



**THE
ZODIAK
PRINKE**

BY DAVID BERGER

◊ A STANDALONE TASK FORCE: GAEA TALE ◊

Brandon Jeffries, aka ZODIAK, is one of four members of the United Nations Task Force: Gaea, an elite group whose sole responsibility is to protect the Earth from metaphysical threats.

Brandon opened his eyes and saw shadow, a muddled tint, and he then realized he was in a warehouse, his arms stretched out and chained. As soon as he was aware his feet were bound, he felt the metal around his ankles digging into his flesh. Whoever had done this to him knew enough to keep him off the ground. Being an Arkadeian, he gained strength from contact with Gaea, but without that contact, he would be no stronger than an average person over time. Pulling the chains brought sharp pain, and he felt the air move around him, across his bare chest. His stupor lessened, and he tried to call upon the zodiac signs Taurus or Aries to help break his bonds, but his connection had been broken—someone had removed his amulet and somehow impaired him, but how? He growled and pulled with every ounce of power to snap the chains.

“You’ll hurt yourself if you keep doing that.”

Brandon didn’t know the voice, but he now knew he wasn’t alone in this dank place. The voice was male, and it didn’t have the gruffness he would expect from a creature or the haughtiness of a god. His drowsiness dissipated, and the silhouette of wooden shipping crates and pallets loomed around him. One two-bulb fluorescent light buzzed above, flickering every so often, casting not enough light to see more than a few feet. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes.

“That won’t work, either.” The man’s voice seemed to taunt him.

Narrowing his eyes in the direction of slight movement, Brandon grunted.

“I know you’re connected to your brother, and that connection is enhanced through Gemini. However, without your extraordinary amulet or contact with Gaea, you’re no more than an ordinary man. Well, an ordinary demigod, I suppose. That won’t matter too much longer.”

Again, Brandon pulled on the chains, and the pain rifled through him like a bolt of Zeus’ lightning. He breathed slowly through clenched teeth, and tried one more time. This time, he cried out.

The man laughed. “I warned you about that.”

“What do you want?” Brandon enunciated each word.

“I would think that’s rather obvious.” His captor chuckled. “The question is whether or not you’ll be cooperative. The alternative would be... unpleasant.”

From the dusty obscurity, the man emerged, the heels of his shoes, calculated and confident, tapping the floor. Not enough light highlighted his features, but Brandon could see the shape of his tormentor who had moved in a little closer. The fluorescent light gave this man an ochre cast, and just enough blackness remained to keep his features hidden.

“It wasn’t easy to get you, Brandon. I don’t have your skill in hand-to-hand combat nor do I have any otherworldly abilities, so I had to do some research. I’ve watched you for quite some time. Well, I also had some guidance.”

“Huh. I have a stalker. Wouldn’t be the first time,” Brandon muttered. “I’m touched.”

Walking behind Brandon, the man said nothing, but then he giggled to himself. A click, and the light above went out. Completing the circle back to where he had stood originally, he

pulled up a wooden chair, sitting just a few feet away from his captive. Moonlight hit the floor just shy of him.

“Will you tell me, or do I need to persuade you?” The lilt of his voice made him sound almost playful.

“You seem to have all the answers,” Brandon said. “What do you think? What did your research tell you?”

Silence. Five minutes elapsed before the man spoke.

“Tell me.” The timbre of his voice deepened.

Ten minutes more passed, and all the man could hear was Brandon’s shallow breathing.

“Very well.” He left the chair for a few moments, and when he returned, he was pushing half a steel drum on wheels to just under Brandon’s feet.

Brandon couldn’t see much, but he did notice the man put something in the drum and toss in a lit match. When the scent reached him, he coughed a little at first, but then he couldn’t stop. A minute went by before the man used his foot to move the makeshift brazier away. Brandon’s coughing gradually ceased.

“Don’t like that, do you? I’ll bet it burned your throat and made your eyes water.” He shined a flashlight on Brandon’s chest. “Oh, and I see lesions have formed, too.”

