

Louis Decrevel

STRANGERWOOD (book 1)

25 May 2023

hi@loueee.com

+61438885419

*If the Zodiac are Earth's last hope,
what does that make Max Turner?*

Synopsis

Max Turner prefers playing games on his phone to playing baseball. When his teammates gang up on him and break his phone, he runs off into Strangerwood to escape. There he meets an enormous, overly friendly golden retriever, who follows him.

Max angrily flings his bat away. The dog disappears after it. In the twilight the rocks underfoot come alive and make Max stumble, banging his head and knocking him out.

Max awakens in a small cave, the opening blocked by a strange energy barrier. When the dog returns, Max discovers that the baseball bat *earths* the barrier's energy and enables him to escape. He notices a small, strange, goatlike creature imprisoned in another cell, and frees it.

The goat thing turns out to be *Capricorn*, a Zodiac Lord, one of the ancient defenders of Earth. He's in a weakened state and needs Max's help to escape the meteorites and return to the other Zodiac Lords. They soon become overwhelmed, until Emily from school arrives, just in time to save them both—as well as the dog, who belongs to her. They discover that a space elevator, under construction on the far side of Strangerwood, is *earthing* the atmosphere—like the baseball bat with the barrier—and that the only way to stop the meteorites is to restore Earth's defences by bringing down the elevator. Together with the other Zodiac Lords, they fight off the meteorites and infiltrate the space elevator, setting up the sequels in the Out-Of-This-World series.

Out-Of-This-World Things I Saw in Strangerwood

1.

My baseball coach is an alien. I'm sure of it. He has no idea of normal human behaviour. Look at him yelling. His cheeks are red and he's spewing instructions like he's possessed. I bet under that sweaty layer of fat and the too-small Orioles t-shirt there's a little green man trying desperately to communicate some important message to us.

Oh. He's looking at me. He's yelling at me. Why is he yelling at me?

I paused my game and pulled my earbuds out.

'—for a WEEK, Turner! I said: BATTER! UP!'

I looked to my right. The bench was empty. Bases were loaded. I'd been daydreaming again. I cursed under my breath. I stuffed the stupid helmet on and jammed my phone into my pocket. I grabbed a metal bat from the rack and half-ran to the plate. They were all laughing. My own teammate on third swore at me. I planted my shoes in the dirt and rubbed my eyes. All this natural light was a pain.

Why can't we just do it on a screen? Everything else is online. The catcher was making hand signals to the pitcher. I hated that. I looked up at the pitcher. There was evil in his eyes. Great. I tightened my grip on the bat, settled into a squat and held the bat over my shoulder. Bring it on.

I swung, but gave up halfway through. I chickened out when I realised it was too low.

'STRIKE ONE!'

More laughter. This sucks. As if I'm gonna play baseball again next year, no matter what Dad says. Why can't I spend *my* time how I like? *He's* always in the office. *So* not fair.

The pitcher wound up again, and let fly.

'Hey!' I jumped back mid-swing as the ball shot through to the catcher's mitt. 'Ref!' I appealed to the umpire behind the catcher. 'Did ya see his eyes? He aimed right *for* me!'

The umpire gave one shake of his head. ‘STEERIKE TWO!’

Arrrh, how infuriating! Fine. I tapped the plate meaningfully and looked defiantly back to the mound. The pitcher was spinning the ball in his glove and grinning. Punk. I gripped the bat and narrowed my eyes. The centrefielder called out for another one like the last.

That’s it. I’m gonna smash this thing right between the pair of ’em. I knew I shouldn’t’ve done it, but we had just watched this Babe Ruth clip in history, and I was ready to quit anyway. So I did it. *I pointed*. I rested the end of the bat on the plate and raised my left hand and pointed to the sky between the pitcher and centrefielder. I think I shocked them, for a second. Then *everybody* laughed. Man! Whatever.

The pitcher coiled up, then released.

I swung with all of my might. *Crack!* Yes!

Hang on. The ball’s at my feet. And my—thigh hurts. Why does my thigh hurt?

I dropped the bat and staggered a step back. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone. The screen was cracked. A jagged white spiderweb of broken glass obscured the paused game. My hearing suddenly returned, and they were all laughing. Argh! I wanted to smash them all. Instead I cried.

