

Andy and The Zodiac Crystal

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.

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

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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..."

"3..."

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“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 purplish color. This time I didn't extinguish the light from my flashlight though as I

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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.

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

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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.

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

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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.

"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.

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“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.

“I don’t care who you are! Where are my parents? This is my home! These strange

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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 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.

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“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 parents and the officers just shook their heads.

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“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 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.

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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 drawer for now. I really didn’t want to have anything strange to happen over dinner. I had

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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 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

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

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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 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.

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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!"

WHOOSH...

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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!"

WHOOSH...

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“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.

“I don’t know? I never tried that. Let’s see...” I said as I swiftly grabbed Chris’s arm.

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“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 Batman, I'm Robin ok?”

“Yeah...except no stupid costumes ok?” I said laughing.

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“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!”

Andy and The Zodiac Crystal

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!!!"

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.

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“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 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.

Andy and The Zodiac Crystal

“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...”

Andy and The Zodiac Crystal

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.

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

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“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.”

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.

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"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..."

"Nooooooooo!"

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.

"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'."

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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 way. For the heart will fall prey to the forces of darkness, the more the powers of the

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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.

"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."

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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 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?

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“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 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.

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"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 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

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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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Chapter 15

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.

“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.

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

CRA-ACK!!!

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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.

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

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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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Chapter 16

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

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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.

"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.

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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 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 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

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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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Chapter 17

“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?”

“Just don't do anything stupid.”

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“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?”

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.

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“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!”

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

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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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Chapter 18

“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, 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.

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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.

"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?"*

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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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Chapter 19

“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!”

WHOOSH...

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...

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

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“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.

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.

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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!"

WHOOSH.

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!"

"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."

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“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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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...”

“What do you mean?”

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“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 not possible. What can only be described as a miracle at this point is the mysterious costumed person who ended up being the one to actually save her two boys. We're now going to show you the amateur footage again, taken by Billy Tilden who was able to capture their amazing rescue.”

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“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...

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Chris and I emerged out of the vortex and were once again sitting in the large room with all black walls, the sky and stars still shining in place of where a ceiling would normally be. The Council of the Zodiac surrounded us like before, with Capricorn directly facing us.

“Welcome Keeper and Guardian of the Zodiac from planet Earth. We are very pleased with your progress and understand why you have returned to us,” said Capricorn who spoke in the same soothing female voice.

“Christopher, you question whether you need to go on hiding Andy’s identity,” said the deep masculine sounding Aries.

“You wonder if the world will hunt him down if you don’t,” said the equally female soothing voice of Taurus.

“And you are feeling concerned that you won’t be able to handle whatever darkness might come your way...” boomed another deep masculine voice from behind us, that being Leo.

It appeared as if Council ultimately was all-seeing and all-knowing with them asking our questions before we even had a chance to. And while I was still completely amazed at their omnipresence like I had been the first time I sat before them, I secretly wondered why they wouldn’t just tell us exactly what we needed to do to better prepare us for the inevitable, especially if they already knew what our future held.

“Yes...to all three questions...” Chris said slowly, as he interrupted my random thoughts.

“As for you Andrew, we know you are frustrated and wish to have us better prepare you for what your future holds...” began Pisces, who too spoke with an angelic sounding female voice.

Chris looked at me with the same puzzled expression I now had on my face. Are they really reading all our thoughts?

“Yes, we can read your thoughts and as we mentioned to you the last time you were here. There are many things we cannot say, as doing so could alter the entire time-space continuum. While we can see the possibilities that your future may hold, your ability to use free will can alter that at any point in time.” Pisces continued.

The expression on Chris’s face looked as if he already expected that answer.

“As for whether to hide Andrew’s identity, that is for the Guardian to determine. Not concealing it will lead many to covet Andrew’s abilities, while concealing it will only cause just as many to seek out his true identity. Each choice has its own set of risks and outcomes, but regardless of whichever path you choose, the Zodiac abilities can help you

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in any situation that may arise.” Pisces finished and the room was suddenly immersed in complete silence.

I honestly did feel a little frustrated. What was the point in coming here if the only answers we were going to get were ones we could have figured out ourselves?

“Again we acknowledge your frustration Andrew and want you to understand that we have sat here before many other Keepers and Guardians over thousands of years who each felt the same way as you do right now.” said Pisces.

It did creep me out a little knowing they could read every one of my thoughts.

“What we can say is that if you continue on the path you already are on, then you will fare just fine as most of them did.”

“Most?” Chris said sounding somewhat concerned.

“There have been a few over time who decided to use the abilities of the Zodiac for their own gain and glory. This only led each of them down a very dark path that ended in destruction. As we mentioned the last time you sat here before us, the crystal was never designed to be used in darkness and doing so will only cause it to cease working. The outcome of this for all those who ventured down this path never ended well either.” said Aries.

I knew I didn’t want to go down that path, but it did make me wonder how someone could go so far astray.

“There is one last thing we wish to offer you before you go, as time is passing quickly in your plane of existence.” Taurus said as I continued to ponder what would cause someone to abuse the crystal’s powers. *“There is another ability that does not appear on your crystal, but can help you with at least one of the questions you came here with. By saying the word “Endymasia”, a Zodiac uniform will appear on you immediately, and will entirely conform to your own body’s size and dimensions, as well as to whatever Zodiac symbol you might be utilizing at the time.”*

I breathed a slight sigh of relief knowing that our journey to the Council wasn’t totally in vein, but I did wonder if the costume was going to look too corny. Nevertheless, it was time to go and both Chris and I knew it.

“We wish you well Andrew and Christopher and we trust you will do everything you can to continue protecting both the crystal and the Light,” said the Council of the Zodiac in unison.

“We will...” Chris and I said both at the same time.

“Zōidiakos!”

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As the crystal once again flew out of Chris's hand with that mesmerizing hum and started spinning in mid-air between us, I felt thankful that Chris had taken us here. Soon, the cosmic room became nothing but a blur, eventually fading completely away until the vortex returned us to my bedroom. Thankfully, a quick glance over at my alarm clock saw only 2 hours had passed since we had left.

"I totally have to see what this Zodiac costume looks like!" Chris said excitedly once the presence of the vortex was fully gone.

"You know they left that choice up to us. I really don't have to use a costume remember?"

"I think we should. I don't think our planet is ready for an unmasked super-powered hero."

"You don't know that..."

"Remember they placed me in the position as the Guardian and it's my job to assess these things isn't it?"

"I guess so?"

"Well come on, let's see this costume then..."

"Whatever. What was that word again? Oh yeah, Endymasia!"

Suddenly almost in the blink of an eye, the clothing I was wearing disappeared and was replaced by what I could only describe looked like a wetsuit. Although I had worn one of those once when rafting down a river, this felt nothing like that. In fact, the costume conformed to my body so well that it almost felt as if it was a living, breathing part of me. In the center of it was the Gemini symbol in a bright white color. The color of the suit though was glowing the same eerily purple glow as the crystal itself.

"You really need to look in the mirror," said Chris looking even more excited.

"What? Does it look stupid or something?" I said as I glanced over at the mirror on the back of my bedroom door. *"Holy crap!"*

There was a mask now conforming to my face that covered part of my nose and both of my eyes. I had no idea it was even there. It didn't obstruct my vision like one of those Halloween costumes usually do. And it was shining in the same cool purple glow. Contrary to what I thought the Zodiac costume was going to look like, it actually looked pretty amazing on me.

"Andrew Arthur Dawson, it is way past your bedtime and why is your bedroom door locked? Open this door now young man!" My mother said rather sternly on the other side of the door I was now standing in front of.

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Almost on impulse and without thinking, I quickly unlocked the door and began to turn the knob...totally forgetting that I still had my Zodiac uniform on.

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Chapter 22

“What are you thinking!!!” Chris said, as he ran over and pushed the door back shut and then swiftly pointed at my costume.

“Andy, what’s going on in there? Open this door immediately!” My mother said sounding very perturbed.

“Nothing Mom, we’re just rough housing a little.”

I knew it was a lie, but I couldn’t think of anything else to say at that moment. Unfortunately, the look on Chris’s face as I said it was enough to remind me that he really didn’t approve of me continuing to tell lies, even if they felt more than necessary in certain situations. He then took the opportunity to point again at the costume I still had on.

“If you don’t open this door now young man, you’re going to be grounded for the next month! And that means we won’t be going on the camping trip next week with Chris’s family.”

“Endymasia!” I quickly said the strange word again and watched as my normal clothing returned on my body instantly. Chris then promptly moved away from the door as I opened it.

“I hope you have a good explanation as to why the two of you are still up? You know it is way past your bedtime Andy!” My mother said as she walked in my room and observed that everything appeared in order.

“I’m sorry Mrs. Dawson. I kept Andy up because there were some things I was really concerned about in our friendship.” Chris responded sounding super nice.

Man! How come I can never think of responses like that!

“Well I’m sure it can wait till the morning right Chris?” She said with a slight grin, which was one of those where you knew she was saying she was ok with his answer, but we better do as she says.

“You’re absolutely right Mrs. Dawson. I’m sorry if we disturbed you.”

“Oh, it’s ok Chris. I just know how crabby Andy will be tomorrow if he doesn’t get enough sleep.” She said smiling from ear to ear.

Boy she wasn’t kidding. I usually need at least six hours to feel somewhat normal and it was already going on midnight.

“Well goodnight boys. I’ll have breakfast ready for the two of you in the morning around 8am or so...” My mother said as she walked out of the room and closed the door again.

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“If you don’t slow down and let me do my Guardian job, this is never going to work!”
Chris whispered adamantly as soon as the door was closed.

“I wasn’t thinking. Geez. Sorry.”

“Look, it’s fine. You just need to be more careful. We can’t have anyone else finding out about your abilities.”

“I know...”

Chris then gave me a high five to let me know everything was cool between us and shortly after that I was laying in my bed and out like a light.

The next two weeks flew by rather quickly and soon the camping trip was upon us. Chris had continued to spend all of my free time up till then practicing the powers of the Zodiac signs I already knew. I was definitely getting much better at all of them. I must say though, I still didn’t like using the Leo sign because of the extreme amplification of my senses, although I was learning how to tone it down a little the more I practiced with it.

As for school, Trevor continued to remain my nemesis. I wanted so badly to use my powers on him every time he tripped me, knocked the books out of my hands, or made fun of me in front of his little gang of annoying friends. I knew with the muttering of Libra or Taurus, I could do just about anything to him, but the more Chris helped me with my Zodiac training, the more I found myself just feeling sorry for Trevor. Chris also helped me to see that I truly had no idea what went on in Trevor’s home. He was right, as they say most bullies are usually just people who have been abused themselves. I’ve also heard that can happen in families where the parents are alcoholics or drug addicts. Thinking about these things each time I landed on the floor due to his outstretched foot helped me to never retaliate.

“They’re here!” My mother shouted from downstairs instantly breaking me out of my frustrating thoughts about Trevor.

I looked out my window to see Chris’s family getting out of their fully loaded vehicle. We were all headed to the Adirondacks for Veterans Day weekend. I was really excited and hadn’t slept much the night before. Chris had told me the home we were staying in had a whirlpool tub, a stone fireplace, and a huge outdoor deck that overlooked a lake and a panoramic view of the mountainside. I guess we were going to be about 25 minutes north of Lake George Village, which was near a place my family used to go to every year for a church retreat.

“Are you ready or what slowpoke?” Chris said bursting into my room.

“Hey, I’ll tell you what. How about I just meet you there. CAPRI-...”

“Wait! Don’t do that!” Chris said rapidly.

“HA HA. I got you!”

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“Very funny.” Chris said with a smirk. *“Anyway, we’re all waiting on you. It looks like your family’s car is packed and ready to go.”*

An hour later we were well on our way there, each budding with excitement. None of my family had ever done a mountain top getaway before, so this was going to be a new experience for all of us. At the moment, my parents were humming along to some 80’s tune on the radio while my sister and I were mostly quiet with each other in the backseat. She had been almost continuously texting with someone on her phone who I could only assume was some boy she liked. While I on the other hand had been spending the majority of the car ride so far reading one of my fantasy books that I had brought along.

“Are you kids hungry? I just received a text from Mrs. Riley letting us know there’s a great place to grab lunch not too far from here.” My mother said, as she looked in the rearview mirror at us.

“I can eat.” I said as my stomach grumbled slightly.

“Me too.” My sister agreed taking a rare breather from texting whoever she had been for the past hour.

It wasn’t long before we were pulling into the parking lot of a cool retro-looking diner in some small town off the highway. Once inside, we all crammed into an oversized booth with a chair added at the end of the table. My father sat there, while Chris and I were all the way on the inside seated across from each other. I quickly started flipping through the titles in the jukebox that was sitting next to me and wasn’t recognizing any of the songs.

“Here let me select a few...” said Mr. Riley who reached over Chris and put a few quarters in the coin slot.

A few minutes later a song started playing on it that felt like it was from the 1960’s. I watched as my parents and the Riley’s all began bopping their head to something about wearing short shorts while my sister and Chris and I all rolled our eyes.

“So what is everyone going to have to drink today?” The waitress said glumly. She appeared to be very sad, almost as if she was about to cry.

“I’ll have a Diet Coke with a lemon.” I immediately blurted out.

“Andrew Arthur, I think I’ve taught you better manners than that. Ladies should always go first...” my mother said rather sternly.

“Yeah, ladies first.” said Chris sarcastically, at which point his own mother lightly smacked him on the back of his head, both of us now turning two sheets of red.

As everyone began to place their drink orders, I decided it was time to have a little fun with Chris.

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“Virgo.” I murmured ever so slightly under my breath while Chris ordered a Diet Slice.

Since this was just between the Guardian and Keeper, I figured the Council wouldn't mind me having a small bit of fun. I then subtly pointed my hand at the salt and peppershakers that were sitting near him and slowly unscrewed their caps by twisting my finger counterclockwise for each. Chris absolutely loved to always put salt and pepper on everything he ate.

As the drinks began to arrive at the table from our waitress, I was brimming with anticipation for my little joke to come to light. But something kept drawing me back to the waitress as she stood there with a very depressed look. I stared at the pretty middle-aged woman intently, pondering what could be going on in her life that would cause her to be so miserable. Suddenly I heard her speak some words I wasn't prepared to hear.

“I don't want to live anymore. I hate my life. No one cares about me. Maybe I should just end it all tonight....”

“What? Please don't do that Ms.!” I shouted out to her.

“Don't do what? Take our order?” My father said as everyone began to look at me rather strangely.

“Didn't you hear what she just said?”

“Are you feeling ok Andy?” Chris said, as I looked back at the woman, who now was also staring at me with a very puzzled expression...

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Chapter 23

"I'm fine. Never mind." I said to Chris and then turned my attention back onto the waitress.

Could it be possible that I just learned another ability of Virgo? Was I actually reading her mind? While she proceeded to take the lunch orders from everyone at the table, I decided the only way I'd know is to try staring at her again intently. But after a minute or so of trying, I gave up as nothing happened.

"And for you young man, what'll it be?" The waitress had turned her focus onto me, promptly waiting now for my order.

She still had the same solemn look on her face and I felt really sad for her.

"Why is this kid staring at me so weird? Ugh, just place your order already!"

"I'm not staring at you weird and sorry if I'm taking too long to order!" I blurted the words out quite rudely and without thinking, and then immediately regretted it, as everyone was now giving me those strange looks again.

I guess it really was true. Virgo does give me the ability to read people's minds. But somehow the only way to use that power was to connect to them through my heart rather than just staring at someone.

"Andrew Arthur Dawson, I don't know what's going on with you today, but you need apologize right now to this nice waitress."