“*Tharmakondios*. I know what it is.” He coughed.

The man walked over to Brandon, his face in full moonlight. He stood a few inches shorter than Brandon, with an average build, short brown hair, and glasses. He leaned toward his captive, the stench of stale gas station coffee on his breath.

“Then, you know what it will do to you.” He returned to his chair, crossing one leg over the other. “Imagine my good fortune to stumble upon ‘The Bane of Zeus’. It’s supposed to do the exact opposite of nectar, for a god. Brandon, if you just tell me what I want to know, I’ll let you go.”

With as much strength as he could muster, Brandon laughed with the occasional cough.

“Did I say something funny?”

Brandon continued to laugh.

“Why are you laughing?” He uncrossed his legs and sat up.

“Even if you got what you wanted, and you freed me, what then? Let me tell you what will happen. If my brother finds you, he will disembowel you with his sword. If my other teammates find you, one will fry you with Zeus’ lightning, and the other will use all of the elements to tear you apart.”

“When I get what I want, I can handle them.”

“I wasn’t finished. If my father finds you? Hunh. He won’t kill you, not immediately. You’re familiar with Marsyas? Do you know what it would feel like to be flayed alive?”

“Is that supposed to scare me? You can’t hurt me. I know that you’re forbidden from harming humans. I’m not from the underworld.”

The man pushed the brazier a little closer so that the fumes started to affect Brandon once more. He knew just enough to keep Brandon subdued but not enough to do serious damage. From a wooden crate, he pulled some metal rods and put them in the brazier along with a liquid. Pulsing as if alive, the fire made the metal rods glow a bright orange.

“Who... are you?” Brandon coughed intermittently, and his skin started to turn a pale shade of green.

“What would that matter? Knowing who I am gives you nothing. I, however, know much about you, Mr. Jeffries. By the way, how are your adoptive parents, Evelyn and Max? Talked with them lately?”

Brandon pulled on the chains and tried to raise his voice. “Stay away from them!”

The man grinned. Taking a metal rod from the brazier, he pointed it toward Brandon’s chest and took a step forward. Brandon winced from the heat radiating off the metal.

“Well?”

“Go to Tartaros.”

Taking one step, the man touched the metal rod to Brandon’s chest, and the smell of burning flesh mixed with the *tharmakondios* fumes. Brandon grunted but wouldn’t give the man the satisfaction of screaming from the pain. When the man removed the rod, the half-dollar sized symbol of Aries had left its mark.

“A nice side effect of the *tharmakondios* is that it lets me brand you. I hated to do that to you, Brandon. I just wanted you to know how serious I am about what I want. By the sign of *Krios*, I mark you.”

He spoke as if this were an everyday occurrence, with a casual tone and gentle lilt. Twenty minutes crawled by, and Brandon’s silence brought him three more brands. Sweat ran down his face and into his eyes. Still, he wouldn’t let this man see him taken down and kept his pain to himself. He had never experienced the effects of *tharmakondios* before, so he didn’t know its properties, but from his father’s accounts, the consequences of exposure ranged from disfigurement to death. Regulating his breathing, he thought about the manacle on his wrist and his *Asulos Pistis* to Gaea. That sacred pledge had given him balance in the past, so he focused all his attention on the sensation he had when they were connected spiritually. His physical trauma had kept his mind unfocused, so he wasn’t able to put himself in that special mindset.

“I told you. That won’t work. No one’s coming to help you.” The man’s voice became sharper, and he jammed the fifth brand onto Brandon’s chest. “By the signs of *Tavros*, *Didymoi*, *Karkinos*, and *Leon*, I mark you!” He laughed as he walked into the shadows. “I’ll be right back. Nature calls.”

Brandon’s exposure to that acrid smoke had eroded more than his physical strength; his spirit had started to diminish as well. Without his connection to Gaea, he felt like his soul was floating in the ether. He couldn’t even feel the amulet, and he knew it had to be nearby. When he first received it, he was told that he needed to be touching it for it to work. What he couldn’t figure out was how this man removed it from him; no one was supposed to be able to do that without his consent. Had he given consent before he arrived in the warehouse? Did he know this man somehow and trust him with the Eye of Ouranos? If a mortal man could subdue him, why had nobody done it before? Surely, this man had to have had divine help, Brandon mused. His moment of thought halted as soon as he heard the man return.

