

Partial Draft:

The Zodiac Heir

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

Chapter 6

"No blood."

"By Libra." His sister sank to the ground.

Jud averted his eyes as Rose pulled the fabric back over her arm. "I could have ruined your life."

"As well you should have known bringing a human into this world."

At the sound Jud whirled, shifting in front of his sister.

"I am not the one threatening her purity." The girl who had appeared out of nowhere crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"Impertinent child." Jud didn't relinquish his position. The girl looked harmless enough. The archery equipment on her back did not.

Far from intimidated, the girl shrugged one scrawny shoulder and made to turn back to where she had come from. "Have it your way then."

"Wait." Rose, who had struggled back to her feet behind Jud pushed in front of him.

Jud cursed low under his breath. "Rose."

For all they knew, the girl could be a spy sent by the Water Zodiacs, or any one of a number of Land Zodiacs feeling hostile toward the Royal family. One draw of the bow and his sister's blood would soak into the ground.

Ignoring his warning, Rose advanced on the girl. "You must be his." She studied the scrawny thing with blatant excitement. "The Archer's charge."

Jud drew in a startled breath. How could he have overlooked the connection.

Nobody knew these woods like the Archer except for, maybe, the Archer's charge, a girl who had appeared unannounced at the Archer's doorstep a number of years earlier. A girl who did not officially exist, her heritage and lineage as much a mystery as her origin.

The girl's chin came up. "Some might argue he's mine."

Jud held back a disbelieving snort. "Nobody owns the Archer."

"Nor does anybody own me."

"He knows you're out here talking to us?" he asked.

The slight flush creeping into the girl's cheekbones told him everything he needed to know.

"Take us to him and he will never know we spoke," he said.

"Don't take you to him and he will never know we met," the girl countered.

Jud's jaw set in a hard line.

A simpleton she was not. And now he had given away the fact that he was lost looking for the man.

Although Jud had frequently roamed these woods as a child, he had never once stumbled across the Archer's abode.

Some claimed that the forest around the cave-like dwelling changed too fast for anyone to remember its exact location. Yet, those who were invited—or those who were in love and in need of a mating—found the entrance to the Archer's cave easily enough.

Unfortunately, Jud could claim neither. The only advantage he had was his determination.

He studied the mulish tilt to the girl's mouth.

"You know who I am," he said, ready to use his title to break through her stubborn resolve .

"I do recognise my better, Your Royal Highness?" She attempted an awkward curtsy and Jud realized it was social incompetence rather than disrespect that had given her the appearance of an insolent brat. But more than the girl's behaviour, her earlier words nagged at Jud's awareness.

"How did you know about Sarah?" he asked. "The woman I brought into this world."

Her expression turned wary as she answered. "Everyone knows the heir has fallen for a human mate."

Jud shook his head. "Only my family—" He broke off as understanding dawned, the small hairs on his arms rising in alarm. "The Archer has spoken to the King. By all that is balanced, how could he have beaten me to it? He doesn't know where the Archer lives any more than I do."

The girl's gaze darted nervously between Jud and his sister. "My Master was summoned."

"You mention that now?"

At his thundering shout, she pressed further into the thicket. Jud forced his muscles to relax. "I need to see him." Now more than ever. "What will it take for you to show me the way?" But he was talking to the softly swaying branches of a blackberry bush.

"Hey," he called out. "Hey." He shot a disbelieving glance at his sister. "She's gone."

"Not quite." Rose gathered her skirts to pick up an object that had fallen to the ground.

Jud looked at the piece of wood in confusion. The bark had been whittled off, a lethally sharp tip pointing away from his sister's fragile flesh.

"She left a mark. She's leading us to him."

Jud frowned. "She couldn't simply tell us where to go?"

Rose contemplated the makeshift arrow. "She didn't strike me as someone who would break a promise made to her Master."

Whatever that was supposed to mean.

Rose's mouth tipped up at the corner. "I think I'd like to be her friend. She looked rather lonely, don't you think?"

Instead of answering, Jud headed into the underbrush. Trust his sister to attach to herself to the most peculiar being in the entire Zodiac World.

They couldn't have gone for more than a handful of minutes, picking up more arrows along the way, when the entrance to a large cave appeared before them. A thousand-year-old oak had dug its roots into the stone around it. Inside metal clanged loudly and the air was hot like a furnace.

Jud spotted the scrawny figure of the girl squatting beside the entrance whittling

away pieces of a branch. She looked up as they approached.

“I thought your Master melded hearts, not metal” he said.

The knife scraping over wood stilled. “Forging weapons relaxes him.” She pointed the tip of her whittling knife at the wall, where an entire arsenal was hung on pegs of all sizes.

“His designs are stunning.” Walking up to the display, Rose ran a fingertip over the intricate pattern of a particularly remarkable gun sword.

“And functional.” The girl’s voice was full of pride.

“Yet, all official weapons are manufactured by our factories in the north,” Jud said. “Why doesn’t he sell them?”

“Much better to use them against uninvited guests.”

At the sudden appearance of a dark figure at her side Rose jumped, sending an axe the size of a horse’s head crashing to the ground. The Archer bent to retrieve the tool, the handle sliding comfortably into his grip, firelight dancing on the burnished metal. He rotated his wrist and the weapon came to life. As if possessed the blade seethed and hissed in a way that should have been impossible for a weapon this size.

Jud took a step forward, forcing the Archer to cease his display or risk slicing the heir in two.

“And thus we finally meet,” he said.

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Editing by: N/A

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