"Did he just read my mind? Man, this kid is way too creepy. Please just tell me your order so that I can finish my work day and then go home to my miserable existence."

I had read her thoughts again without even trying and felt bad now. She truly was hurting and I had no idea why.

"I'm sorry Ms. for being so rude and acting so strange. I haven't gotten much sleep in the past couple of days and I think I've been reading my fantasy novels a little too much."

Ok, so I know it wasn't the entire truth, but the part that mattered was my apology and by my mother's reaction, she was satisfied as well. I could tell Chris wasn't though, as he was giving me that look which said he knew I was using one of the Zodiac powers.

"It's ok kid, so what'll be?"

Thankfully, this time she totally was speaking those words aloud, but I could see how using this ability could get a little confusing.

"I'll have the double burger with blue cheese and bacon. And can I have my bacon and fries really well done please?"

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“Sure kid. So is that everything?” She responded while looking around the table once more.

Everyone nodded their heads approvingly.

“Thank God, this table is really giving me the creeps. I really hate my life. I don’t know how much longer I can go on like this.”

I frowned as I listened once more to her thoughts while she turned and walked towards the kitchen.

My mother suddenly placed her hand on my forehead to see if I had a fever.

“Mom, I’m fine!”

“Maybe you should take a nap Andy for the rest of the car ride?” My Dad said reassuringly.

“Yeah, I’m sure that will probably help.” I responded as nice as possible so as not to draw any more unwanted attention to me. I could feel Chris’s eyes boring down on me while my mother continued to look at me with concern.

“Things just haven’t been the same with you since you returned home. I wish I knew what really happened to you during those three years.”

I was unexpectedly hearing my mother’s thoughts now and could feel her sadness. Then without warning, it was like the volume was turned up in my head and I suddenly was tapping into everyone’s thoughts.

“If they only knew about his powers.”

“I feel bad for Mrs. Dawson.”

“Thank God that’s not my son.”

“I hope Andy isn’t a bad influence for Chris.”

“I wish I had Andy’s powers. The things I would do with them...”

“I wish my son was more like the other kids I see playing in our neighborhood.”

“ANDY, I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR MY THOUGHTS, LOOK AT ME!”

Chris’s voice suddenly blared over all the others. I had been cupping my ears without realizing I was doing it and had also closed my eyes as well because all the chatter was really giving me a headache. Having this power activated wasn’t so much fun anymore.

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“ANDY WOULD YOU PLEASE LOOK AT ME!”

I opened my eyes and saw Chris glaring at me.

“Shut it off now! It’s Virgo isn’t it. I don’t know why you turned it on, but turn it off!”

“*Virgo.*” I whispered the zodiac sign silent enough so that no one could hear and then the world became eerily silent again with everyone still looking at me with concerned expressions, all except Chris that is. I could tell he was a little perturbed with me.

For the next ten minutes I didn’t say anything and instead randomly looked through the song titles on the jukebox, trying to focus my attention on something. Everyone else was engaged in conversation about things we were going to do during our camping trip. Everyone else but Chris though, as I could still feel him glaring at me, waiting for me to acknowledge what I had done. By the time our meals arrived, I wasn’t feeling very hungry anymore. I looked down at the huge burger and plate of fries now in front of me and where I’d normally begin to devour it, I just let it sit there.

I had heard far too many things from everyone at the table that I didn’t want to hear. Mrs. Riley felt bad for my mother because of me. Mr. Riley hoped I wasn’t being a bad influence on his son. My sister was coveting my powers. My mother was living in sorrow over my lost years. And my father wished I were more like the other kids in the neighborhood. Knowing all this was far worse than not knowing. Then I thought about the waitress who seemed as if she was pondering the thought of suicide.

“AAAAHHH”

“OH NO!”

Two different voices expressing their discontent with something then interrupted my thoughts about how everyone felt about me. I looked over to see a pile of salt now on Mr. Riley’s fries and a pile of pepper on my father’s eggs.

My joke had backfired and I felt truly terrible.

“I need to go to the bathroom please.” I said feeling a little queasy with everything I had done and heard.

“I have to go as well.” Chris said sternly.

As both sides of the booth cleared out, we headed in silence to the bathroom. Once the door was closed, Chris checked to see if anyone else was in there and once finding it was completely empty, he locked the door.

“*WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?!*”

“I was going to play a joke on you with the salt and pepper, but somehow Virgo had another ability I didn’t know about.”

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"I got that much already. But seriously, abusing these powers is only going to cause you to lose them or maybe something even worse."

"I guess I thought it was ok because it was between you and me."

"Well, don't guess next time. We don't know all the abilities of these signs yet, and playing with any of them for your gain could possibly expose you or cause damage to someone else."

"Yeah, you're right. Hey do you know that your parents feel bad for mine and that they worry I'm a bad influence on you. And my own father wishes I was more like the other kids in the neighborhood."

"Don't worry about what they think. What other people think of you doesn't matter. What matters is how you think about yourself ok? Now what's going on with that waitress?"

"I think she wants to end her life."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, she said she hates herself and that no one cares about her."

"Ok, what I want you to do when you leave the bathroom is go up to her and tell her something really nice. But before you do, reactivate Virgo because I want you to read her mind after you tell her whatever you do."

"You really want me to use this power again?"

"Yeah, just for this though, then turn it back off, once you do this."

"Alright. Virgo!"

"You'll be fine Andy. Trust me." Chris's thoughts came through with kindness. I was so glad I wasn't going through all this alone.

As I left the bathroom, I looked around for the waitress while Chris returned to the booth. After spotting her, I approached cautiously.

"Is everything ok kid?"

"Look, I'm really sorry for being so rude. It looked like you were really sad about something and I'm sure I just made things worse for you. I just want to say you're a great waitress and a very pretty one at that. Don't let anyone tell you you're not important, because you are. And as strange as this sounds, know God loves you and so do I, as a friend of course!" I said turning beet red.

She immediately smiled from ear to ear and I could feel her spirits rising.

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“Thanks kid. That means a lot. Just been dealing with some depression lately. You know what that is.”

“All too well. My father has battled it. But there is hope and I know you are going to make it through it.”

“Thanks. I needed to hear that. Hey, if it’s not too weird, can I give you a hug?”

“Sure.”

I gave her a huge hug and then I heard her thoughts.

“Thank you God for the message. I won’t give up. I promise.”

I walked away and headed for the booth while the waitress continued to shine with a brightly lit smile.

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Chapter 24

“What was all that about son?” said my father as I returned to the booth where everyone was once again staring at me.

“Oh, I just wanted to say I was sorry again for being so rude to the waitress earlier. And well, I wanted to brighten up her day a little I guess.” I responded as I slid back into the inside of the long red booth.

“Well that was mighty nice of you Andy!” said Mrs. Riley. *“I guess my little Chris is rubbing off on you.”*

I chuckled and mouthed the words “my little Chris” with a big grin while staring across at Chris who was now the only one turning beet red.

“When is she going to stop calling me her little Chris? I’m not a little kid anymore. Ugh!” Chris’s thoughts suddenly came through in my head causing me to laugh out loud.

“Stop reading my thoughts and turn off Virgo! And by the way, I’m assuming it all went well with the waitress right?” Chris’s thoughts boomed in my head, obviously now aware I hadn’t turned the zodiac sign back off.

“Virgo!” I murmured the words while nodding approvingly to Chris, but not before I heard Mr. Riley’s thoughts come through once again. He really did think of me as a weird kid, but in all honesty, I’m sure I did act rather strange from his point of view.

Thankfully, the rest of lunch went off without a hitch. And as much as I had liked learning a new part of the Virgo abilities, it was definitely a welcomed relief not hearing what people were thinking about me anymore. I have to say it did feel pretty good helping the waitress though, as it was very noticeable how happy she was for the rest of our meal. Once we were all done and the bill was paid, I said goodbye to her and was back in the car for the rest of our drive to the cabin.

I mostly dozed for the next hour in the car until we arrived in Lake George Village. There we had a quick stop off at the rental office to pick up the keys to the cabin and thirty minutes later we were finally pulling up in front of the large lakefront vacation home. It truly was breathtaking.

The log cabin seemed mammoth compared to our house back home. It must have been over 3000 square feet. The outdoor deck really was as huge as Chris had said, as it ran the entire length of the house. Behind it were floor to ceiling windows that allowed each of its occupants to lazily stare out at the lake, which was probably only about 100 feet from the edge of the deck.

“Hey, can Andy and I walk down to the dock?” Chris said as soon as we had all exited our cars. Ironically, I hadn’t even noticed the long dock until he had mentioned it.

“After everything is unloaded Mr.” said Mrs. Riley somewhat sternly.

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Once we began to bring everything in, I noticed how impressive the inside of the home was as the outside. The place had three floors. On the bottom was a recreational room that actually contained a full size pool table, a foosball table, a satellite-connected television, and a decent sized couch.

On the second floor were two bedrooms, one for my sister, and one for Chris and I. She got the smaller of two with the twin bed in it, but she did have her own bathroom, which made her more than happy. We got the one with the bunk bed, which I promptly claimed the top so that I wouldn't have to smell any of Chris's farts travelling downward. Our bathroom was outside our room, which wasn't that big of a deal to either of us. Also on our floor was the door that exited onto the deck, a long exceptionally soft sectional sofa and two recliners, the kitchen and a dining room table that sat twelve.

On the top floor were the two master bedrooms, each with their own walk in showers and king size beds. Overall the décor there and throughout the rest of the house definitely had a rustic feel to it. There were pictures everywhere of the forest and woods, and the colors of the furniture and bedding were all browns and greens.

It was all very quaint in its own way, all except for the creepy deer's head that hung directly over the door heading out to the deck. I kept feeling like it was staring at me every time I walked by it. In fact, I had to force myself not to look up at it once everything was unloaded and unpacked when Chris and I headed walked under it on our way down to the dock. My sister had decided she wanted to tag along with us as well and I noticed she too avoided the weird gaze of the deer as she walked out the door behind us.

The deck itself was lined with bright rainbow-colored Adirondack chairs and on the far corner of it near the stairs heading down towards the lake was the whirlpool, which felt quite hot to the touch. From the looks if it, it appeared it would fit all of us just fine and I was excited at the thought of sitting in it at night while staring at the stars.

"Please be careful!" shouted my mother who had peaked her head out the door, as we headed down the stairs.

"We will!" I shouted back.

"Hey, so did you use some power or something, back there at the diner?" My sister asked once we were far enough away.

"Yeah, I was reading the waitress's mind. She was totally in a bad spot in life. Oh, and I read yours too by accident."

"WHAT!" My sister was now the one turning red, obviously thinking I had heard something more personal than I actually did. *"I didn't kiss him I swear."*

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I only heard that you wished you had my powers and all the things you could do with them if you did."

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"Oh...well never mind then. Forgot what I just said." My sister said feeling overly embarrassed.

"No go on, tell us what you mean..." Chris said laughing.

"Anyways...so are you reading my mind right now?" Laura said quickly changing the subject.

"No, I turned the ability off back at the diner. It's not that fun hearing what everyone is thinking actually. Trust me."

We had reached the end of the dock and two benches sat across from each other there. Laura sat down on the one, while Chris and I on the other.

"So what signs haven't you figured out what they do yet?" Laura said inquisitively.

"Aries, Sagittarius, Pisces, Scorpio, and Aquarius." Chris quickly jumped in, knowing if I had responded, I would have activated the first one I said.

"You haven't tried Mom's sign yet? Cool! Can you try it now?" Laura said rather excitedly.

"Ummm, I don't know if that's a good idea right now given Andy's track record, but just curious, what is your mother's sign?" said Chris.

"She's a Sagittarius." WHOOPS. I spoke it without thinking. It was a bad habit of mine, as I often found myself responding for other people when I knew the answer.

"Ugh! Andy! You just activated the sign!"

"I don't feel any different."

"That's what you said when you activated Taurus."

"Do you notice anything weird at all?" My sister chimed in.

"Well, there is a really big zit on your right cheek. Does that count?"

"Really, there is?" My sister said as she frantically began feeling her face.

"No, I'm just kidding..."

"Jerk."

We all began laughing uncontrollably, completely forgetting for the moment about the Sagittarius sign being activated in me.

"So, are you hungry dear?"

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“Not really hon, I’m still full from the fish we had earlier.”

“You know, I think Maribel was flirting a little too much with you earlier today. She really ruffled my feathers!”

The voices were coming from behind me. At first I thought I had been hearing things while laughing about the fake zit on my sister, but as soon as I turned around and saw the two geese in the water nearby, I knew immediately what Sagittarius did.

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Chapter 25

“Oh, she’s harmless dear. You know you’re the only goose for me!”

“Uh huh. You’ve probably said that to all the pretty geese Jules.”

I couldn’t believe it, I really was hearing these two geese talk to each other. As I continued to listen to them, I had to chuckle as they started squabbling exactly like my parents did sometimes.

“Andy, what’s so funny and what exactly are you looking at anyway?” My sister asked inquisitively.

“I’m looking at these two geese right here and listening to them talk to each other. Well they’re not really talking right now, they’re actually bickering about some goose named Maribel who’s flirting with this one here whose name is actually Jules.” I said pointing at the male goose in the water below me.

“Seriously? That’s what all those squawks and hisses are about?” said Chris.

“Yeah, I think Jules girlfriend is a little upset.”

Laura then got up and quickly came over to see for herself.

“Betsy, did you hear that kid?”

The two geese were now looking up at me.

“Yes, but how’s that possible? Normally they only sound like a bunch of creatures making strange, loud noises.”

“Hey, you can understand what I’m saying?” I suddenly said to the two of them.

“Jules, is he talking to us?”

“I think so dear. This is soooo weird.”

“Umm, he-llo there?” said Jules a little coy.

“Hi. My name’s Andy.”

Chris and Laura were now looking at me with rather funny expressions.

“Why are you guys looking at me like that?” I said to them.

“Well we find it a little strange that we can understand you and vice versa.” Jules responded, obviously thinking I was talking to them.

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"Hold on a sec, I'm actually not talking to you two." I said politely to Betsy and Jules.

"Are you really speaking to those geese right now or are you just playing with us?" said my sister with a grin.

"I think Andy's talking to that girl next to him Jules, not us." Betsy said looking over at Jules.

"No, I'm not pulling your chain. I actually can understand these two geese. That one there is Betsy, and that one there is Jules." I said pointing to each of them.

"So how is it we're able to understand each other Andy?" said Jules vying for my attention.

"It's kind of hard to explain, let's just say I have some abilities that other human beings don't. Hey, and by the way, I've always wanted to know, why do you guys always hiss at us when we try to come near any of you?"

I knew it was kind of odd to ask such a question but it really was something I've always wanted to know.

"Well, let's see, you either are trying to hit us with your loud machines, or shoot us down with those weapons, or if by some chance you get close enough to any of us, none of you ever seem to be gentle with our feathers! And I take great care to look this darn good don't I dear!" Betsy said quite adamantly.

"You definitely do dear, you definitely do."

"Uh huh, I'm sure you're thinking about Maribel right now, that little floozy."

"What's a floozy?" I asked aloud while Chris and Laura kept prodding me to know the answer to my last question about why geese run away from us all the time.

"A floozy is someone who sleeps around." My sister answered quickly. *"And why would you want to know such a thing anyway?"*

"Well, they're starting to bicker again about this Maribel who I guess is someone that Betsy thinks sleeps around. But I honestly think she's just being a little jealous."

"I totally agree Andy!" said Jules.

"I'm not jealous! And you stay out of this Andy! This is between Jules and I. You shouldn't even be able to understand us anyway! Come on Jules, let's swim to the other side of the lake where we can have a little more privacy."