“Much better, which is more than I can say for you. Reconsidered yet? You can’t be feeling well with all of that poison coursing its way through you.”

“Between the *Tharmakondios* and you, I’m not sure what’s worse.”

The man grabbed another iron, and the sixth brand left its mark on Brandon’s chest.

“By the sign of *Parthenos*—”

Brandon’s cry of pain echoed. “You bastard! Stop doing that!” He pulled on the chains and grunted.

“I mark you!” The man continued. “I’m surprised you’re still conscious. Surely the pain has to be mind-numbing.”

“Let me make this clear for you...” He coughed. “You will *never* be able to use the amulet. It won’t work for you.”

“I have it on good authority that you’re wrong.” The man went to one of the stacks of pallets and picked up the amulet. “I was able to remove it from you, wasn’t I?”

Even in the dimness, Brandon could see the Earthsteel disk and the gemstones picking up the ambient light. With his concentration affected, he couldn’t feel the energy of the zodiac. His entire body ached, and his arms felt like tenderized meat. The brands on his chest continued to throb, and he concluded it had to be the herb limiting his natural healing ability. Regardless of whether he touched the ground or not, he was still the son of Apollo. His captor moved around in the shadows, and occasionally Brandon would hear the cracking of wood and the subsequent echo as the wood hit the floor. Shipping crates, he thought. They had to be. Whoever this was, he was able to subdue a demigod. After all this time hanging by his arms, Brandon’s body ached, and the ancient herb diminished almost all of his strength.

Who would have aided this man in capturing him, Brandon asked himself, especially telling him that someone other than its bearer could use the amulet? Even though he knew that aspects of his heritage weren’t always accurate, having learned so much from his father, he had to have faith in the knowledge that certain things held true. The amulet of Ouranos bonded to its bearer, and Brandon’s ability to draw from the zodiac signs came from that bond. Not even Apollo or Zeus could use it without his consent, and that consent had to be genuine. Divine gifts came with intricate rules and regulations, he had come to learn. This... man... seemed to have knowledge that he shouldn’t. Brandon thought perhaps this man was delusional, but that wouldn’t explain how he had managed to overpower the son of a god. A dangerous herb like *tharmakondios* wouldn’t be lying around, either. Someone had to have harvested it in the underworld without Hades knowing, and that would mean either eluding Cerberos or knowing some sort of enchantment that would allow him to pass into an ethereal realm like that of the dead. In any event, this man had needed help.

“I don’t suppose you’d tell me how you were able to do all this. I mean, there’s no place for me to go. You’ve seen to that.”

The man chuckled. “You’re just like all the others. You think that because you’re powerful that you’re untouchable. Being an Olympeian doesn’t make you better. Just different. And like any other people, you have weaknesses as well as enemies.”

Tell me something I don’t know, Brandon thought. He racked his brain for who this man could possibly be or be in league with. Of all the gods, Ares would be the most logical choice, but he wouldn’t be so obvious. Plus, he’d have no reason to do this. None of the Olympeians, in fact, would. They also knew that incurring Apollo’s wrath would be ill advised. The son of Zeus might not be as powerful as his father, but he was a formidable adversary to any of the gods, especially when it came to his children. It could be someone from within the underworld, but Brandon couldn’t think of anyone with the power or influence to reach into the mortal world. In addition, he or she would have to do so without getting Hades’ attention.

“Once you’re branded, your connection to the zodiac will be broken, and then the power of the amulet will be mine.” The man jabbed a hot iron into Brandon’s side. “By the sign of *Ydrohoos*, I mark you.”

Brandon’s face contorted from the burn. “Who... Who told you that?” His voice quivered.

Another brand pressed into the tender skin of his abdomen followed by, “By the sign of *Toksotis*, I mark you.”

