there was a window in there.

"So do you guys trust me still?" I said to Jake and Noah setting them down near the window in the bathroom I had just entered.

"Yes, why, what are you gonna do?" One of the twins answered while the other started crying pretty hard, apparently quite scared.

"You're both going to jump out this window one after another, once I'm down on the ground and I'm going to catch each of you."

"WHAT?!" The crying twin abruptly said in between sobs.

"Please just trust me ok?" I said trying to reassure him.

I didn't wait for them to say anything else as the flames had now blocked our exit from the bathroom. Both were coughing uncontrollably by the time I got the window opened and had thrown the screen to the ground. I then climbed out and jumped without thinking, finding it almost hard to believe how effortless it was when I reached the ground.

"Ok, come on. JUMP!" I said as I prepared my hands to catch whoever went first.

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The twin that hadn't been crying quickly climbed through the window with no hesitation and jumped. I caught him with ease and motioned for his brother to do the same, except he continued to peer over the edge fully paralyzed in fear. I yelled again for him to jump, but to no avail.

I knew there wasn't any time left for this so I leaped as hard as I could and reached the window easily. I could see the flames had now entered the outer perimeter of the bathroom, leaving me with no choice but to grab the boy's arm with one of my hands and roughly drag him out the window. As soon as I did, I let go of the windowsill with my other hand and fell to the ground. I landed on my back while still holding onto him, but thankfully it hadn't hurt either of us. He immediately then bolted out of my arms and stood on his feet, next to his brother.

"Now run as fast as you can away from your house towards the street and then head over towards the firefighters ok? Your mom is there with them now and I'm sure she'll be more than happy to see you both are safe!" I said as I stood up and brushed myself off.

"Thank you mister superhero," said the twin who had jumped first. *"So who are you anyway beneath that mask and how did you do all that?"*

"Don't worry about any of that. Just run. Your mom needs to know you're safe."

"Thanks for saving me too," said the other twin who had finally stopped crying.

"You're both welcome, now go!"

I watched as they ran away from the house, making it safely to the street, and then disappear heading towards the firefighters and their mother.

"TAURUS!"

"LIBRA!"

I walked slowly back around the house, amazed I had actually pulled it all off. The rush of helping save Jake and Noah felt incredible. Once I reemerged on the other side of the house where the firefighters were still battling the blaze, I was able to see the teary mother with arms outstretched, and just beyond, the boys running towards her. A television crew had already arrived and was now filming the whole scene, which I'm sure, would make for great headline news later that night. When I reached enough of a safe distance where no one could see me, I unfroze time and saw Chris standing on the corner of the next street over as promised.

"Well?" Chris said in anticipation when I reached him, while handing me my bag of candy.

"They're safe, but not without a few of those hiccups I'll have you know!"

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“What do you mean?”

“I’ll tell you later, let’s just get out of here first. My costume feels like it’s totally stuck to me.”

“Well at least most of it’s still on you, especially your mask, which means those boys shouldn’t know who you are right?”

“Yeah, I guess so...” I said, as we began to head down the hill to return to his house.

Little did I know though what was taking place at that very moment back at the still blazing fire...

“I think you’re going to want to see this!!!” said a man wildly shaking his Iphone in the air while racing over towards the filming TV crew and the female reporter.

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Andy's Woodsy Adventure – Chapter 20

“You know you’re going to need to teleport yourself back into your room from here right?” said Chris once we had reached the front of his driveway.

“Yeah, so my parents don’t see my costume all messed up with holes in it right?”

“Exactly. And you really need to destroy it as well.”

“What? How am I going to do that when my parents are probably going to ask at some point where it is?”

“Look, if they do, you tell them you left it at my house because we were going to use them again for another adventure.”

“Hey, that’s lying and I thought you were trying to set a good example for me?”

“Hmmm, you know you’re right. Ok, I have a better idea. Teleport yourself home right now and change into something else. Then teleport back over here and give me the costume. Then you’re actually not lying,”

“Ok sounds good. Capricorn!” I said as I pictured my bedroom.