"But wait, don't you want to know more about why we can understand him?"

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“No, and stop trying to change the subject. I’m not done talking about Maribel because I see the way you look at her. Is there something going on between the two of you?”

“Ugh.” Jules groaned and with that the two swam away.

“So what happened?” said Chris. “What was the answer to your question?”

“Yeah, and how do they sound when they talk?” Laura said excitedly.

“They sound just like us and they really don’t like humans because we run over them on the road, we hunt them down in the air, and we’re never gentle with their feathers, as I guess they are pretty particular about that.”

“That’s what all that squawking was about?” Chris asked.

“Well that was part of it, but it all started with that whole thing about Maribel making Betsy jealous. I guess Maribel was overly flirting with Jules earlier today and has been for a while now.”

“Man, it sounds just like what real people go through sometimes.” Laura said with a big smile.

“Yeah, totally. You know, I have to say I like this ability the best so far. I think it’s going to come in handy for a lot of reasons, like when an animal is not feeling well. I’ll be able to totally figure out what its symptoms are!” I said fondly remembering Dr. Doolittle having the same ability in the movies.

“Sounds like one of many possibilities. So maybe we should go find some other animals to talk to and explore this ability a little more don’t you think?” said Chris.

“Is that your way of saying we’re going to go do some more training?” I said chuckling.

Chris grinned and with that, Laura ran back inside to let everyone know we were going to go for a walk. A few minutes later we were heading down the street we came in on, passing by other lake front homes one by one.

“Can you imagine living here year round? How cool would that be?” I said, as I imagined myself sitting in a hot tub night after night, soaking up the stars.

“I’m sure you’d get bored after awhile...” said Chris.

“You think?”

“I’m with Andy, I like it up here.” said Laura.

“Many things seem great at first, but after having it consistently, it’s common to want something more.”

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“Wow, you sound so wise. Way beyond your years.” Laura said with a little awe, but also with a little sarcasm to her voice.

“That’s why the Council chose me to be the Guardian.”

“Don’t let it go to your big head Chrissy!” I said with a smirk.

“Whatever Andrina!” Chris playfully said in return.

“Hey, how about those two dogs over there? Can you hear what they’re saying?” Laura said pointing at two German Shepherds in front of a home that looked like a mini White House.

“I don’t know, hold on a minute.”

I then walked up close enough to see if they were saying anything to each other.

“Joe, I don’t know what to do. I can’t take getting kicked anymore. I hurt all over.”

“Me neither, maybe we should run away Paul.”

“Yeah, but where would we go Joe? We’re too old now and if we end up at the pound, we’re probably going to die there.”

“I just don’t understand why we’re always getting so abused. We never do anything to deserve this kind of treatment...”

I started to feel really sad and wished I hadn’t heard what they were saying.

“What’s wrong Andy?” Laura asked, obviously noticing I was getting upset.

“We have to do something as these two German Shepherds are being physically abused by their owner! In fact, I’m going to do something about this right now!”

And with that I angrily headed to the front door of their house...

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Chapter 26

“Wait!” Chris yelled, as I was about to ring the doorbell of the large white house.

“WHAT?! I need to put a stop to this! These dogs are being abused and they don’t deserve it!” I said rather angrily.

“Hey Joe, did you just hear what that kid just said who’s at our front door right now?”

“Yeah how does he know we’re being abused anyway?”

“Don’t you think the more important question Joe is why we’re able to understand what he’s saying?”

“Ugh! You can understand me because I have a special gift ok?” I responded to the dogs feeling overly frustrated, as I headed off the front porch and over to them.

“What? Are they talking to you right now?” Chris asked, as he and Laura approached the dogs as well.

“Yeah, sort of. They are trying to figure out why they can communicate with me just like the geese were. And I’m beginning to realize that anytime I use this ability I’m going to have to explain it to whatever type of creature I’m talking to!”

“Man, he’s a little testy isn’t he Paul?”

“He sure is. Maybe he’s just a little backed up right now you know what I mean Joe?”

The two of them stared laughing, which to Laura and Chris sounded like rapid short barks.

“What’s with them?” said Laura pulling her hand back, thinking they were going to bite her.

“They’re making fun of me and thinking I’m constipated if you can believe that.”

“Well you are kind of acting like that right now Andy you know...” said Chris as he began to laugh along with Paul and Joe.

“Whatever! Look, I’m not backed up! Seriously I’m ticked that you two are being abused. I just want to give your owner a piece of my mind!”

“I wouldn’t do that if I was you.” said Paul.

“I’m with him on that one...” said Joe.

“Why?”

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“Because he’s dangerous.” Paul said putting his tail between his legs.

“You mean because he abuses you?”

“No, because he has this long pointed thing that has killed other animals. We’ve seen him do it.” Joe said, as he began to shake in fear.

I reached down to pet Joe, hoping somehow it may help him to calm down. I could see he obviously was really scared.

“You mean a rifle? Does it make a totally loud noise every time it goes off?” I asked.

“Uh huh...” said Joe.

“He sounds like he’s a hunter. Does he use the rifle to kill deer?”

“Yes. But he also points it at us when he’s really mad and that is usually what precedes him kicking us really hard.” Joe said, somewhat calmer, obviously enjoying the fact I was petting him.

Laura meanwhile was stroking Paul behind the ears, seeing it was helping him to remain calmer as well.

“Andy, ask them what makes their owner so angry?” said Chris while placing his hand on my back.

“It only happens after he drinks a number of these cans of this nasty smelling stuff.” Joe said in response to Chris’s question.

“Did you just understand what I asked?” Chris said.

“We sure did. It was like one second you were talking gibberish, and the next second we knew what you were asking.” Paul said answering for the two of them.

“Man, how cool is that. It must be because I had my hand on your back Andy.”

Laura then immediately placed her hand on my shoulder and blurted out the same question Chris had just asked about why their owner was so angry, obviously not having heard the answer Joe already gave us.

“So he’s a drunk then!” Laura said in disgust after Joe answered it again in the same way.

Laura and I had both seen our share of drunkenness in our own family a long time ago when my father battled alcoholism for a few years. Thankfully he found some program called Alcoholics Anonymous that really helped him and hasn’t touched a drop since.

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"If you mean him yelling, screaming, throwing things, falling down, and then taking it all out on us, then yes." Paul said in a very somber way.

"Where is he right now?" I asked, wondering why he hadn't come out into his front yard given the three of us had been spending all this time with his animals.

"He's asleep on the couch..." said Paul.

"You mean he's passed out, from drinking too much..." said Laura adamantly.

"Well if that's what you call what happens after drinking two dozen or so of those nasty smelling beverages then yes..." said Joe heatedly.

"Hey, have you guys even eaten anything today?" I asked, beginning to notice how undernourished they looked.

"We haven't had anything to eat since I think it was yesterday. Or was it the day before Joe?"

"It was the day before yesterday Paul. And don't remind me, I'm starving."

"This has got to stop Chris. We have to do something about this." I said feeling angry again.

"Andy, you know you can't rationalize with a drunk." Laura said reminding me of what it was like when my father used to drink.

"Well what do we do then?" I said looking at Chris truly hoping his skills at being a Guardian were going to provide the answer.

"We're going to take them back to the cabin with us right now." Chris said without blinking an eye.

"We're going to do what?" I said, thinking Chris would have come up with a better plan than this. *"And what do think our parents are going to think about this? And how are we going to convince them that these two guys need help anyway?"* I asked, wondering how this plan could possibly work.

"We're going to have them call the local Humane Society and have them do an investigation."

"Please don't do that." Paul begged. *"They're probably only going to take us to the pound and dogs our age rarely leave there!"*

"I don't think they will do that. The Humane Society is not the pound and I will personally make sure we find a better solution than the two of you ending up in a dog pound." Chris said with confidence.

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“Hey Andy, maybe Mom and Dad will let us keep them?” Laura said excitedly.

“Look, they’re not even our dogs and we’re acting like they are. First things first. We need to get them some food and better care immediately alright?” I said in a serious tone.

“I absolutely agree...” said Chris.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right...” said Laura nodding her head in approval.

“You think it’s safe to trust them Joe?” said Paul feeling slightly nervous.

“I trust this kid. I mean he does have this weird ability to communicate with us. That’s something I don’t think we should take lightly don’t you think Paul?”

“Honestly, as long as I can get some food, I don’t care where they take us at this point Joe.”

And with that, they stood up somewhat slowly, obviously weakened from being malnourished, and were ready to follow us back to the cabin.

“So what do you think of your new ability now Andy?” said Chris as we headed down the sidewalk in the direction of where we were staying.

“I think I’m going to hold off from answering that until we get these guys some help.” I responded somewhat glumly, knowing that until they got some help I wasn’t going to feel any better.

“Hey, I just want to say thanks Andy, from the both of us...” said Paul.

“For what?” I asked curiously.

“For caring about two old dogs. We haven’t been cared for in a good long time.”

“Well you deserve it and as I said before, no one deserves to be abused, humans nor animals.”

“Not everyone feels like you though Andy.” Joe chimed in.

“Yeah, sadly, I know that all too well now...”

I walked the rest of the way in silence back to the cabin with my heart feeling extremely heavy because of what I had learned about Paul and Joe. It really made me wonder how many other animals in this world go through this type of terrible treatment every day. Laura and Chris on the other hand spent the rest of the walk back occasionally touching me to talk with Paul and Joe, asking things like what they liked to eat and what fun they liked to have.

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When we finally reached the porch stairs of our cabin, I began to feel a little afraid, only because I honestly didn't know how Chris was going to explain any of this to our parents...

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Chapter 27

"Who's dogs are those?" said my father when we reached the top of the porch stairs. Both of our parents had been sitting in those colorful Adirondack chairs, obviously observing the breathtaking views from there.

I looked over at Chris to see if he was going to handle it given he had been the one with the master plan.

"I don't think this is going to go so well Joe..." said Paul.

"Try and have a little faith Paul ok?" said Joe.

"That's much easier said than done Joe..." said Paul.

"I know Paul; I know..."

"It's ok guys, you know we're going to do our best to help the two of you..." I said hoping it would reassure them.

"Well?" my father asked again. *"Who's dogs are they and why are they whimpering so much?"*

I was about to respond when thankfully Chris suddenly spoke.

"They are a neighbor's dog and are being seriously abused and malnourished."

"And, how do you know this?" said Chris's mother.

"Well for starters, take one look at them. Do they look healthy to you? They are starving and have bruises all over them." Chris said rather adamantly.

Both mine and Chris's parents then came over to take a closer look at the two overly neglected German Shepherds.

"I feel kind of uncomfortable with all this attention Joe..." said Paul feeling concerned.

"Yeah, I know what you mean Paul. I don't like strange adults touching me either." said Joe in a somber tone.

"Look guys, we really are only trying to help, but we need our parents to understand for that to happen ok?" I said trying once again to reassure them that everything was going to be ok.

"They're a little upset aren't they?" said Chris's dad observing that the dogs were making more whimpering and slight growling noises.

"Yeah, you don't know the half of it." I said.

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“What do you mean Andy?” said my mother chiming in.

“Well for starters, it appears as if their owner is a serious alcoholic and is kicking them repeatedly when he gets drunk!” I said heatedly.

I glanced at my father and saw him cringe. I’m sure he was relating to the effects that alcoholism had on him, although I’m grateful to say he never physically abused my sister nor I.

“I still don’t understand. How is it that you know all this?” said Chris’s mother.

Before Chris even had a chance to respond, I did exactly what I knew he didn’t want me to do.

“We talked with another neighbor when they saw us petting them in their front yard. They said it was sad what those two dogs are put through on a daily basis and how mean and drunk their owner always is. I felt so bad after hearing that that I convinced Chris and Laura to take them back here hoping you would help us call the local Humane Society.”

Chris glared at me obviously a little perturbed that I ended up telling another lie again. I shrugged my shoulders at him feeling like there was nothing else any of us could have said. I mean it’s not like either of our parents would understand I could communicate with animals right?

“We really shouldn’t be meddling with another person’s animals Andy.” said my mother who never has been a big fan of dogs.

“So you want them to go back to their owner and not be fed and continue to be kicked!” said Laura somewhat angrily.

“Watch that tone young lady!” said my mother glaring at my sister.

“While I agree with you Pam, I do think we need to do something. These dogs definitely aren’t well. And from the looks of it, I’m not sure if they can keep on going much longer being treated like this...” said Chris’s father.

“Pam, I think Frank is right. We really should do something about this...” said my own father.

“Ok, well why don’t you and I go inside Linda and find the phone number to call the local Humane Society while the rest of you stay out here with them.” said my mother pointing at the nervous and weakly shaking dogs.

“See guys, everything is going to be ok.” I said calmly petting the both of them.

“So they’re going to get us some help Andy?” said Joe.

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“And some food?” said Paul.

“They’re going to go call the local Humane Society guys. And I’m going to go get you some food right now ok?”

“Well so far we’ve been treated far better than the last year of our lives that’s for sure right Paul?” Joe responded sounding a little upbeat.

“Absolutely!” said Paul sounding upbeat as well.

Once I got my father’s permission, Chris and I went inside and grabbed two large cereal bowls and filled them with a bunch of cold cuts and a few apples that I cut up into smaller pieces. We also filled two other bowls with water as well. Meanwhile, I could hear Chris’s mother and my own downstairs on a speakerphone explaining the situation to whomever was on the other end.

It didn’t take Paul and Joe very long at all to devour the food and water we brought them, but not wanting them to get sick, we all decided it was best to wait for the Humane Society to show up and let us know what to do. About an hour later after showing them plenty of love and affection, a van pulled into the driveway and a police car just in front of it. After directing them up onto the porch, we all discovered that each was already well aware of Paul and Joe’s repeated abuse. It appeared that some of the neighbors had previously reported it several times and that their owner, whose name was Carl, had received a number of citations for the constant abuse and neglect. And as much as hearing all that wasn’t a funny thing at all, I had to give Chris a cocky grin knowing my lie wasn’t as much of a lie after all.

“So what happens now?” said Chris who had been relatively silent for most of the past hour.

“We will take them into our care now and ensure they get the proper rest and nutrition they need.” said the lady from the Human Society. *“Don’t worry, they won’t be going back to Carl anymore. This was his final straw.”*

“But what happens after that though? I mean who will become their owner now?” I asked while Joe and Paul both looked at me with a very serious stare.

“That all depends on if anyone chooses to adopt them. Until then, we will keep them safely in our care.”

“We’ll adopt them!” my sister suddenly blurted out quite excitedly.

“Laura, you know Mom will never go for that.” I said solemnly, noticing my father shaking his head and agreeing.

“You don’t know that!”

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“Andy, what’s going on?” Joe said nervously.

“The Humane Society is going to take you into their care now and get you better. You’re not going to go back to Carl ever again.”

“But what happens after that?” said Paul equally as nervous.

“Hopefully you will then be adopted and have a much more loving home.” I said feeling a few tears welling up in my eyes.

“Hopefully?” said Paul worriedly.

“You know what they do with dogs that don’t get adopted, especially at our age right?” said Joe.

“Do you put to sleep animals that don’t get adopted?” I immediately asked the woman from the Humane Society.

“Only in rare cases son, when an animal is either very sick or very dangerous.” she answered.

“Hey, I think it’s going to be ok guys and I’m going to work on seeing if my parents will somehow allow us to adopt them.” I said feeling not very confident of that, while the woman from the Humane Society placed leashes on them and began to lead them down the porch stairs.

“Andy please come visit us...” yelled Joe.

“And don’t let us die there...” yelled Paul being a little dramatic, but I understood where he was coming from.