His body heaving from the pain, from the brands and the *tharmakondios*, Brandon glared and gritted his teeth. The man spoke no more to him, and he would leave for anywhere from ten minutes to thirty minutes, only to return and continue the branding process. Brandon’s body had withered a little, as if the moisture in his skin had been removed. His hair was matted to his head from sweat, and his breathing grew even shallower. After the man placed the eleventh brand, he picked up the amulet and brushed his fingers over the jewels. His eyes came alive, and a smile spread across his face. Lifting the amulet over his head, he shrugged his shoulders as he bore the weight of it.

“It’s heavier than I thought. I suppose it must be your Arkadeian and Olympeian lineage that enables you to wear it. Incredible.” He removed it. “Once you’ve been marked, I will be able to use it, but I needed to know what it felt like before that happened.”

He looked over to the limp man hanging from the chains, his skin a pale green, marked with bleeding spots where the brands were. Getting close enough to see Brandon’s face, the man’s expression went blank and seemed to soften for the briefest moment. Within inches from his prisoner’s face, he lowered his head.

“If you’d just tell me how it works,” his voice dropped to a whisper, “I wouldn’t have to hurt you.”

Parting his lips to speak, Brandon lifted his face. The man took that as a sign that Brandon was indeed ready to tell him whatever he needed to know. How could he not? He was breaths away from unconsciousness.

With a gravelly voice, the words came. “May... your soul... burnnnn...”

The man turned his head, reached down to the last rod, and with more emphasis than he had done so before, he pressed the glowing shape of *Libra* into Brandon’s body, holding it there long enough so he could smell the burning skin.

“By the sign of *Zygos*, I. Mark. You.”

Brandon, like a dead autumn leaf barely clinging to a branch, hung there. The man put the amulet back around his neck, reaching his hands toward the ceiling. A few minutes passed, and he lowered his hands and returned to his prisoner.

“Why isn’t it working? I did what I was supposed to do! Tell me!” He pushed his prisoner with both hands, and the body swung back. “Tell me!”

Muttering to himself, the man entered the shadows of the warehouse returning with a scroll. Spreading it out on a pallet, he put rocks in each corner to hold it open. He pointed, dragging his finger across, mouthing the words.

“I *did* that. I branded him with the signs. Why! Why!” He slammed his fist down, and the rocks jumped. “Maybe I overlooked something... there is a piece of the scroll missing.”

Meanwhile, Brandon’s eyes fluttered open. With almost all of his strength sapped, he could hardly lift his head, but he tried to look over at the high window on the other side of the warehouse where a few tiny stars twinkled in the black night. Wisps of *tharmakondios* smoke lingered in the air around him. He heard the man rail on to himself about what should have been an easy task, but he had made a mistake or missed something. The respite from the branding gave Brandon some time to gather his thoughts even with the Bane of Zeus ravaging his body and mind. His thinking became erratic, jumping from one mission to another with the Task Force: Gaea team to moments with Dan to the quiet times when he would sit outside at night and contemplate how to improve himself in small ways. His contemplation was broken

when the man stomped back to him, putting something on a stack of pallets hidden by the shadows.

“You are going to tell me what I need to know. I’m sure I’ve done *everything* right, but there’s something missing. I know you know what it is.”

His eyelids heavy, Brandon stared at the man, showing no expression.

“I can ease your suffering, Brandon. I can stop the pain. Just tell me.”

Again, Apollo’s son hung limp, his chest barely moving. Every so often, he would cough to show he was still indeed conscious.

“All right. Well, there’s one other option, then.” He paused. “You will need to relinquish your pledge to Gaea.”

Brandon coughed. “Never...”

“Oh, Brandon. Don’t be like that. If you renounce your connection to her, whatever strength you’ve been able to retain will disappear, and it’ll be easier to take what I want.”

“*Asulos... Pistis...*”

“Yes, yes, I know all about that. That’s why I need you to give up the Earth Mother.”

Brandon didn’t have the strength to glare, but his hollow eyes sent the message: he wouldn’t do what the man wanted—ever.