VAVOOM...

I quickly entered and exited the vortex and was now standing by my bed. Thankfully my door was already closed upon arrival, as I had left it that way before leaving to go trick-or-treating. After setting my bag of candy down, I rapidly began taking off my costume, but unfortunately, it seemed to be taking me much longer than I expected. Parts of it had adhered to my skin where the intensity of the fire and heat had melted it onto me. I had to peel it off in those areas and all I can say is that it was a very unpleasant experience doing so.

“I knew I heard you in here! You used your powers to get home didn’t you?” My sister said suddenly barging into my room.

“Shhhh! Be quiet! Yes, I used one of my powers to teleport home.” I said hoping my parents didn’t hear her.

“You can do that? How cool is that! Oh, and you don’t have to be so quiet. Mom and Dad went out to dinner and left me in charge of giving out candy.”

“Phew! That’s a big relief!”

“Well, you might not feel that way after you see what’s all over the local news...”

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"What do you mean?"

"Just meet me downstairs after you get done changing. And if you can somehow teleport Chris here as well, you might want to do that."

My sister then left the room and headed downstairs leaving me to finish peeling off the rest of my costume. I hadn't the faintest idea as to what Laura was talking about, but by her tone I could tell she was pretty concerned.

After placing the now mostly destroyed superhero outfit in a bag and changing into some clean clothes, I teleported back to Chris and gave it to him. I then proceeded to tell him about what my sister had said and asked if he might be able to stay over for the night. He didn't know and told me to wait on his front porch while he found out whether he could or couldn't. Ten minutes later he re-emerged in his normal clothes with an overnight bag and said it was fine. I wasted no time and swiftly teleported us back to my bedroom. Once there, I quickly deactivated Capricorn, as I didn't want a repeat of what happened last time I didn't deactivate one of the signs.

"You know we should teleport ourselves to somewhere really cool sometime don't you think?" Chris said as he set his bag down on my bed.

"Wouldn't that be abusing my powers? Remember what the Council of the Zodiac said about that."

"I honestly don't believe that's what they meant. I think you're just not supposed to ever use your gifts to gain power or prestige, or to abuse another person on purpose."

"Ahh. That makes sense I guess." I said as we headed downstairs to where the main television and my sister were.

"...again what you have been seeing here is amateur footage taken from a cellular device." said the news anchor on channel four as we entered the family room. *"We're going to go live now on the scene with Heather Sampson in Scenic Hills."*

"Thanks John. Yes, if you're just tuning it, firefighters have been on the scene here for almost an hour now trying to fully put out a two-alarm fire that reportedly started from some faulty electrical wiring. As you can see there are still a few flames they're trying to take care of."

The camera then moved off the newswoman and onto the charred remains of the house.

"Sadly not much is left of the once beautiful two-story home owned by Kathleen Johnson. Thankfully, both she and her two children were unharmed and are now safe. That wasn't the case though a short time ago when the fire trapped her two 8-year-old boys upstairs in their bedroom. By the time the firefighters arrived on the scene only she had escaped and the flames had reached such intensity that any rescue of her children was initially

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cover for me by letting them know Chris was staying over and that we had already turned in for the night. And with that, Chris and I sprinted back upstairs to my room.

When the door was safely closed, I watched as Chris immediately locked it. Before I had a chance to ask him why, he pulled my crystal out of his bag and said something that was the last thing I ever expected him to say at that moment.

“Zōidiakos!”

As the crystal began to give that mesmerizing hum once again, while also spinning in mid-air like before, I looked over at Chris somewhat in alarm, wondering why we were returning to the Council of the Zodiac.

“Andy, in light of everything that happened tonight, I really feel we need some additional guidance from the Council on how to deal with you helping others. I’m hoping a quick visit to them will provide us some much-needed answers”. Chris said as the blur of the vortex grew bigger and several of my comic books began flying around my room.

“I really hope you know what you’re doing!!!” I said, hoping this time we wouldn’t return days, weeks, months, or even years later...