I then watched from the porch as they were loaded into the Humane Society’s van. As it slowly pulled away while the police car headed for Carl’s house, I suddenly felt completely overwhelmed. Without warning, I burst into a pile of tears and felt totally powerless. It was the first time I had felt that way since emerging out of the woods back in the summer and found my home was no longer occupied by my family. But what I was really feeling most powerless over at this very moment was the fact that I had so many abilities with my Zodiac crystal, yet none of them could guarantee that Paul and Joe were going to be ok...

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Chapter 28

I spent the rest of the day feeling pretty bad inside about Paul and Joe. I knew there was nothing more I could have done for them, yet I still wished I could have ensured their safety somehow. And as much as I enjoyed the Sagittarius ability, I had decided to turn it off so that I didn't have to deal with the possibility of having any more difficult encounters with another animal.

Unfortunately, I also no longer felt as excited as I had been upon arriving to the log cabin and nothing seemed to be cheering me up now. Not the fire we had roaring in the fireplace, nor the cookout we did on the grill later, and not even a long soak in the hot tub out under the stars made me feel any better. I just couldn't seem to take my mind off of those two old dogs no matter what I did. Thankfully, after playing a few rounds of a game called Catch Phrase towards the end of the evening, I finally did manage to at least laugh a little.

By the time we had all agreed to turn in for the night, it was well past 11pm. I was thoroughly exhausted, more mentally and emotionally, than physically. Chris and I had talked for a short time, mostly about me not beating myself up with the whole Paul and Joe thing, but it wasn't long before I had found my eyes getting too heavy to keep open. As I finished pondering the day's events in silence, I soon fell into a deep sleep drifting into one dream after another of me dealing with a long line of animals all coming to seek my help.

Knock Knock Knock.

I slowly came to wondering if I was hearing things? Did I even sleep? I still felt totally exhausted.

"Come in." Chris said sounding quite alert already.

"Good morning boys. I have some pretty good news to tell you."

I opened my eyes to see Chris's Mom standing there.

"What is it that couldn't have waited until we were both awake a little more Mom?" said Chris with a huge yawn.

"Well, I thought you might want to know that Paul and Joe have already been adopted by a wonderful couple."

"WHAT? REAALLY!" I said as I rubbed my eyes.

"We got a call this morning from the Humane Society, probably because of how concerned they saw you all were about Paul and Joe. It seems as if their owner relinquished all ownership given the long list of allegations he was facing once again, which made it possible for them to be adopted right away. And ironically, this very morning, a couple came in that had been on an overnight stay in their RV at a local

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campground and were looking to find a new companion for their Golden Retriever. I think their names were Jym and DW or something like that and supposedly they immediately fell in love with the two German Shepherds. So it sounds like they are going to be just fine guys. Isn't that great news?"

"That's really cool Mom, thanks for letting us know."

"No problem and you might want to start getting up, as breakfast will be in about 30 minutes." She said as she closed the door.

While I was definitely happy to hear the good news of Paul and Joe's fate, I had truly hoped somehow that either my parents or Chris's would have been the ones to adopt them. Regardless, I was actually relieved to know they were now in good hands. I decided it was probably as good of a time as any given the news we had just received to get out of my funk and enjoy the rest of our weekend getaway. So I quickly grabbed my pillow and proceeded to slam it into Chris's face, at which point we ended up in a huge playful battle for about 10 minutes. Ultimately I gave him the victory when he pinned me down at the end and let out a huge fart on top of me.

"Just you wait." I said as Chris left the bedroom to go take his shower.

"Uh huh. Whatever. I won. Ha Ha."

I threw on my sweatshirt and sweatpants, feeling a lot more awake and a lot better, and headed out into the main room where I saw another fire was already roaring once again in the fireplace. The smell of bacon cooking was already beginning to waft through the air. My stomach began to grumble as I grabbed a bottle of water and proceeded to sit down in front of the warm and dancing flames of the fire.

"Don't get too close Andy." My mother said from the kitchen.

"I know, I know." I said with a deep sigh. "Hey, so what's on our agenda for today anyway?"

"Well as far as I know you and Chris are going to be hiking somewhere with your father and his, while the rest of us go shopping."

"We're going shopping today?" Laura said excitedly, as she emerged from her room and entered the kitchen.

"Yes, there's some outlets nearby, does that sound good?"

"Well of course. Maybe I can finally find that Coach purse I've been looking for."

"So where is Dad anyway, Mom?" I asked after noticing neither he nor Chris's father were around.

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“Your father and Chris’s went to the local tourist’s office to find out about all the hiking trails that were available locally. They should be back any minute now.”

I hadn’t honestly been on a decent hike in a good while so I was rather looking forward to it. In fact, the last time I had really spent any decent amount of time in the wilderness was when I had discovered that Zodiac cave. Hiking was without a doubt one of my most favorite things to do in life and I was more than excited now to see which trail our fathers had in store for us today.

About ten minutes later they returned with a few maps but wouldn’t say much about the one they chose, other than it was up some local mountain. Not too long afterwards we all sat down at the big table and started feasting on piles of cheddar cheese scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, granola pancakes, and orange juice. It was definitely a great start to the day.

After everyone was done stuffing themselves and the dishes were fully cleaned and put away, Chris and I were instructed to pack up our backpacks with some bottled water and snacks, something to eat for lunch, and anything else we might want to bring along like my pair of binoculars I had brought on the weekend trip. Our fathers did the same with their own backpacks and soon we had said our goodbyes to the would-be shoppers and were off in the car heading for some unknown destination.

“So where are we headed today Dad? Did you find a good hike?” I asked curiously.

“I think so and I’m sure the two of you won’t be disappointed because I hear there’s a great view at the top.”

I couldn’t wait, as I always loved seeing those spectacular views after a long hike.

It took approximately 15 minutes to drive to our destination, which was nothing more than a large parking lot and some small bathroom facilities for people to use. None of us needed to go so instead we walked over to the sign that said “TRAIL TO” with an arrow pointing ahead and below it a list of the possible hikes to take from there. I was glad my father said we were doing the first one, which said “BUCK MT. SUMMIT”, as it had the shortest length of 3.3 miles. The others had much greater lengths ranging anywhere from just over 5 miles to almost 17.

Before we headed onto the yellow-marked trail, we all decided it might be best to have someone take our picture. Chris’s father then asked a fellow hiker who had just emerged from the woods if he would be open to doing that for us. He was more than happy to oblige and I of course made a funny face while it was being taken. It wasn’t until after we began our hike did Chris tell me he managed to put those stupid bunny ears above my head in the same picture. I tried to trip him after that, but of course got immediately scolded for it by my Dad.

At first the trail seemed quite easy, heading off in a slightly upwards ascent. But it wasn’t long before we found ourselves heading up much steeper inclines. Each of us managed to slip a few times here and there on some rocks along the way, but thankfully none of us

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ever fell completely down. After about 45 minutes or so of heavy hiking, I felt like I was running out of steam and asked if we could take a break.

“Come on Andy, we’re almost there!” Chris said in between breaths.

“No, I agree with Andy, let’s take a break.” Chris’s father said sounding out-of-breath himself.

“Why don’t we all have a snack and some water. We still have a good 45 minutes to go before we hit the summit.” My father said, as he found a nearby boulder to sit on.

After we all found a place to sit down, each of us quickly gulped down a bottle of water. I took a moment to look around as I drank my own and noticed the beautiful array of thick canopy surrounding us. Most of the leaves had already fully changed and fallen to the ground, but a few trees who still had theirs seemed to be enjoying the relatively warm day for the middle of November. If I had to guess, I’d say it was probably right around 50 degrees, which I felt was making it quite tempting to take my sweatshirt off given how hot I felt. But for the moment I decided I was way more interested in finding something to eat in my backpack. As I fished in my bag for one of my snack bars, it suddenly was eerily silent other than the rustle of the leaves.

“What was that?!” said Chris breaking the silence.

I hadn’t heard anything and assumed he was just trying to play a joke on me.

“I’m not falling for it this time Chris...”

“No seriously, I just heard something.”

“Yeah, probably one of your farts.” I said laughing.

CRACK.

“Now that I heard. But it’s probably just some tree branch that fell down with the wind.” I said shrugging my shoulders and taking a bite out of my Larabar. But then suddenly I heard some strange sounds coming from behind me that I couldn’t immediately identify.

As I turned around to see where it was coming from, I noticed everyone else had already identified its source and the expression on their faces said it all.

There standing not more than 20 feet away was a pretty good-sized black bear staring us down and not looking very friendly at all...

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Chapter 29

“ANDY, don’t make any sudden moves...” said my father who was already doing his best to heed to his own words.

I looked over to Chris and he nodded in silence as if to tell me it was ok to use my Zodiac abilities. Meanwhile the bear continued to make its strange noises, some of which even sounded like growls and snorts.

“Sagittarius...” I whispered the sign as silently as possible, hoping neither my father or Chris’s heard me.

“I NEED YOUR HELP ANDY!”

The words were coming from the black bear who seemed to be in a good amount of distress. With the communication ability now activated, I could tell the bear was female.

“What’s wrong? And how do you know my name?”

“BE QUIET ANDY! PLEASE DON’T SAY ANOTHER WORD!” Chris’s father said, obviously frightened.

“I don’t have time to explain, will you follow me? I promise I won’t hurt you” said the female bear.

It was strange enough for me to be seeing a bear in the woods while hiking, but even stranger hearing one actually talk to me. Yet somehow, I knew I needed to try to help her. But how was I going to follow her and explain it to my father or Chris’s? Then it hit me and I suddenly knew what I needed to do.

After nodding approvingly to the bear, letting her know I would follow her, I looked back over at Chris and mouth the words, “I got this.”

“Sagittarius. Libra.”

WHOOSH.

Time then abruptly stood still. Chris and his father, as well as my own all became like those creepy mannequins from a clothing store. It was really rather funny to see them each in this state. Part of me wanted for a brief moment to play a joke on them by moving their hands and arms into odd positions, but I decided against it given the urgency of the present situation.

I then walked towards the female bear and it almost appeared as if she was a huge stuffed animal, like one of those you could win at a carnival for the ring toss game that one rarely ever gets around the tops of those large glass bottles.

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As soon as I reached her, I quickly deactivated and reactivated Libra while my hand was firmly placed on her coarse fur, instantly watching as she came alive from her frozen stance. I looked back at Chris and our father's and noticed they were still frozen. And although I knew I couldn't communicate to her in this zodiac state, I moved my head in a way as if to signify I was ready to follow her. Somehow she seemed to understand because we began walking away from the trail I was just on, away from my closest friend and our fathers, and away from anything that felt essentially safe.

I honestly had no idea how far we were going to go in the woods, how I would ever find my way back, and whether I truly could trust this bear. But somehow my footsteps kept moving forward at a fast pace behind the bear who was moving rather quickly. At one point, I was almost having to jog to keep up.

And then I saw what the source of her distress was as we approached what appeared to be her den. There in front of it was her mate in mid-stance, pawing at a huge boulder that had somehow fallen in front of its entrance. It immediately became apparent that having Libra activated was only causing her more distress when she saw he wasn't moving. It was then I knew I needed to un-pause time, as much as that was only going to cause great alarm to my father and Chris's.

"Libra."

WHOOSH.

Suddenly I could hear tiny little squeals of fear coming from inside the small cave, which I could only amass was from their offspring. When the male bear turned and saw my presence, he began to charge, obviously quite angry. The female bear unexpectedly jumped directly in front of me, guarding me as if one of her own. After listening to their various grunts and snorts, I watched as he eventually backed off and returned to pawing at the boulder unsuccessfully. She then turned around and began uttering some of those strange sounds to me.

"Sagittarius." I quickly enabled the communication sign so that I could understand her, really wishing at that moment I could use two abilities at once. Unfortunately, because I couldn't, I was quite sure my father was getting overly frantic right now, but hopefully Chris would somehow be able to diffuse the situation.

"Andy, can you help us? Our baby is on the other side of that huge boulder."

"I think I can, but I have to know, how do you know my name and how could you possibly have known who I was in the middle of these woods?"

"The whole woods have been talking about you today Andy. We heard a rumor yesterday from a pair of squirrels about a boy who was able to communicate with animals. When we asked them how a thing such as that could be true, they said they had caught wind of two geese who supposedly spoke with him and learned his name was Andy."

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“WELL ARE YOU GOING TO HELP OR ARE YOU JUST GOING TO SIT THERE AND TALK ABOUT NOTHING IMPORTANT!” said the angry father, still pawing at the boulder, hoping somehow it was going to move for him to reach his crying cub.

“VERNON, RELAX! Andy, can you help us somehow?”

“Yes, but I won’t be able to understand you for a few moments while I do ok?”

I then deactivated Sagittarius as she nodded and then activated the only ability I knew could help.

“TAURUS.”

As I proceeded rather cautiously over to the small cave’s entrance, I looked at Vernon who growled at me and then slowly backed away. The boulder that had fallen in front of it was much bigger than the one I had picked up and thrown during my training days with Chris, but I was confident it wasn’t going to pose a problem for me. But instead of me trying to pick it up this time, I decided to use a small crack in the lower left corner to move it. After placing both of my hands in it, I could feel a tiny tongue licking them from inside the den causing me to smile a little.

“You’re going to be ok little one.” I said while slowing pulling the rock towards me. In a few seconds, I had created enough space for the small cub to escape into the arms of Vernon. And as the bears began to comfort their young one, I crawled into the cave and completely pushed the boulder out from the opening and down into a small gully nearby. Little did I know there were a number of birds in the trees above, as well as a number of squirrels and other forest creatures nearby, all watching intently. Each of whom scattered away as the thunderous noise of the boulder came to an abrupt halt.

“Taurus. Sagittarius.”

“Oh Martha, you’re safe now pumpkin. No need to worry anymore. Andy saved you.” said Vernon to his small cub who was crying. *“And I’m sorry Delilah for getting so angry...”*

“Oh Vernon, it’s fine, but one of these days you’re hopefully going to start trusting me a little more.” Delilah said slightly sarcastically.

“I know hon; I know...”

Martha then left her father’s side and slowly approached me.

“Thank you Mr. Andy for saving me.”

“It’s no problem little one. I’m just glad you’re ok.” I crouched down and gently touched the hair on her, which felt incredibly soft.

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“So Delilah, how did you know I was that boy the rest of the woods seemed to be talking about?”

“To be honest I’ve always had this inner guidance about things.”

“You mean an intuition?”

“Something like that, or maybe one might say I had a gift from our Creator.”

“So how did that lead you to me?”

“Well, as best as I can put it, I kept hearing a voice within me that said to head off in the direction I found you. Vernon wasn’t all too happy with me though when I decided to follow my gift.”

“Gifts, schmifts, you’re just lucky I say” grunted Vernon, apparently not a believer in her ability.

“Scoff as you may Vern, eventually I did run into him on that hiking trail by following that luckiness of mine. And when I did Andy, I began trying to communicate to you saying your name and hoping it was you and that you would understand me.”

“Wow, that’s pretty cool.” I said as continued to rub Martha’s soft fur, who clearly was enjoying all the attention.

“So then is it true Mom?” said Martha looking over to her mother.

“Is what true?” I said sounding clueless to what Martha was speaking of.

“The prophecy.”

“What prophecy?”

“Long ago, there was a story passed along from a Native American who had similar abilities to you Andy.” Delilah said. *“He spoke of a crystal that gave him his great abilities and was blessed upon him by some Divine Beings. And that one day his crystal would reach the hands of a young boy who would have a great mission, even greater than his. One that would help unite the world in greater peace and love.”*

“Are you serious???”

