

Partial Draft:

The Zodiac Heir

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(Link back to: <http://www.sglovell.com/zodiac>)

Chapter 6

"So be it."

Deep in the woods Jud was having the devil of a time shaking off his younger sister.

"Leave me alone, Rose. How did you sneak out of the palace unnoticed?"

"You must ask, brother? You taught me the trick."

"For emergencies, elf. Are we besieged?"

"Of course not."

"Then why are you here, wearing a nightgown too cold for this weather? No gloves. Anyone could happen past."

"Nobody knows this part of the woods. Isn't that why you brought her here, your human?"

"My mate. She is of no concern to you?"

"You are of concern to me. I love you, brother, you know I do. I think the world of you, but this," she bounded after him, "this exceeds even your power. You can't save her. The Scorpion—" Rose shuddered. "He has no soul."

Jud stopped stalking through the underbrush to look at his sister. "You mistake Maverick's lack of conscience for an inability to distinguish between right and wrong. He has never killed for joy or out of deference to our father."

"Are you defending the blackguard? He made you bleed."

Jud looked at his hands. "Just a scratch. It was my own clumsiness breaking the fall when we passed into the Zodiac lands."

"And when he threatened to pierce your liver, was that your own fault, too?" she asked. "I'm worried about you. Maverick knows the punishment for wounding the heir. It didn't stop him from coming after you."

"He came after Sarah."

"Knowing you would be by her side, defending her."

"Maverick fears no punishment," Jud agreed. "He fears nothing, yet *something* holds power over him. I have to find out what it is, so I can double his reward."

Rose halted in the process of scrambling over a fallen log. "You don't know?"

"What is it?"

Our father has threatened to cast out Maverick's sister."

"Elaheh? Are you certain. Even Maverick couldn't keep her safe. If Elaheh's life is at stake there is nothing I can do to sway Maverick. Then the Archer is truly my only hope."

Rose teetered on the wood. "You're heading for the cave?"

Jud curled his fingers into his palm to keep himself from reaching out. "Be careful, elf. I do not care to see you hurt."

Jumping down from the log, Rose glared at him. "By Libra, Jud, I must be wary of men. I shall not be wary of an old, dead tree."

Jud bit back the comment that was on the tip of his tongue. His sister had a point. "You have a better idea?" he asked.

"Anything would be better than what you're proposing. You know the Archer's reputation. For someone who has the gift to make people happy he certainly seems to abhor his skill."

"Abhor it he may," Jud said, watching Rose rub her arms, where goose bumps had woken at the thought of the blacksmith. "It won't make a difference. He's honour bound. He can't refuse a true love mating."

"Does the human love you?" Rose asked.

"Not yet."

"Not ever."

The certainty in his sister's voice stabbed at Jud's pride. "You think I'm so

unlovable?"

"Of course not." Rose halted in the process of rubbing warmth into her skin, her face softening, arms sliding around his torso, head burying trustingly against his chest. "I was speaking of your mate, Jud. You are my most beloved brother."

"I am your only brother," he pointed out.

She winked up at him mischievously. "Let us be glad for small favours. How would I find space in my heart for another?"

Jud wound his own arms around her, careful to keep his scraped hands from her skin. "One day, I will remind you of this moment when my space in your heart is replaced by someone else."

An outraged squeak. "Never. I could never imagine giving you up." Rose pushed at his chest.

Jud released her with a smile, his sister who could never be still for any amount of time, and watched her spinning in a circle, arms wide, head high. "I could never give up my freedom."

"Love doesn't have to be a cage."

Rose looked back at him. "Is it not for you?" she asked, the russet colour of her eyes that always struck Jud as too somber for her exuberant personality barely noticeable in the twinkling twilight of the stars. . "Creeping through the night, begging a hermit to save your mate."

Jud snapped a branch off a tree and lobbed it into the forrest where a man in a cave would determine his fate. "You don't understand."

"Nor do I want to, if misery is the answer."

"Elf." He lifted his hand, then let it drop back to his side.

"She is human," Rose insisted.

So much determination bundled into the most fragile of shells. It always amazed him.

"Is this why you're out here, risking your safety roaming the woods at night?" he asked.

Rose looked up at him. "How could I risk anything being with you? Could I be any safer behind palace walls, guarded by ten of the Lion Guard?"

His smile was sad. "I'd like to think not."

Rose touched his cheek. "Yet your eyes say you do. Has she replace me in your heart already?"

"Don't even think it."

"I know it."

Jud pressed his lips against her temple. "A brother's love can never cease."

"I'm not talking about love. I'm talking about loyalty. Have you told your mate why our father wants her dead? It could help your endeavour." Rose scrunched up her nose. "Some women love easier if they know what they gain."

"And send us to the deepest pit of hell?"

"I thought you trusted her."

"I don't know what to think. My judgement is clouded. I know it is."

"Then maybe you should let the Scorpion find her."

"Never. Never! You hear me, Rose."

"Jud. *Jud*. Let me go."

The terror in his sister's voice cut through the rage that had gripped him.

Jud stared in horror at his hands that had gripped her bare arms.

"Your signet ring." A trembling whisper. "The diamonds are cutting into my skin."

Blood on blood. He felt the piece of jewellery burning his flesh. All colour left his face.

"Rose. I—" He released her arm.

"Am I cut?" The question strangled from her throat.

Jud felt his heart slam against his ribs. Please, *please*, it couldn't be. He could never forgive himself.

"I can't—I can't see. Lift your sleeve."

She inched the cloth higher. Her face was ashen. "Tell me brother. Am I to carry the shame of bearing a Gemini firstborn?"

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