The man sighed. “I was afraid of that.” He reached into the shadows and pulled out a reciprocating saw. “If you won’t do as I ask, I’ll have to remove the manacle myself.”

He pulled a stepladder up to Brandon and climbed so that he was within reach of Brandon’s right arm. The man touched the manacle as if it were fragile, brushing his fingers across the etchings.

“Such beautiful handiwork. Hephaestos did a great job, didn’t he? A shame I’ll have to remove it.”

“You... you can’t cut through that metal. It’s... god-forged.” He choked out the words.

A burst of laughter echoed. The man leaned forward toward Brandon’s face.

“I’m not going to cut off the manacle.” A smile spread on his face like oil on water.

Brandon’s eyes widened when he realized what the man meant. Under the influence of the *tharmakondios*, he wouldn’t be able to resist, nor would his imperviousness to injury prevent the saw blade from severing his arm. With the manacle removed, the pledge would be considered broken—a pledge that held the same weight as a Stygian oath. Brandon didn’t know what the consequences would be, even if the removal weren’t of his own doing. The man lifted the saw blade under the manacle on Brandon’s forearm.

“You know something? I’m a little peckish. I’ll be back soon. This will be your last chance to consider giving up the oath. Hang in there.” He snorted.

When Brandon heard the warehouse door click shut, he exhaled, releasing his pain. He didn’t know how much time he would have to figure a way out of this situation, or if he even could do that. In his current state, he would surely bleed out if his arm were cut off. Left in the silence and cloak of darkness, he ran through everything he could think of to free himself. If he could reach the saw, he could cut through the chains, but he was pulled so taut that he had little to no movement. He wouldn’t be alone long. With no way to contact anyone, and so weak that he couldn’t draw upon his connection with Dan through Gemini, whatever hope he had of escaping was evanescent. His thoughts went to his father and mother, to Evelyn and Max, to Aleta and Sarah, and then to Dan. Should this man succeed not only in stealing his birthright somehow, and perhaps killing him in the process, Brandon didn’t know what the repercussions would be. What he had told his captor earlier would certainly happen: the man would die an

unimaginably painful death, after unending suffering. Brandon was starting to make peace with his fate when he heard the door open, and the clacking of the man's shoes got closer.

"Well, that was entirely unsatisfying. I should know better than to eat fast food. Have you made your decision?"

He climbed the ladder once more with the saw, the blade's teeth highlighted by the moonlight.

"Before you cut my arm off... and that's the only way you'll get the manacle off me, tell me why. If I'm going to die from blood loss, I'd like to know at least that much."

"I will honor your last request." He placed the saw on the small shelf on the ladder. "I study archaeology at Boston University. Going for my masters. Never had the pleasure of being in your brother's classes, come to think of it. I might still have the chance, though. It'd be funny, wouldn't you think, if I were sitting in his class, your amulet around my neck? Anyway, I started classes last January."

The man began his tale, and just from the style of his self-involved storytelling, Brandon figured it would be a while. His thoughts went to the zodiac, and he remembered the first time he had to call upon them, especially Taurus. The connection he had made was almost at a cellular level, if that were even possible. That was when he knew he was truly connected. He thought about the sign, the stars that comprised it, and what it represented. When Zeus abducted Europa, he took the form of a bull, and to commemorate this love for her, he put a bull in the heavens.

"Tavros, for the strength and perseverance you have given me, I honor you." Brandon thought.

Brandon moved in his mind to Gemini, the representation of Castor and Polydeuces, a sign he had recently come to understand, and for which he had profound reverence. Through this sign, he was even more bound to his brother Dan.

"Didymoi, for the kinship and bond of brotherhood, I honor you."

In his many journeys, he had called upon Cancer, the crab that bit Heracles, but whose agility and power had been invaluable to him since he became the caretaker of the zodiac.

"Karkinos, for your gifts of strength and dexterity, I honor you."

The man's voice broke into Brandon's private communion.