“Why would I make something like that up?”

“What about the rest of the prophecy Mom? You didn’t tell him the rest of it.”

“Let’s not overwhelm him anymore than he looks right now ok Martha?”

“No please tell me. I want to know...”

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“Well if you insist, the other part of the story is that there was also another crystal, equal in power to the one the Native American had, but guided by the forces of darkness. And anyone who possessed it would always find the light-based crystal and attempt to extinguish it and its wielder...”

For once I became totally speechless and felt something I hadn't felt to this depth since discovering the crystal.

Terror...and lots of it...

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Chapter 30

I was definitely disturbed with the story I had just heard from Delilah and I really wanted to ask some more questions about it, but I knew I needed to return as soon as possible to wherever Chris and our fathers were. As I headed back in the direction from which I came, she thanked me for my help and wished me good luck, while I vaguely heard Vernon say something along the lines of “Good riddance.” I’m not sure he would know what gratitude was if it smacked him dead in the face I thought as I made my way back through the thick forest.

The thought of someone possessing a crystal equal in power to my own, but powered by dark forces seriously concerned me. But at the moment, I was feeling far more concerned about how I was going to explain my sudden disappearing act. Hopefully Chris had found some way to reassure our fathers, seeing how I had been gone for at least 30 minutes, maybe more.

It seemed to take far longer getting back to the hiking trail than the time it took to reach Delilah’s den. I guess the swift sprint I took there was much quicker than I had thought. By the time I found the actual spot where we had taken our last hiking break, there was no one there.

Where could they have gone?

I honestly didn’t know whether it was best to head back down the mountain, remain here, or hike to the top. If I were Chris, what would he have done after I vanished? Ugh, I have no idea! Wait, maybe I could find an animal nearby who could tell me where they went?

I looked around, including in the trees above me, but saw no one nearby to ask.

Crap!

In sheer frustration, I shouted out into the air, hoping someone might hear me...

“Does anyone know where my friend and our fathers are?!”

I felt kind of stupid after that. I mean who was going to hear me, other than possibly some other hikers, of which I saw none nearby.

“Hello there!” I heard a tiny voice come out of nowhere and looked around, but saw no one.

“Down here!” The voice said.

I looked down to see a tiny chipmunk looking straight up at me.

“You’re the one everyone in the woods is talking about! The one human being we can all talk to!”

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It was rather funny listening to the chipmunk talk, because on some level it spoke like it was on mega doses of caffeine, rapidly speeding through its words.

“I’m not sure if that’s a good thing that everyone is talking about me my little friend, but yes, I guess that’s me.”

“You’re looking for the people you were hiking with right?”

“Yes, do you know where they went?”

“Sure, they headed further up the mountain, probably to the top.”

“Wow, that’s a huge relief to know. What’s your name anyway?”

“I’m Samuel, but you can call me Sam.”

“Well, I’m Andy, and as much as I’d like to stay and chat, I gotta run and find my hiking companions ok?”

“No problem, it was nice to meet you Andy, good luck!” I watched as he quickly scampered away and out of sight.

I knew it would take me too long to hike up to the top, especially given how tired I felt, but there was one way I could get there much faster. I knew I could use Capricorn to teleport myself to the top, but since I had never been there, how could I envision it in my head.

Could it be possible that this Zodiac sign might also work by just stating where I wanted to go?

It was worth a try at least. So after deactivating Sagittarius, I looked around to make sure no one was watching and then said the words.

“Buck Mountain Summit! Capricorn!” I said as I thought about Chris and our fathers wandering around the top of the mountain looking for me.

VAVOOM...

The vortex rapidly appeared and pulled me in. For a brief moment, I felt a little fearful where it was going to take me, but before I had a chance to really worry about it, it spit me out on top of the mountain. And there not more than 100 yards away were Chris and both of our Dads, who were all in the process of shouting my name at the top of their lungs.

“ANDYYYY!”

“ANNNDYYYY!”

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Thankfully they had their backs turned to me and no one else seemed to be around either. I began to wonder if this sign also had a built-in ability to teleport me without being seen by anyone. I didn't have much time to ponder the thought though as Chris had already turned around and seen me.

"THERE HE IS!!!"

They immediately all ran over to me and my Dad proceeded to give me a huge hug.

"What's that for Dad?"

"I thought you were dead!"

"I told you he was ok and probably just went exploring on his own." said Chris, which actually was the truth.

"One second you were there, and the next you were gone. I thought that bear had taken you away."

My Dad grabbed me and gave me another huge hug.

"Ok, ok, I'm fine Dad. And anyway, I'm too skinny for a bear to enjoy for a meal" I said with a chuckle.

"Just don't do that again. We need to stick together in the mountains when hiking, as you never know what you'll run into! By the way, did you actually chase after that bear?"

"Yeah, it went running away and I was a little too curious to see where it went."

"That wasn't too bright son." said Chris's father.

I looked over at Chris and winked, knowing at least I was still telling the truth.

We spent about an hour at the top of the summit after that walking around, enjoying a lunch, and taking some pictures. I told Chris when I got the chance about everything that had happened, including the prophecy of the dark crystal. He told me not to worry about it and said it probably is just some fiction-based tale. I wasn't so sure though, but I made the decision to let it go for now.

By the time we made it down the mountain, the sun was starting to set. I could tell we were all pretty exhausted because no one was saying much of anything. After a quick visit to the bathroom facility, we hopped in the car and were headed back to the cabin.

I kind of hoped that the rest of our weekend getaway was going to go a lot smoother. We still had another full day here in the Adirondacks and so far things had been totally stressful with learning a new Zodiac ability, dealing with Paul and Joe, as well as the whole encounter with Delilah, her trapped cub, and of course then there was that prophecy she warned me about.

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The ride back seemed to take forever, probably because of how tired I was. On the way there, Chris and I agreed that the hot tub sounded like a great idea to soak our aching legs. When we finally pulled into the driveway, I was so ready to relax and do nothing more than simply enjoy those hot bubbling waters on the deck.

As I jumped out of the car and bounded up the stairs behind Chris, I suddenly felt a terrible sense of dread within and couldn't quite shake the feeling that someone was watching me...

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Chapter 31

Thankfully the rest of the holiday weekend getaway proved to be much more relaxing. Other than playing some games, sitting by the fire or in the hot tub, walking around the lake, and going out to eat on our last night there, things were uneventful, of which I was totally grateful.

I had kept all of my Zodiac powers in check, deciding not to explore them any further, as I didn't want to have any more disruptions or frustrations that might have caused me not to have a good time. Unfortunately, I still continued to feel at unease though, not only with the prophecy Delilah had told me, but also with the feeling that someone really was watching me. But maybe I was just being overly paranoid.

Regardless, we had stopped on our drive home at the same diner from our way up and I was glad to see the waitress there who I had helped. She actually greeted me with a big hug and was glad to see me as well. I was so happy to see her smile as much as she did while we were there and it definitely became one of the bright notes for the trip that's for sure.

But oddly enough, I had noticed something strange there while eating another burger and fries. An average-sized middle-aged man sitting at the counter, consuming nothing more than a cup of coffee, had stared far too much in our direction the entire time. But what made that even more uncomfortable was when each time his gaze met mine, I felt this icy feeling go up my spine and my head begin to ache.

I guess that's why I was rather relieved when we left and I was safely back in the car heading home, the remainder of which I fell asleep. And other than a small snack and a few hours of watching reruns on television once we were back at our house, the trip away came to a close with some much needed peace and quiet.

For some reason my first morning heading back to school after the holiday trip felt very weird though. All the events that had taken place up at Lake George had made it seem like I had been gone for much longer than I actually was. Even the walk I was presently on to the bus stop felt weird, as it appeared to take forever to get there. I'm sure part of that was due to the temperatures hovering around the freezing mark and the noticeable high winds making that feel even lower. It felt good to see Chris though when I finally arrived there, as it helped me to quickly snap out of my reflections from the trip and the slight doldrums I was feeling inside.

"What's up chicken butt?" Chris said.

"Not much Chrissy." I said with a chuckle.

"Whatever Andrina." Chris responded in laughter.

"Feels weird going back to school doesn't it?" I said as I could hear the bus coming up the hill.

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“Yeah totally. I thought it was just me.”

“Wouldn’t it be great if I could somehow speed up time and we could both be on the bus ride home.”

The bus had now arrived and opened its doors. Chris and I were the first ones on and headed towards a seat near the middle.

“Who knows maybe that’s one of your abilities you haven’t tapped into yet” Chris said once we had sat down and were out of earshot from everyone else.

“Yeah, that would be something, that’s for sure...” I said thinking about how I’d love to skip several of my classes, especially Social Studies, which I always found to be extremely boring. *“Hey, so did anything exciting happen since you got home last night?”*

“Not really, just vegged I guess.”

“Me neither. But I’m kind of dreading school today.”

“I can only imagine given everything that happened to you on our trip. But I’m sure you’ll feel a lot better by lunch.”

“Yeah hopefully...”

We spent the rest of the bus ride talking about plans for the upcoming weekend and Chris mentioned he wanted to continue my training. I had four Zodiac symbols I hadn’t tried out yet and although I was excited to see what they could do, I still had some fear of the unknown given some of my previous experiences with some of the other signs.

“Hey, I’ll catch up with you at lunch.” Chris said once the bus had arrived at school and we had entered the front doors.

“Ok, see you then.” I said heading towards my homeroom while he headed off to his.

While it was great that Chris was my closest friend, it kind of stunk that we didn’t get to see each other much at school. Other than lunch and PE, we had totally opposite schedules. But I must say that I was glad that kid Trevor wasn’t in any of my classes either. Actually he was in the 8th grade along with most of his friends, except there was one kid in my class who did hang out with him, and occasionally tried to be just like him. He was the one who had also called me a freak during attendance on my first day back at school. I was glad that he had only done it that one time though.

After today’s roll call was done, our schedule began with Science. There we did several cool experiments with fire showing how they can burn in different colors. Science was next followed by foreign language, which I was attempting to learn Spanish. Today I was surprised to learn from our teacher that not too long from now, Spanish might be spoken far more frequently than English in our country. After our language instruction ended, then came the dreaded Social Studies. There we continued to talk about the American

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Revolution and half the time I found myself dozing off. I was more than glad the teacher hadn't seen any of that though.

When lunch finally arrived, I was starving. Today I had chicken fingers and tator tots, some green beans, a cookie, and a carton of milk while Chris had brought his own lunch and was eating bologna.

"How do you eat that anyway?" I said to Chris as he took a big bite out of his bright pink sandwich.

"Eat what? Bologna?" Chris responded with a slightly puzzled look.

"Yeah, it tastes so gross and do you even know what's in it?"

"Not really, but ask me if I care because I totally like it!" Chris said as he took another large bite with a smile.

"Well it's your stomach, not mine. Anyway, you know we got PE together after this right?"

"Yup. I wonder what fun we'll be in store for us there today." Chris said sarcastically, as he wasn't a fan of PE, much like I wasn't with social studies. But ironically Social Studies was his most favorite class.

"Who knows? But since it's so cold outside, I'm sure it will end up being something done in the gym."

We spent the rest of lunch continuing to talk about my Zodiac training. He wanted me to try Aquarius next and we made plans to do that on Saturday near the small pond in the woods behind his house.

By the time PE arrived, I could see the dread in Chris's eyes. We had already changed into our gym clothes, which was shorts and t-shirts, when a whistle abruptly pierced the air.

"Ok everyone, let's circle up. Today we're going to have a little basketball tournament so let's not waste any time and start picking some teams." Mr. Walsh said cheerfully.

"Yeah...." said Chris sarcastically.

"What's that Chris?" Mr. Walsh said obviously having heard Chris.

"Nothing sir."

"That's what I thought. How about you be one of the captains Chris along with John, Melissa, and Vickie."

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I watched as Chris rolled his eyes, especially when he discovered he got to pick last. Vickie was first, followed by John, then Melissa, and finally him. I was a little bummed when Melissa chose me for her team as I had really hoped to be on Chris's team.

We played five of five games on the two smaller courts in the gym where the winners would end up playing each other and the losers the same. Games were to eleven with each basket counting as one point. We easily won our first game as did Chris's team. I felt a little nervous as my team stepped onto the court ready to face them. This would be the first time Chris and I had been on opposing sides of anything.

"Good luck." Chris said. *"You'll need it."*

"Uh huh. We'll see about that." I said with a serious face, even though I wanted to laugh.

It was a close game, with the score being neck and neck the entire time. Something or should I say someone was really starting to get to me though during the game. That kid who had called me a freak in homeroom on the first day was also on Chris's team and he kept taunting me every time I had the ball, acting much like Trevor.

He had just missed a layup with the score currently being tied at 10-10 when I caught the rebound and headed down the court hoping to get a shot off and win the game for our team.

"Come on weirdo, what you got? You gonna make the ball disappear like you said you did in the woods?"

"Cut it out Clyde..." said Chris to his teammate.

"Aww, that's so cute. Am I hurting your feelings too? You know his story is so fake Chris. Just admit it Andy. You're a fake!"

"Shut up!" I said in anger.

I tried to dribble around him and head towards the basket, but he blocked my way.

"Oh, did I hit a nerve? Freak..."

I saw my chance and dribbled through his legs and then jumped up towards the basket. As the ball left my fingertips and bounced off the backboard heading into the net, a hand from behind unexpectedly pushed me with such force that I ended up crashing to the floor.

"What the hell!" I said angrily as I got up and saw Clyde standing there smirking. I pushed him back just as hard, watching him stumble backwards.

He quickly regained his balance and then took a swing at me. For a moment, I was tempted to use my Zodiac abilities but instead blocked his punch and caught him forcefully with my fist in his stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

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I know this probably wasn't showing me to be a very good Keeper of the Zodiac at the moment, as I normally am pretty good keeping my cool. But for some reason, I had allowed Clyde to totally get under my skin.

"You two, principal's office. NOW!" said Mr. Walsh who had caught sight of the whole thing.

"You're a dick..." I said as I left the court heatedly while Chris shook his head, obviously irritated that I had acted that way.

"Whatever freak."

"Silence the both of you!" said Mr. Walsh as he grabbed each of our arms and led us out of the gym and down the hallway into the principal's office. *"Sit down there and wait while I explain why the two of you are here!"*

He pointed to a bench in front of the secretary's desk and then explained to the woman sitting there what happened. She then proceeded to get on the phone and talk to both the principal and assistant principal.

A few minutes later Clyde was directed into the principal's office, while I was instructed to go into the assistant principal's. As I opened the door with my head hanging low feeling a little ashamed, a deep voice broke the silence.

"Have a seat Andy. We have much to discuss..."

I looked up and suddenly that icy feeling ran up my spine and my head began to hurt, as I saw standing there right in front of me, the same man from who had creepily stared at me from the diner on our trip...

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Chapter 32

“You’re, you’re... that guy from the diner.” I said, as I choked up the words in fear.

“That’s right Andy, and I’ve been watching you for a while now.” The assistant principal said in somewhat of a sinister tone.

My heart was racing and I suddenly wanted to run. My head was pounding and I had no idea why.

“Your head is pounding Andy because I’m probing your brain, just like I was at the diner.”

“Stop it! How are you doing that?”

“How am I doing what? Reading your mind? You should know, you are a Keeper of the Zodiac aren’t you?”

“Keeper of the what?” I said, trying my best to play stupid.

“Do you really think I’m that dumb Andy?”

My head then immediately started to hurt even worse.