"So, after I had a few classes under my belt, I heard about a dig in Krokos, near Olympos, but I'm sure you know where Krokos is. I knew I needed to be on that trip, so I made sure to get in good with the professors. I convinced my academic advisor to put in a good word, too. With my grades and eagerness, I was a shoe-in. I made the second cut for the team, and I had to put in a leave of absence at school and my job. We arrived in Greece in the spring of that year, and we had to go through training for the area. Once we were on site, I knew great things would happen."

Returning to his thoughts, Brandon recalled his connection to Leo, the representation of the Nemean lion slain by Heracles. A force of nature unto itself, it was memorialized by Zeus after its death with a place of honor in the heavens. Even though Hera brought on Heracles' madness, and subsequent trials, Zeus felt the lion had not transgressed and had become a victim of a goddess' jealousy.

"Leon, for your power and majesty, your royal deportment and stature, I honor you."

Moving across the skies in his mind, he arrived at Virgo, the representation of Astraea, daughter of the dawn, Eos. Through her innocence, Brandon had been able to maintain his own purity of spirit. He had remained a virgin by his own choosing, although he would still

have gained the blessings of Astraea had he not been. Her own purity strengthened him in ways beyond the physical.

“Parthenos, for your support of spirit and purity of intention, I honor you.”

Balance, or the search for it, had been ever-present in his life, and it was through Libra that he not only achieved a sense of physical equilibrium in battle, but he also felt his own personal balance had been augmented. It was perhaps the hardest quality to maintain, especially since it could shift with the slightest pressure, but this sign had done more than most in keeping him aligned.

“Zygos, for the balance you bring to mind, body, and spirit, I honor you.”

Like the crack of a whip, the man’s voice snapped Brandon back.

“Anyway, while I was in the cave, I wandered away from the group and saw these ruins buried in dirt and age. I couldn’t help but notice the inscription on the stones, and using what ancient Greek I knew, I figured out whom this shrine belonged to. I was going to tell my dig supervisor, but then I thought, why not just keep at it? I could make a name for myself, right? Once I brushed the dirt from the remains of an iron box, I knew I was about to discover something to bring fame and fortune my way.”

The sign of Scorpio coalesced in Brandon’s mind, and he reflected on all the times when those qualities came in handy: the stealth and strength, the power behind his punch, a sting if you will. Viewed as a sinister creature, he could harness the energy and make it work for him. The grip he could muster like the scorpion’s claws, the one who bested the hunter Orion.

“Skorpios, for the confidence and potency, for the cunning, I honor you.”

One of his most called upon signs, Sagittarius, was the one he would be if he had to remain in one form. The power of the centaur archer, with its aim true, gave him strength and skill. A noble race, the centaurs grew to prominence due to the leadership of Chiron, the one who taught the mightiest of heroes. He felt the closest to his ancestors in ancient Arkadeia when he took this form.

Toksotis, for your archer’s arm and your equine power, I honor you.”

Like a river’s waters, his thoughts rushed into one another, and he remembered the power he felt from Capricorn, the nurturing of the goat Amaltheia, the one who nursed infant Zeus. This half-goat, half-fish helped fuel him during his most needy times, and she provided him with the sustenance only an immortal could.

Aigokeros, for keeping me strong and giving of yourself, I honor you.

Brandon’s captor continued his story. “After finally breaking the shovel with all those attempts to open the seal, I pounded my fists against the box, cutting my hand on the corner. At first, I pulled my hand back to check the wound, but the blood had dripped onto the box, seeping into the locking mechanism. I had grabbed a rag to bind my wound when I heard a click. When I looked down, the latch had opened. My blood had been the key. The metal grew warmer, as if it were alive, and lifting the lid showed me what had been hidden all these centuries...”

Knowing his time of reckoning was coming, Brandon let his thoughts lapse once more to the last of the signs. When he was in India, he fought against Lyssa, goddess of rage, and summoned Aquarius’ power, the ability to harden water without turning it to ice. The original water bearer was Ganymede, Zeus’ lover who poured nectar for the gods. This ability to harness the liquid element had served him well in subsequent battles, and for that, he was grateful.