“Let’s see, you discovered your crystal in a cave that only you could see and three years passed in the short time you were in there. Chris is the Guardian of your crystal and he hasn’t even fully taught you how to use all of its abilities. You’ve also visited the Council of the Zodiac twice and your sister is the only other one that knows of any of this. Should I go on?”

“OK I GOT IT! PLEASE STOP IT! YOU’RE REALLY HURTING MY HEAD!”

Thankfully the icy feeling then dissipated and the pain in my head quickly began to reduce.

“What...do you want from me?” I said nervously, once the headache was mostly gone.

“It’s pretty obvious isn’t it? Didn’t you have the pleasure of meeting Delilah and Vernon and their cub Martha?”

The prophecy that Delilah had told me had started flooding through my head the moment I walked into the assistant principal’s office and seen this man, but I honestly had hoped it was just a story and nothing more and that I was simply overreacting.

“So...it’s true? That prophecy she told me about?”

“Well duh. How else could I have known about the Council and read your mind Andy? Poor, poor Vernon...”

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“What about Vernon?”

“Poor Vernon, let’s just say he was taught a little lesson that was pretty painful for him.”

“What do you mean?!!!”

“Andy, I honestly don’t have time for this. The fact is I want your crystal and you’re going to give it to me as soon as possible.”

“I’m not giving you anything!”

“Do you realize how easy it would be for me to hurt you right now?”

“But you won’t, because I’m in school and they would know you did it...”

“You’re so naïve Andy. You have no idea just how powerful you are with the abilities your crystal has. I could remove you from the face of this planet and make sure no one would even remember you. But unfortunately, I can’t take your crystal unless you give it to me willingly.”

“Well you can forget about it. I’m not giving you crap!”

“Oh, you will. And things are about to start getting a little interesting in your life. By the way Andy, you’re little training sessions back there in the woods were pretty comical, with you almost killing Chris that one day. You don’t even know how to use your powers properly. I’ve been using mine for a long time and know every little in and out of each of the signs.”

“How is it that the Council hasn’t taken it away from you? What about the rules that the Zodiac crystal can only be used for good?”

“Council and ALL their RIDICULOUS rules!” He then pulled out his crystal and slowly studied it in his hands. It was glowing dark black and the signs were all of a gold tint.

My mind was racing and I felt like a prisoner at the moment. I knew if I tried to get up and leave his office, he probably wouldn’t let me by using some power to prevent it.

“Andy, you couldn’t even begin to fathom how far back this all goes. Why the Council would bestow a crystal to a 12-year-old boy I have no idea. But it makes my job all the easier.”

“Virgo...” I whispered the sign as quietly as possible, while he continued to ramble on with his disapproval of the Council of the Zodiac.

I was angry, really angry and wanted to know more about this man, who I didn’t even know his name at this point. I looked at him, well scowled would be more like it, and began to penetrate his mind like I had with the waitress accidentally at the diner. An

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image slowly appeared in my head, like a mist clearing somewhere within it. There was a young boy who appeared to be around my age and he was playing in a yard with a soccer ball when suddenly he flew backwards through the air and landed on the ground extremely hard, yet no one had touched him. A much taller and older man with dark eyes and black hair then came into view and was holding a glowing dark crystal. I watched as the boy cried, while the man told him to stop being a baby and to toughen up, as one day he was going to be the keeper of the crystal. But then, as he walked over to the boy, looking as if he was going to rough him up some more, a huge bank vault type of door immediately closed over the image.”

“GET OUT OF MY HEAD!”

“Doesn’t feel so good does it?”

He then muttered something I couldn’t quite hear and got up from his desk. As he approached where I was sitting, I tried to squirm in my chair but couldn’t move. In fact, I wasn’t able to move any part of me or even speak a single word.

“Andy, you can make this painful as you want, OR you can do what I ask and I’ll leave you and Chris and the rest of your friends and families alone...”

He was now standing over me and took one of his knuckles and began pressing it into a part of my neck that shot pain up and down my entire body. I couldn’t scream, I couldn’t move, I couldn’t do anything except feel the excruciating pain.

“Don’t ever try to get in my head again Andy. This is your only warning.” He said sternly and then pulled his knuckle away from my neck and muttered something again.

Thankfully, the ability to move my body then returned and I began to regret ever getting this crystal.

“Such a fair fight. Just like your father, pushing you down with his abilities and bullying you. Guess you’ve become just like him haven’t you?” I said angrily.

“You know nothing! Don’t even begin to think you know me! What you saw means nothing!”

I obviously had hit a pretty serious nerve in him.

“You’re right I don’t know anything about you. I don’t even know your name or how long you’ve been watching me or how you manipulated your way into this assistant principal position or how your crystal became dark or why you even want my own crystal.”

“The name’s Carl, but you will refer to me as Mr. Dillard from now on and that’s all you need to know for today. So I will ask you once more, are you going to make this easy and hand over the crystal or are you going to make this far more difficult than it needs to be?”

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“Go screw yourself...” I said quite heatedly, surprising even myself given how unfair of an advantage he had over me at the moment.

“Suit yourself. But don’t say I didn’t warn you. I’m sure Vernon wishes he had listened to me when I gave him a similar warning. Oh by the way, did you think that whole rock over the cave event with Martha inside was purely an accident? Did you think of yourself as a hero Andy? You were just a puny pawn in my game. Now get out and do yourself a favor and try not getting yourself sent to the principal’s office again, especially when I can control anyone like I did Clyde...”

The door then swung open behind me unexpectedly and my chair immediately moved away from under me, landing me with a thud on the floor. I quickly got up trying desperately to act brave, but the tears had already started creeping out of the corners of my eyes.

As I slowly walked out of the principal’s office and headed back to the locker room to change for my next class, which was already in session, I felt something I don’t think I’ve ever felt before...totally helpless...

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Chapter 33

It felt as if the rest of the school day went by at a snail's pace. I had deactivated the Virgo ability on my way back to class and my head was now totally swimming with nothing but fears and worries about Carl Dillard. How long had he been watching me? How was I supposed to stop him? And how am I going to prevent him from hurting my family or Chris's?

By the time the school day ended, I had no answers to any of these questions and hadn't retained much of anything that had come out of my teacher's mouth, not even during one of my favorite subjects, that being Math. After getting my jacket out of my hall locker and leaving a few books within it that I didn't need for the night, I headed out to where the buses were beginning to line up and saw Chris was already there waiting for me.

"So I see you survived a visit to the principal's office?" Chris said with a jovial smile, obviously having no idea what happened to me while there.

Our bus had just pulled up and opened its doors for everyone to board. As I began to walk up the few short steps, knowing I had a lot to fill Chris in with on the ride home, I suddenly felt that icy feeling head up my spine and my head began to throb again. I immediately clasped my hands against the sides of my skull, hoping it might help somehow, and then turned around to look for the Assistant Principal.

"What's wrong?" Chris said from behind me, seeing me in apparent distress.

I pointed when I located him. He was standing directly in the center of the throngs of kids who were filing out to their buses, hands on his hips, glaring at me with a menacing stare.

"Hey kid, you're holding up everyone from getting on the bus!" The driver said sounding slightly irritated.

I turned around and swiftly headed towards the very back with Chris following from behind. The pain began to subside as I took my seat.

"What the heck was that all about?" Chris said, as soon as he was seated next to me.

"Do you remember that prophecy I told you about, the one that Delilah had given me, up in the mountains?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"It's all true."

"What do you mean it's all true?"

I spent the next ten minutes telling him everything from the strange feelings I had that someone was watching me back at the cabin, to the man who was sitting in the diner on our trip home who kept staring at me, to the pains I got in my head when he was, to the

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assistant principal who was actually the very same person, to the powers he demonstrated when I couldn't move, and finally to what he promised he would do if I didn't give him the crystal willingly.

The bus was beginning to pull away from the school's parking lot. I made sure not to look out the window, as I didn't want to see Carl Dillard still staring at me with that awful look on his face, nor did I want to have any more of that icy feeling running up my spine.

"He wasn't there in case you're wondering." Chris said, seeing how afraid I was to even look out the window.

"I don't know what to do Chris? If we don't give the crystal to him, he said he's going to harm you and your family and mine as well."

"We can't give it to him. You know that."

"I know, but I'm not strong enough to beat him. He's had years to master the use of his dark crystal. I can't believe this is happening! Up until just a few days ago, I was rather enjoying learning all the ins and outs of my crystal, but now I feel like it's a curse."

"I understand how you're feeling, which is why I think it's time I pay another visit to the Council of the Zodiac."

"What are they going to do? They're probably just going to speak in ways that don't make any sense and tell us we need to figure it out on our own."

Chris could tell I was totally frustrated and speaking out of fear.

"Look, I know you're upset and afraid, but we need to work together. And we will make it through this."

"I don't know how you can have such a positive attitude about this..."

"Well, a negative one is only going to make it seem all the more impossible to overcome."

"Yeah, I know. Well I hope you have something in mind to ask specifically to the Council. Remember there's that time lapse that happens while we are there."

"I know, but there's no 'we' this time. I'm going alone."

"What? What do you mean you're going alone? Don't I have to be present to activate it?"

"I don't think so. And I'm going alone because I don't want your parents freaking out if you were to disappear again for a period of time."

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“Well what about your parents?”

“Well you see that’s the thing. I don’t have to tell them anything because they’re heading out of town for a few days. My mother got a call last night from her parents. I guess her father had a slight heart attack and is in the hospital. They say he’s going to be ok, but my grandmother thought it would be a good idea for my parents to come anyway.”

“They’re going to leave you alone all that time?”

“Of course, they trust me. I’ve never given them any reason why they shouldn’t. It’s not like I disappeared into the woods for several years you know.”

“Ha ha, very funny. So when are they leaving?”

“They already did this afternoon. I just need to check in with them tonight and then I won’t talk with them again until tomorrow night.”

“So you’re planning on visiting the Council tonight and hoping to be back before then? What about school?”

“Well I’m hoping I’ll be back before then, at least that’s the plan...”

“You have no clue what you’re doing, do you?”

“Well do you? We certainly need some help and I know of no better way to get that than to visit the Council again.”

We spent the rest of the bus ride home brainstorming some questions Chris could ask the Council, with the biggest one being how could we better protect ourselves from Carl Dillard. I also personally wanted to know how this dark crystal came into existence and asked if Chris could get the answer.

Once the bus had dropped us off at our stop, I wished him good luck and said I’d hope to see him the next morning there. He agreed and then headed towards his house.

The walk back to my house felt different today. I kept looking over my shoulders, thinking I’d see Carl Dillard watching me off in the distance. I also thought some strange person or animal might unexpectedly show up and say or do something to me, being manipulated by his powers. But thankfully none of that happened.

The rest of my evening sped by pretty quickly. I received a phone call from Chris just before he planned on attempting to use the “*Zōidiakos*” ability. I wished him good luck once again and told him to call me back if it didn’t work.

It was hard to focus on anything after I hung up. At first, I waited by the phone for a bit, thinking he was going to call back and let me know it didn’t work, but when he didn’t, I decided to start my homework. I completely struggled through it and by the time dinner came, I didn’t have much of an appetite. I managed to eat a small portion of the lasagna

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my mother made before heading to my room for the rest of the evening. As I laid on my bed and tried to read a book, I watched as the time went from 8:00pm to midnight in the blink of an eye. I was so wired I couldn't fall asleep and finally decided I'd use my powers to check in on Chris. Maybe he was already home and just didn't want to call because it was so late.

"Capricorn" I said the words while thinking about his room at his house.

VAVOOM!

When I came out the other side of the vortex, I immediately saw Chris wasn't there. While the lights were on in his room, there were pieces of paper scattered everywhere showing clearly that the ability had worked for him. I must admit, it felt kind of weird being in his house without him there. And although I knew he wouldn't be upset about it, especially with his family out of town, I still felt like I was breaking and entering somehow.

CREEEAK...CREEEAK...

A strange noise broke the silence of Chris's house and came from downstairs. It sounded a little like footsteps. Was someone there or was I just imagining I was hearing things?

I listened for a few more minutes in complete silence and heard nothing more but my breathing, which was slightly erratic given my heart had started racing again.

Man, I really am on edge aren't I? I decided it was time to teleport myself back home before I got any more freaked out by strange noises.

"CAPRI-"

"Leaving so soon...Andy?" A sinister-sounding voice interrupted me and was unmistakable.

The brooding figure of Assistant Principal Carl Dillard then abruptly emerged through the entrance to Chris's room...

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Chapter 34

“What are you doing here?! Get out!” I said feeling half angry, half scared at seeing the sudden appearance of Assistant Principal Carl Dillard in Chris’s bedroom.

“The real question is...what are you doing here Andy?” said Carl with a sneer and in that same sinister-sounding tone. *“Looking for your Guardian I presume. Well it’s apparent he’s not here. Let me guess, he must have gone to the Council to see how you two can stop me.”*

“We ARE going to find a way to stop you.” I said maybe a little too overly confident.

The pain began searing immediately in my head.

“You can’t stop me. No one can, especially not from a few 12-years olds the Council thinks so highly of.”

“Yeah, well if you are so powerful, then why do you need my crystal?!”

“Because with your crystal in my possession, no one is ever going to stop me.”

“So then you’re admitting I actually have a chance to stop you then?” I said catching on to the irony in his words. *“You know what I think Carl? I think you’re afraid. That’s why you want my crystal because you’re afraid of losing the only power you have in this world and becoming powerless.”*

The pain grew even stronger, like a nail was being driven into my head, but I didn’t stop.

“You think you’re so strong, but actually, you’re weak! You have to control people and instill fear in them just to respect you. That’s why you aren’t a Keeper of a light-based Zodiac crystal and that’s why you can’t stand the Council.”

Even though the pain in my head was becoming excruciating, I could feel something stronger growing within me.

“You don’t know anything. You’re just a stupid kid who has a powerful crystal with no idea how to use it.” Carl said defiantly.

“I don’t need a crystal to deal with bullies like you. That’s all you are Carl. An adult-sized bully. And that’s what your Dad was to you. And guess what? Now you’re only following in his footsteps becoming just like him.”

“SHUT UP YOU INSIGNIFICANT LITTLE COCKROACH!”

Something was happening. The pain was lessening in my head and I could tell it was undermining Carl’s ability to control me with his dark crystal’s abilities.

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“Am I striking a nerve Carl? You know what’s funny? I don’t care about the pain you’re causing in my head anymore. In fact, you can inflict all the pain you want on me, but that’s not going to change the fact that you’re still just a scared little kid who had an abusive father!”

The pain in my head then suddenly disappeared completely.

“Maybe if your parents had treated you with unconditional love, you might have not become like this. Maybe then Council might have selected you to receive the crystal you want so bad to take from me. Well too bad. You can’t have it because you don’t deserve it!”

The look in the Assistant Principal’s eyes said it all. He was now the one who looked afraid and if his powers were still active within him, they weren’t working on me one bit. I don’t know whether that was because I had distracted him from what he had been doing to me, or whether me overcoming my own fear had changed something somehow. Either way, Carl Dillard looked like a sad little kid at the moment, like he was about to be pushed down to the ground again by his angry father.

“You may have overcome my abilities this time Andy, but that won’t happen again the next time...” said Carl, as a vortex abruptly appeared next to him, which he slipped through and ultimately disappeared into the night.

I did it! I actually beat him! Man, I wish Chris was here, as I really wanted to savor the moment and celebrate the victory with him. But he wasn’t there and I was becoming more and more concerned with each passing minute.

I decided to sit down on his bed while I pondered what to do next. There were a few comic books nearby that I picked up and leafed through, hoping that at some point, Chris would reappear in that tornado that comes along with travelling to see the Council. But he didn’t and after thirty minutes passed, I decided it was time to head home and hope that I’d see him at the bus stop in the morning.