Ydrohoos, for allowing me control over that which is dynamic and potent, I honor you.

As a child, Brandon had heard the story of Aphrodite and Eros fleeing the monster Typhon during the *Titanomachia*, or Great War of the Titans and Olympeians. She turned herself and her son into fish, binding him to her with an unbreakable cord so that they could never be separated. It was this mother's love for her offspring that gave the cord its strength, and it was the transformation into fish that provided longevity. Once safe, Aphrodite put the image of two fish bound by a cord into the heavens, showing that Love and Beauty would always be connected. From this sign, Brandon was forever bound to his teammates, Sarah, Aleta, and his brother Dan. No matter where they would be, he could find them. This sign, like Gemini, solidified their bonds.

"Ikhthyes, for your unyielding binding of spirit through love, I honor you."

Finally, coming full circle, he remembered his connected to Aries, the first sign. The Ram represented the golden ram that saved Phrixus and Helle from sacrifice, and it was its fleece that was sought after by Jason and the Argonauts. This wooly skin had the properties to heal those of pure heart who touched it; those whose heart had been darkened by ill intent would receive no succor from it. Brandon knew that as a son of Apollo, he had a heightened healing ability, but the connection to Aries augmented that in a world that didn't worship the gods.

"Krios, for your gift of healing and protection of my body, I honor you."

The man's final part of this story brought a glassy look to Brandon's eyes, knowing he might not make it out of this situation.

"I found within the box scrolls belonging to Atë. You probably remember her as the goddess of evil and folly, but she would become my savior. With my rudimentary understanding of ancient Greek, I read how her priests described how she wanted Ouranos' power to control the skies. Her envy of Zeus drove her to find a way to get the original sky god's magic for herself. The writings told of a powerful amulet forged by Ouranos, one that gave him power over the heavens and all that it contained. *Your amulet.*" The man squealed.

"A second scroll talked about the branding. Should Atë be able to brand Ouranos with the signs, she could remove his power over them. I still don't know why that didn't work.

"A third scroll spoke of the 'Bane of Zeus' that she had stolen from Hades and had sealed in a kylix. She had intended to use it, but when Kronos castrated Ouranos, the amulet was lost. It took me a few hours, but I found a few of the clay vessels. Most had been broken, their contents gone. Only two sealed ones remained, and I cracked them both open. Wrapped in wool woven with *moly* was the *tharmakondios*. Amazing how powerful that *moly* is, eh? Who knew the same herb that saved Odysseus would also preserve the poison within the cloth?

"I returned to the States with the scrolls and the herb, not having any idea what to do with them, even though I knew they would define my path. Then, I felt like the Fates understood my plight when I learned about you and your Task Force. I saw you on the news, wearing this..." He held up the amulet, its gemstones gleaming in the moonlight. "It was then clear to me what I needed to do. I followed you from the Task Force offices, watching your every move, until I learned that you frequented that café, The Beanery. Awful coffee. Don't know how you stand it. Anyway, I'd sit in the back by the magazine rack, keeping an eye out for you. Every time you walked in, I'd get goose bumps. I mean, you were *the* Zodiak of Task Force: Gaea. You might be asking how I knew, since you all had this... what's it called... glamour protecting your identities. Funny thing about being in contact with *moly* is that it renders magical things inert. So, when I saw you in action on the news, I could see the real you.

“That leads me to last night. You always showed up around 4 p.m. at The Beanery, so I waited until you ordered your coffee. I’d been chatting up the barista for a few weeks, so when she had her back turned, I put some diluted *tharmakondios* mixed with Ativan in your coffee. It took longer than I thought for it to take effect, but you eventually started getting bleary-eyed. Do you remember? About ten minutes after that, you went to stand up, but you couldn’t get your bearings and slipped back into your chair. When the barista asked if you were okay, you waved her off, but I could tell the poison was taking its toll. The second time you tried to stand, I jumped from my chair to catch your arm. You slurred a thank you. I assured the barista that I was a friend, so I led you to my car. That’s how we ended up here. The Ativan kept you out for a while, and I’m willing to bet you didn’t remember how you got here when you came to. One side effect of Ativan is retrograde amnesia. There. I’ve given you your last request. Anything you’d like to tell me?”

His head off to one side, Brandon stayed silent, his chest movement all but stopped. The man patted the amulet. Picked up the saw with one hand, he held Brandon’s wrist with the other.

“Once I remove this, you’ll bleed to death which will break your bond with the amulet. You can’t say I haven’t give you chances.”

He placed the blade against Brandon’s arm and was about to turn on the saw when something caught his attention. The brands on Brandon’s chest seemed less pronounced, as if they had started to heal. The man shot his eyes around the body of his captive to see if maybe it was a play of the fluorescent lighting, but he knitted his brows.

“What—What’s going on? When I last looked, your branded skin was scarred and bleeding. Now it looks like... what’s happening?” His voice quivered, rising in pitch.

While the man stood stupefied, he heard a strange screeching sound, and scrambled down the ladder, still clutching the saw. Whatever the sound was, it made him jerk his head in all directions. He walked closer to Brandon and saw no movement, but then he heard a snap and flew back as Brandon’s feet pushed against his chest. As he landed, the saw slid across the concrete into the darkness.

“How did you—how did you break free? That herb should have drained your strength!”

Before he got his answer, he heard the same screeching sound, and then the chains holding Brandon’s arms flew away from where they were bolted. Brandon landed on his feet, his legs shaking. Light from above put him in shadow, but the man saw the silhouetted figure pull the chains one at a time from his wrists and then from his ankles. With a back kick, Brandon knocked the brazier far into the blackness of the warehouse. The man used his feet to push himself away as Brandon took steps toward him until his back was against a stack of pallets.

“How—?”

Brandon’s voice had regained much of its resonance. “While you were bloviating, I was concentrating on my connection to the zodiac. What you failed to understand is that I am the ‘keeper of the Twelve’, amulet, or no amulet. That doesn’t mean I *control* them. It means I *serve* them. You wanted nothing more than to make them do your bidding, but they would never have done that. When you were marking me with brands to claim ownership, I was honoring them by respecting their power. Atë didn’t understand that part. The zodiac signs existed long before I was born, and they will continue to exist long after I’m gone. The amulet is a sacred trust. Even if you’d succeeded in removing my manacle, killing me, the amulet would be noth-

ing more than an Earthsteel trinket hanging around your neck. The power to commune with the signs would have died with me.”

“I followed everything, everything Atë said to do! I—I made sure to... made sure to—”

“What you made sure to do was seal your own fate. You’re right. I can’t kill a human being. Atë may be the goddess of evil and folly, and you are indeed a fool. I don’t need my friends or my father to exact justice. In fact, I won’t be the one to do it.”

Brandon yanked the amulet from the man’s neck and held the disk up. Moonbeams, like arrows, highlighted by dust shooting into the warehouse struck the gemstones, bringing forth three colorful sparks. Like fireflies, they swirled hovering around the man on the floor before flying into the darker corners. One by one, a crab, scorpion, and lion whose skin resembled the heavens illuminated by individual constellations stepped into the flickering yellow light. Brandon headed toward the door.

“You wanted to become acquainted with the zodiac signs. So now you will be.” He paused at the door. “They don’t exact justice at my request. They do so at their insistence. I am the Zodiac Prince, and I serve the will of the stars.”

Each of the creatures took hold of a limb, and the man cried out in horror at the thought of being torn apart. Instead, he gradually became nothing but specks of light, and the lion, scorpion, and crab returned to their celestial path, holding fast to the newest constellation.

The door clicked shut behind Brandon who looked above the warehouse to see the newly shaped stars take their place.

“Ouranos, welcome your newest charge, forever held in your grasp. He wanted to be among the circle of animals, and now he will be, henceforth called *The Fool*.”

Donning his amulet once more, Brandon became the Sagittarian centaur and galloped toward home.

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