After teleporting myself back to my room, I sat on my own bed feeling rather excited on the one hand, because I had defeated Carl for the first time. But on the other hand, I was really worried about how long Chris was going to be gone, given the time displacement that happens with visiting the Council.

That worry only grew worse the next morning when Chris didn’t show up at the bus stop or at school. When my home phone rang later that evening after having a very restless day, I had hoped it was Chris saying he was back.

“Andy? It’s Chris’s mother on the line. Can you come downstairs please?” My mother shouted from the kitchen. I had been trying to focus on something else other than my worry about when Chris was going to return by attempting to do my homework, but I wasn’t having much success.

“I’M COMING!” I yelled back as I got up from my desk and headed downstairs.

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“Andy, have you seen or talked with Chris today? Mrs. Riley says she hasn’t heard from him and he was supposed to check-in around 6pm.”

I didn’t know whether to lie or to tell the truth. I knew that Chris didn’t like me lying, but shouldn’t I cover for him somehow? What would I say though if I did try to cover for him?

“Andy?”

“Ummm, no I haven’t seen or talked to him today Mom.”

I actually told the truth. Maybe being a Keeper really was changing me for the better?

“He wasn’t at school today Andy?”

“No. But maybe it was because he felt sick and chose to stay home? Maybe he’s just trying to sleep it off? Or maybe their home phone isn’t working for some reason?”

I know that was a lot of maybe’s, but at least it wasn’t me lying since I was only posing some questions. Unfortunately, I knew the real truth though and I was as concerned for Chris as much as his mom was. I shuddered at the sudden thought of all those years that went by with me in that cave for just several hours of time there.

“Linda, I’m sorry, it doesn’t appear that we have any information for you. Would you like us to stop over at your house and knock on the door?”

My mother paused while she listened to Mrs. Riley and then wrote a number down.

“Ok, I will call you back in a short while. I’m sure he’s fine Linda.... Ok ... Goodbye.”

“Andy, we’re going to take a quick walk over to Chris’s house to see if he’s there.”

“That’s fine Mom.”

It wasn’t fine though, because I knew he wasn’t going to be there. After all, I know he would have called me already if he had returned from visiting the Council.

The trip to his house seemed to be as quick as one of my journeys through those vortexes. But I’m sure that’s because my mother had walked there extremely fast. I think she was feeling overly concerned for Mrs. Riley, given what she had gone through with me when I had disappeared for all those years.

Once we reached Chris’s front door, I rang the doorbell a few times and waited.

After what seemed like a very long time, my mother reached for the doorknob and tried to turn it.

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“Mom, what are you doing?”

“I’m seeing if it’s unlocked.” She said nervously.

And oddly enough it was. I had wondered if Chris had forgotten to do that before leaving to visit the Council or whether it was Carl Dillard’s doing the previous night. I didn’t have time to think about it though because my mother had just opened the door and was now poking her head in.

“Chris? Are you here? Your mother is a little worried because you haven’t checked in with her yet this evening?”

My mother waited a second and then yelled his name even louder.

“CHRIS? ARE YOU HERE?”

Nothing. Which of course I knew was going to happen.

“I’m going in and taking a look around.” My mother said adamantly.

“Mom, are you sure that’s a good idea?”

I was trying to stall, knowing she wasn’t going to find much of anything.

“Of course I’m sure Andy! Chris is missing and I know what that feels like, when your child goes missing.”

Her voice started to waver and for a moment, I thought she was going to cry.

“Mom, it’s ok. Let’s go take a look together.” I said reassuringly.

We spent the next ten minutes wandering throughout the house and as expected, we found nothing other than the heavy mess that was left behind in Chris’s room from the tornado that comes with going to visit the Council of the Zodiac.

“I’m calling Mrs. Riley right now Andy. This isn’t looking good at all.”

She then pulled out the slip of paper with the number Mrs. Riley had given her and picked up a cordless phone sitting on the kitchen counter.

She was right. This wasn’t looking good at all, but not for the reasons she and Mrs. Riley were thinking. But I had one idea that I think could prevent a bad situation from growing any worse and I truly hoped it would work.

“Libra...” I whispered the word, knowing that I could still use my crystal, even with Chris having it in another dimension.

WHOOSH.

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My mother's hand remained paused in mid-dial, phone cradled within it.

If time existed differently in Council's realm, then pausing time here shouldn't affect Chris's return. At least that was my hope. I wondered though, just how long I was going to have to wait with the world being frozen in time to see if my hunch was correct...

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Chapter 35

At first it wasn't so bad adjusting to time standing still. In fact, it had been pretty cool to see everything in pause mode initially not just with my mother holding a strange position with phone in hand, which looked rather comical, but also with things like ground animals jumping in mid-air outside, birds hovering in flight, flags frozen in rippled waves, and people in mid-action pulling garbage cans to the street or getting out of their cars. But when the days of seeing this turned into weeks, it began to grow old and quite lonely. Even worse was the fact that it was constantly dark outside, as the sun had set prior to me using the Libra sign.

I had never gone this long without talking to anyone and was beginning to lose track of just how much time had really passed. I had read about monks before who spent years in silence and couldn't imagine how they did it, yet here I was starting to do the very same thing. Life was becoming monotonous though with every day repeating the same routine over and over again.

After getting some sleep, which felt odd because I was always waking up at night, I'd start my days by riding on my bike over to Chris's, hoping he might have returned and was maybe frozen in time somehow with everyone else. But it was always to no avail. My next destination after this was about a mile away, where I'd go to the local grocery store to pick up a few things to eat to hold me over for the remainder of the day. I realized pretty early on that I couldn't consume all the food in the house because I wouldn't be able to explain that to my mother when I unfroze time.

And if by some chance you're wondering what I ate, most of it wasn't good and I constantly felt guilty about the reality I was stealing it from the store. I wish I had had some other solution, but I ultimately hoped Chris would return soon, as I honestly couldn't imagine continuing to sustain my life by eating a combination of Doritos, string cheese, and fizzy water for much longer.

After each of my daily treks to the supermarket, the rest of my waking moments were then usually spent reading books or magazines or taking walks around the neighborhood. I totally missed doing things like watching television or movies, but sadly every channel was paused on the same scene and I couldn't seem to make the DVD player work either.

With no real concept of time, I also wasn't really even sure of whether 24 hours were passing during each of my waking moments. There was one good thing that was coming out of this though. I hadn't seen Carl Dillard since I activated Libra, so I assumed he wasn't fully exempt from my crystal's abilities either and was frozen like everyone else.

Nevertheless, if I had to guess on how much time had passed since I had activated Libra, I would have to say it was coming close to a month. Knowing that was tough, especially given that I hadn't seen my father or my sister during any of that time at all. My Dad had still been on his way home when I used the Zodiac ability while Laura had been out on a date with some new guy in her life. I did find a little comfort though in seeing my mother in Chris's kitchen every day and occasionally I'd talk to her passively or give her a hug, usually in tears.

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I was lonely, more than I had ever felt before and wondered whether Chris was ever going to return. What if it did last for several years? Could I survive for that long? Would I go insane seeing all these strange mannequins around me every time I walked outside or went to the store? How long should I leave life like this before I give up? These were the questions I pondered every waking moment and the only thing I knew was that it felt like I was beginning to lose my mind.

My stomach suddenly grumbled for something to eat, as I had just woke up a short bit ago on the couch downstairs and was reflecting on all the time that had already passed. It was still the evening outside of course, yet my body clock felt like it was time for breakfast. Man did I have a craving right now for eggs and bacon, but unfortunately, I discovered you can't cook in Libra mode, as things like using stoves don't work the way they do in real time. And as embarrassing as this is to mention, because of the limitations of using Libra, I haven't been able to take a shower or flush the toilet at all the entire time. I really feel like I'm starting to stink and bottled water to freshen up can only go so far. As for going #1, that was always done outside. #2 on the other hand, well let's just say that most of the neighbors aren't going to be happy when time gets un-paused.

Regardless, it was time to start my daily "morning" trek to Chris's house, which most likely was only going to end in frustration. As I hopped on my bike and headed down the road, I looked at two squirrels nearby who had been chasing each other across one of the neighbor's yard. A few houses down, I glanced for the what seemed like the hundredth time at a man and woman who were apparently screaming and yelling at each other on their front porch when I had paused time. I continued to wonder what could have made them so angry with each other.

I soon pulled into Chris's driveway and left my bike laying on the pavement. When I approached the front door, I noticed it was slightly opened. Did I forget to fully close it yesterday? I must of. I walked in and headed upstairs. As I entered his room and expected to see it empty as always, I instead saw the looming figure of Carl Dillard sitting on Chris's bed.

"What? Did you think pausing time was going to freeze me as well?" He said mockingly to a very startled-looking me.

"You...you've been around this entire time?" I stammered out.

"Uh huh. And I've been watching you cry and remain miserable during all of it, as you keep hoping desperately that your friend will return from Council with some way to get rid of me for good. Good luck with that!"

"So why now? Why show up weeks later and let me know you've been around all along?"

"Because I wanted to see you suffer for a spell and I also decided to give you one more chance. One more opportunity to give me your crystal. All you have to do is say you

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release it to me and I will leave you and Chris and both of your families alone from here on out.”

“I told you already I don’t have the crystal! It’s with Chris...”

“If you release it to me right now, he will be forced to return with it immediately.”

“Yeah right, I know you’re lying!”

“I can understand why you might think that, but actually I’m not.”

I half considered his offer for a moment. In all actuality, I was tired of living with time paused. What if releasing the crystal to him really did force Chris to come back? At least then he’d be home safely and we could just return to a normal life again.

“You want your friend back don’t you? Wouldn’t it be great Andy to return to your old life where your only worries were getting your homework done and when would it be time to play outside again?”

“Shut up! Get out of my head!”

“For once, I’m not actually in your head Andy. But I can tell you’re seriously considering my offer. Think about it. Chris would be back and I would then disappear for good. Wouldn’t it be great to have a new assistant principal who isn’t trying to come after you every day?”

“How do I know that releasing the crystal to you would really bring Chris back and that you’d disappear from our lives for good?”

“You’re going to have to trust me on that one Andy. But I give you my word and I rarely do that for anyone.”

“Well, it would be great to stop dealing with all these worries. I haven’t had fun with this Zodiac thing since you came along anyway.”

“See, you already know what to do Andy. All you need to say now is “I RELEASE THE POWER OF THE ZODIAC CRYSTAL TO CARL DILLARD.” and that’s it.

“That’s it? It’s that simple?”

“That’s it Andy. It’s that simple.”

I really was tired of my life and it sounded like a much better option than waiting around for who knows how long for Chris to return. At least he and I could get back to a normal life and just be friends, hanging out and doing normal friend things. I’m sure in time I’d totally forget about the Council, the crystal’s powers and everything else that had been part of my life the past bunch of months.

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“Ok. I’ll do it.”

“Finally! So you’re not going to fight me anymore on this then?”

“No, I’m tired of this. You’re right. I’m sick of all the responsibility that comes with having the crystal’s abilities.”

“Well then you know what to do next.” Carl Dillard said with an extremely cynical smile sprawled across his face.

I knew I was making a mistake but I just didn’t care anymore.

As I started saying the words, I felt a strong sense of guilt inside...

“I RELEASE THE POWER...”

BOOM!

A rush of wind abruptly interrupted the release process and was followed by a torrent of paper flying around the room. Chris then abruptly shot out from the center of the mini-tornado and shouted at the top of his lungs a single word as soon as he saw Carl Dillard.

“Foteinos!”

“Aaaah! Dam you!” Carl screeched as a huge beam of white light appeared around him. It apparently was having a very painful affect upon him.

Within seconds, he muttered Capricorn and was gone...

“It’s about time you got back...” I said with a weak smile, glad that my exile in a paused world could now be finally over...

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Chapter 36

“Do you know how long you’ve been gone?!” I said rather excitedly to Chris.

“It’s been about a month right?” Chris said not sounding concerned at all.

“How did you know that? And do you know what I’ve had to go through since almost the day you left?”

“The Council let me know a bunch of things during my visit to them, including the fact that you were ok and that everything was happening as it was meant to back here. But if I was to make a guess, you probably ended up pausing time and it’s still paused right now isn’t it?”

“Yes! And it’s all because of your parents calling my mother when they couldn’t track you down! My mother’s actually downstairs right now in mid-dial to your parents. She saw the mess in your room and immediately thought the worst!”

“You did the right thing Andy. And in a few minutes, you can un-pause time and let things get back to normal.”

“Trust me, I can’t wait to take a shower again!” I said with a chuckle. *“So what was that word you spoke to Carl anyway?”*

“It’s a self-defense tool that only a Guardian can use and when activated causes pure light to surround the keeper of the dark crystal, rendering it useless and causing them extreme pain.”

“Man, that’s awesome! Any other things you learned that can help defeat Dillard?”

“A few, but right now, I need to tell you something far more important.”

“What can be more important than something that’s going to help defeat Dillard?”

“Andy, you can never give up your crystal to him ok? And I mean never!” Chris said sounding almost afraid.

“Chris, you realize I almost did that right? If you hadn’t reappeared when you did, it would have been too late!”

“Well that’s precisely why I returned when I did. The Council let me know the precise moment when you were going to need my help. And it’s a good thing you didn’t finish that statement Andy. It would have had dire consequences, not only for us, but really for the entire planet as well.”

“What? Now you’re just speaking gibberish Chris.”

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“Seriously Andy. Without the light crystal in our possession, there is nothing that would be able to stop Carl from ruling the world, which is precisely what he wants to do. Remember Adolph Hitler from our history studies?”

“What about him?”

“You’re probably going to find this hard to believe, but he was an earlier keeper of the dark crystal.”

“No way! Seriously?”

“Yes, I’m dead serious.”

“Well how did Hitler get defeated then? History says it was due to the strength of the Allies overcoming him and his army.”

“Of course that’s what’s going to be recorded in all the history and text books. It’s all they know. But the real truth from what I was told by the Council is that they had to send a number of their Keepers here to turn the tide in the war. I guess it was the closest our world had ever come to being surrounded in total darkness.”

“Holy Crap! That’s crazy!”

“Now do you understand why Carl Dillard wants your crystal so bad Andy?”

“Ten more seconds and he would have had it Chris...” I said sounding extremely concerned.

“I know and I totally get why you wanted to give up the crystal and all this responsibility.”

“Chris, I’m friggin only 12 years old and I’m tasked with the burden of preventing the world from being taken over by another Hitler? Really?” I said a little too sarcastically.

“I know. But it’s not just on you. WE have the responsibility together. You’re not alone Andy and Council wouldn’t have entrusted you with the crystal if they didn’t believe you were the one who was meant to bear it and keep this world safe.”

“Chris this is a lot to take in! Do you know what this past month was like watching everyone remain frozen, eating nothing but junk food, and not being able to do things like use a toilet, a shower, or anything electric? I haven’t been able to talk to anyone or even seen my father or sister because they weren’t home when I paused time! Being a Keeper hasn’t been much fun for me lately dude and honestly, I’ve never felt so lonely in my entire life as I did this past month. I think that’s why it was so easy for Carl to convince me that it really wasn’t worth being one anymore.”

I was pretty upset and extremely overwhelmed with the news Chris had just thrown on me. Life as a Keeper was no longer feeling very pleasurable. While it had originally been

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the best thing to ever happen to me, especially since it brought Chris into my life, it had rapidly turned into a curse of sorts. And I was actually beginning to resent having the crystal at all.

“Andy, I get it. But that’s why you’re the keeper of the light crystal and Carl the dark. It’s in his nature to live in the shadows, to be manipulative, to control those around him and to spread nothing but more darkness. But you’re not that way. You have a good heart and care about people, about nature, and do your best to bring light into the world.”

“I guess I’m a little scared right now Chris. This really is a lot to process.” I said somewhat dejectedly. *“Anyway, so does all this mean that Carl Dillard is somehow related to Hitler?”*

“All I know is that there was a connection on Dillard’s father’s side to him.”

“Man. I’m finding it really hard to believe all this...”

“I know. I couldn’t believe it myself when the Council told me.”

“So where do we go from here then Chris?”

“Well how about for starters we deactivate the Libra ability?”

“That’s fine, but I need to get back downstairs first, as I’m sure it will look kind of weird if my mother doesn’t see me standing in front of her once time resumes.”

“Yeah, that would probably be the smart thing to do.”

“Hey Chris know she thinks you might have been taken by somebody right?”

“You mean like kidnapped?”

“Yeah, she really never got over my own three-year disappearance and I’m sure that’s why she’s freaking out right now so much about you.”

“Does she still think you were kidnapped during all that time?”

“Chris, that’s what everyone still thinks. And they believe I’m too traumatized to tell the truth as to what really happened to me.”

“Man, if they only knew...” Chris said shaking his head.

“Yeah, tell me about it...” I said wishing I really could tell everyone the truth. But I was grateful that at least Chris and my sister knew.

“Alright, well let’s go downstairs and get ready to deactivate Libra. I’m going to go outside and come in the front door right when you do.”

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“Wait so what are you going to tell everyone about where you were?”

“Well, for once, I’m going to have to make something up...”

“What!!! Stop the presses. You mean you’re going to lie! Holy moly! Hell is going to freeze over!!!” I said laughing, feeling slightly relieved of some of the tension.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Chris said with a grin as we started to head downstairs.

I was really glad I wasn’t alone in my responsibility of somehow keeping this world safe. Although it was pretty strange to think two twelve year olds were actually in possession of something that could turn the whole world upside down if it fell into the wrong hands.

I had just reached the kitchen where my mother was still standing in mid-dial, cordless phone in hand and I couldn’t wait to give her a big hug, one that she would now be able respond to. I looked down the hallway and saw Chris giving me the thumbs up letting me know he was ready.

“Libra!” I said with anxious anticipation of the return of a little more normalcy.

WHOOSH.

Chris quickly walked in the door and closed it rather loudly to indicate his presence. And just as my mother was finishing dialing the number to his parents, she looked down the hallway and saw him heading towards us.

Before she had a chance to say anything to him, I immediately hugged her, as I was so grateful to finally see her “alive” again. A few tears then fell from her eyes, most likely because she knew Chris was safe now. Little did she know though just how unsafe she and the rest of the world really were and how her own son and his best friend were somehow the chosen ones to protect them all...

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Chapter 37

Thankfully, it didn't take long for things to return to normal after I deactivated Libra. Beyond the hugging that seemed to go on for far longer than Chris probably wanted by my mother, it was as if nothing had really happened at all, that is at least from everyone else's perspective. I, on the other hand had gone through an entire month of unhealthy eating and unsanitary habits, so I was pretty ecstatic to finally get a hot shower and use a working toilet again when I returned home. Oh, and if you're wondering what Chris's excuse was, as to his whereabouts during those 24 hours? He said he had gone for a hike in the woods after he had checked in with his parents, got lost, and realized he had forgotten to bring his cell phone, but eventually he found his way back. It was an exceptionally outright bold lie and trust me, I planned on holding it over his head for a good long time!

Anyway, the next few weeks right up until the day before Thanksgiving passed by in the blink of an eye. Other than having some exams to take in a few of my classes, life was rather uneventful. That was mostly due to the absence of Carl Dillard though. He had seemingly disappeared into thin air, as even a new assistant principle had now taken his place, much to my relief, but I still worried that he might show up at any moment.

I did get some great Zodiac training in with Chris during the weekend before Thanksgiving although it had been extremely cold outside by the pond during it. While Chris supposedly knew what all the other sign's abilities were now, he had opted to continue perfecting the ones I already knew. In fact, I was getting fairly skilled at each of them. Using Cancer for underwater work and Taurus for strength testing was a breeze now and so was doing combination attacks of activating and deactivating one sign after another. One of the coolest moments though came during my work with Leo's abilities.

Of all the signs I had worked with so far, this one had been my least favorite and felt somewhat useless to me, that was until Chris had me practice honing in on each of my senses with it activated. After teaching me a focusing technique that he learned from the Council of the Zodiac, I was actually able to see things as far as a mile away! The same held true with my hearing and smell as well. But it still felt odd though with things such as my sense of taste when the sign was active, as food either tasted incredibly good or phenomenally gross. For example, some things I usually liked such as a turkey sandwich tasted awful, while other things I usually felt were kind of blah such as carrots, tasted heavenly.

Nevertheless, I was beginning to feel a lot more empowered now because of all the training I had gone through, as well as the fact that Chris and I had several ways to deal with Carl Dillard if he were to show up again. I wasn't feeling as afraid anymore, but I remained concerned about what Dillard's next move might be.

"Andy, wake up we're almost there!" My mother said cheerfully from the front seat, putting a pause to my thoughts of the past two weeks.

"I wasn't asleep Mom..." I mumbled, as I lifted my head away from the window. Although I was feeling overly exhausted given how early we had gotten up that morning.

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It was close to 11am and we had almost arrived to my Grandmother's house in Glen Cove, New York, where we celebrated the Thanksgiving holiday each year. We always left during the wee hours on the day before, hoping to beat out traffic, but somehow we never did. This year the 90-minute drive took over 3 hours!

My grandmother lived in a decent sized home in a quiet neighborhood. Her red house was a little smaller than ours and definitely much older in age. I had grown quite fond of it though, even with the peculiar smell that always permeated throughout most of it, which would remind most of days of old.

I really loved my father's mother and considered her one of my best friends. Her name was Elsa, which I thought was a pretty cool name. She and I always talked about the coolest of things and often played a lot of ping-pong games on her old table in the basement when I was there. She had lived alone for many years now, as her husband had died from emphysema long ago, yet that never seemed to bother her. I honestly can't remember a time when she wasn't upbeat and cheerful.

"Hopefully you don't plan on having us spend a month down here..." My sister whispered playfully in my ear as we pulled in my Grandmother's driveway.

I had told her already all about what had happened when Chris had visited the Council, having paused time for as long as I did. She was obviously trying to poke fun at me.

"No, but I might just teleport you away somewhere if you aren't nice to me while we're here!" I whispered back with a grin.

She then punched my arm and exited the car. By the time I had my own piece of luggage in hand, my Grandmother had emerged onto her front porch. I immediately ran over to her and gave her a huge embrace.

"Hi Grandma!" I said. *"Ready for a few games of ping-pong?"*

"Let's get you all settled first and then we'll find some time for that ok Andy?" She said in her usual joyful tone.

"We would have been here sooner Mom if we hadn't hit some heavy traffic on the Throgs Neck Bridge." My Dad said sounding exceedingly tired himself.

"You know the Whitestone Bridge would have been a much better one to take Lew..."

"I know, I know, but when there's no traffic at all, that bridge usually takes longer. Oh well there's always next year..." He said with a chuckle, as my Grandmother opened the front door while we all filed in behind her.

Thirty minutes later, everyone had their luggage put away and were hanging out in the kitchen. I had already poured myself my favorite thing to drink whenever I was down

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there, which was my Grandmother's famous ice tea and lemonade mixture. I swear she had invented the Arnold Palmer drink long before he had!

"So how about that game of ping-pong Grandma?"

"Why don't you and your father go play a few games while the rest of us girls catch up for a bit ok Andy?"

"Fine..." I said sounding slightly disappointed.

My father and I frequently played ping-pong back home together, which I usually won, but my Grandmother was a far more formidable player. For the next 45 minutes, my Dad and I stayed surprisingly competitive with each other. He even beat me a few times, which I of course told him it was because he had home advantage given he had grown up playing on that table.

Eventually my Grandmother came downstairs and took over for my father, as he wanted to go look into making a reservation for some restaurant we were going to that night for dinner. Right off the bat, she killed me in the first game. You know for a woman who was in her mid 60's, she regularly acted like she was in her early 40's. But the games I played with her each time I was visiting were never so much about the competition between us, they were more about my bonding time with her.

"You've been practicing I see Andy!" She said as I took a commanding lead in the second game.

"Yeah, Dad and I have been playing quite a bit back at home."

"By the way Andy, I just wanted to say I believe you..."

"You believe what Grandma?"

"I believe the story you told everyone about what happened during those three years you disappeared."

"You do? You're not just saying that?"

"Of course not dear. I would tell you if I didn't believe you and I'm sorry that your parents didn't."

"Why didn't you ever let me know that on any of the times we talked on the phone then?"
I said as I served the ball rapidly across the table.

"Because it wasn't the right time..." She said with a forceful hit back.

"What do you mean, it wasn't the right time Grandma?" I said, as I sliced the ball with a slight curve, hoping she would miss it.

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“It wasn’t the right time to tell you that I always knew you were meant to be a Keeper of the Zodiac.” She said as her paddle connected with the ball, curving it quickly back towards me.

“WHAT? How do you know about that? No one but my friend Chris and Laura know...” I said dumbfounded, watching as my paddle completely missed the ball and bounced onto the ground behind me.

“I know a lot more than you think Andy about what you’ve been through and are probably going through right now. We have much to discuss, but for now, serve me the ball and we’ll continue this conversation a little later ok?” She said smiling brightly.

As I picked up the ball and served it as hard as I could, my heart raced excitedly about something I never expected to come out of my Grandmother’s mouth...

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Chapter 38

The anticipation of how my Grandmother knew about my crystal and being a Keeper was killing me inside. Unfortunately, talking about this with her “a little later” ended up being much later, much to my dismay. Because after our rounds of ping-pong ended, there just wasn’t any other moments that evening to ask her any further questions.

First it was dinner out at a seafood restaurant in Oyster Bay, which is one of the next towns over from Glen Cove. There, I had my favorite seafood meal like I always do, that being a cup of clam chowder to start and the beer battered fish and chips with a ton of tartar sauce for my main course. All that was finished off by a delicious slice of cherry cheesecake. Next it was family game night once we returned to my Grandmother’s house. There all of us played Trivial Pursuit, a game that I rarely do well in. My Grandmother on the other hand was always incredible at the game and seemed to know just about everything. She won of course and by the time we wrapped up the game, it was well past 11pm, at which point my parents declared it was bedtime for my sister and I.

I really had a hard time falling asleep that night but when I finally did, my dreams were quite bizarre, one of which being about a Guardian who looked an awful lot like my Grandmother. The next morning, I awoke around 7am feeling somewhat unrefreshed, but thankfully the smell of fresh baked popovers and cinnamon oatmeal wafting through the air quickly changed that. I looked over at my sister who was still sound asleep. As silently as I could in an old home that creaks a lot, I swiftly headed downstairs to the kitchen.

“Good morning Andy!” My Grandmother greeted me cheerfully.

“Hi Gran!” I responded just as cheerfully while noticing the door down the hallway to my parent’s room was closed. It appeared as if they were still asleep as well.

“Why don’t you grab yourself a bowl of oatmeal from the stove and a popover Andy and let’s have that chat I promised you ok?”

“No arguments here Gran!” I said as I grabbed a heaping portion of the homemade oatmeal and poured it into a bowl. I then slathered a large amount of butter on one of the popovers and grabbed a seat at the small oval kitchen table.

“So I’m sure you want to know how I knew you were a Keeper right?”

“Yeah! How do you know about any of this Gran?”

“My great, great, great Grandmother Andy was a Guardian and her husband was a Keeper just like you.”

“No way!!!”

“As the story goes, he was a great tribal leader of the Shinnecock Indian Nation. They met during a peace-keeping session and soon fell in love.”

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“Ewww, gross.” I said jokingly.

“One day you’ll fall in love with someone too Andy!” She said with a grin. “Now back to the story...Soon after they fell in love, the two of them went exploring one day in the wilderness and discovered a secret cave just like you did. One in which the very crystal you are now the Keeper of was deep within it. When they emerged from that cave, five years had passed, although to them it had been only mere hours. Everyone thought they had either been killed by some animal or taken prisoner by another Indian tribe. No one believed their story like no one believed yours and they ended up becoming shunned by everyone. So they left the area and began a new life in upstate New York where they eventually learned the crystal’s abilities and why they were the only ones who could see the markings on it. The Council had chosen them just like it chose you, to help during a time when it was most needed. As it was then that a dark zodiac crystal also came into existence and the Council knew a Keeper and a Guardian was needed to thwart the rise of this darkness.”

“Gran, did you know that one of my powers is being able to talk with animals? And I initially learned about this Native American man from a female bear if you can believe it? Even stranger is the fact I had a dream last night where a woman that looked like you was a Guardian. Weird huh?”

“Not really. Nothing surprises me these days Andy, especially now that I know the story I was told as a young girl was true. So one of your zodiac abilities is actually being able to talk with animals?”

“Yup!”

“Well maybe you can talk to all those birds outside who keep pooping all over my birdbath and ask them to do that somewhere else ok?” She said jokingly. “Anyway, you should know that this story has been passed down from daughter to daughter and has come to an end with me, seeing that I don’t have a daughter myself. Regardless, my mother never believed that this was anything more than a simple bedtime story passed on for generations. I must say I thought this as well until your father told me the details of what you said the day you returned to your family home three years after your disappearance and discovered they were no longer there.”

“Yeah, that was a pretty scary day for me Gran...”

“I can imagine. Anyway, the only other part of the story I was ever told is that the crystal shows up whenever it’s most needed to fight off a potential surge of darkness that comes from a rising Keeper of the dark crystal.”

“Gran, I’ve actually crossed paths already with the Keeper of that dark crystal! His name is Carl Dillard and he’s terrifying. But thankfully, my Guardian, who is also my best friend Chris, has been training me to learn the crystal’s abilities and how to counteract his evil.”

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“I wish there was more I could tell you Andy that could help you in that fight. What I can tell you though is that I know the Council wouldn’t have chosen you if they didn’t think you’d be able to defeat this Carl Dillard. Nevertheless, now you have me for moral support as well. Just think of me as another member of your superhero team ok? Now why don’t you start eating some of your breakfast hon before it gets totally cold...”

I looked down at the bowl of oatmeal and the popover next to it and realized I had been so absorbed in her story I hadn’t even eaten any of it so I immediately began scarfing it down.

“Slow down Andy, it’s not going anywhere.” She chuckled. *“So I’m curious, how does this crystal work anyway?”*

“It’s pretty simple really. I just say one of the 12 zodiac signs verbally and it activates a range of abilities within me.” I said as I chomped down on a mouthful of food.

“That’s it?”

“Yup!”

“So do you know what my birth sign does then?”

“You’re an Aquarius right?” I said completely forgetting that I had just activated the sign by saying it. I had been so caught up in hearing her tell me the story and had started thinking about that fearful day when I re-emerged out of the woods, just before I met those two strangers who were living at the home I thought was my own.

Suddenly, I began feeling totally dizzy and my eyes were growing extremely blurry. I closed them for only a moment, hoping the feeling would pass. When I reopened them, I wasn’t at my Grandmother’s house anymore and sitting at her breakfast table eating my food. Instead, I was now sitting on her kitchen chair at the edge of the woods I once used to play regularly in, staring at my old backyard, my old porch, and my old backdoor I used to come and go through so often. But what stood in front of that door at this very moment was the most alarming thing of all, as it was me, talking to Mrs. Sampson...