Yeah, I know. Good move, Max Turner.

I didn’t mean to. Couldn’t help it. Just found myself crying. So I ran off.

2.

I didn't stop running 'til I couldn't breathe. My chest ached. I bent double and vomited on the ground. My life was a mess. Fat chance of flying under the radar at school now. Those baseball jocks would tell everyone what happened. I'd never live it down. I wandered through the scrubland behind the school. It was already starting to get dark. I didn't want to go home—not yet. So I just walked. Lost in my dark, dark thoughts.

It was only when I noticed a scraping sound that I realised that I was still carrying the baseball bat. I had it clenched in my fist and was dragging it along the dirt track. I held it up and considered it for a moment. It was a Louisville Slugger. Surprisingly light and darn strong. I took a few skipping steps off the track and smashed the bat into the trunk of a pine tree. The tree didn't budge, so all of the force vibrated up the length of the aluminium bat, sending my arms to jelly. Ow. I tried again on the branch of a smaller silver birch. This time it worked. The branch broke off and splinters flew everywhere.

That felt better.

I picked up a small piece of the broken branch and threw it as hard as I could.

That felt better still.

I kept walking along the track. Then I heard heavy footsteps and the bushes beside me burst apart. A massive golden retriever landed at my feet, dropping the stick I had thrown. It squatted down and let out a bark. A really loud bark. Which made me jump. Which made me feel worse, for some reason. So I just ignored the dog and kept on walking. It followed me with the stick, dropped it and barked again. Stupid mutt. I spun around and held up the bat threateningly. It cowered a bit and lagged behind, after that. It didn't bark again, either. I kept walking. Then I heard the distant sounds of a crowd, and noticed weird lights emanating from beyond the wood. *Strangerwood*. I paused. The way home was not through the wood. But I really didn't want to go home and face Dad. The dog trotted in amongst the trees as if testing

the ground, then gave a cute little whiney *ruff*. That decided it. If Dad hassled me later, I'd say I was taking the dog back to its owners.

It wasn't long before I recognised carnival music, though why they would be set up on the far side of Strangerwood I still don't know. As I came to the edge of the wood I could see a great red-and-white big top looming beyond the prison bars of silhouetted tree trunks. Its lights and sounds permeated the forest and lightened my dark mood. It was me who was in prison. So I made a break and followed the dog into the clearing. It felt a bit dodgy carrying a bat to a fair, so I doubled back and propped it behind a tree. It felt like a load off, to be honest, and as I turned back to the fair I felt almost happy. There was a wooden green and gold caravan with a drawing of a crystal ball scratched onto a blackboard, a man playing accordion with a monkey on a leash, and a golden, bubbling popcorn cart. Mm-m, that popcorn smelt good. I realised then that I was starving. But I had no cash.

All the people were moving towards the big top. Where did they all come from? Who cares. I followed them in, hoping to get ushered through without a ticket. There was a strongman at the tent door. As I passed him I couldn't help but stare at his huge arms.

I followed the line inside. But then the strongman called out, 'Oy!'

I hesitated, then turned around slowly. He was holding the dog by the scruff and looking around. 'This dog yours?' he boomed.

I paused again, then gulped and said, 'he—he's with me.'

The strongman softened. 'Keep him close, champ. I don't want him skittering the lions and tigers.'

'Yes, sir,' I said to the strongman. 'Come on,' I said to the dog. He bounded up to me, tail flapping furiously. We made our way up the wooden grandstand to an empty section at the top where I thought I could control the dog better. Turns out, he was fine. There were elephants dancing, white horses with acrobats, tigers doing tricks and even a lion jumping

through a fiery ring. This was old-school. I didn't think they had animals in circuses anymore. The dog just kept panting stupidly through the whole thing, and every now and then looked up at me with a huge, stupid grin.

Then the clowns came out. I had *thought* that clowns were lame, but the way they ran with their oversized shoes just made me laugh and laugh. That made me feel much better.

Then I noticed a guy sitting in the row in front of mine. Not sure where he came from—I didn't see him arrive. He looked back and laughed with me. It was a bit weird, but then I realised he just wanted to share the moment. He was holding a huge box of popcorn. Oh man! It smelt so good. My stomach gurgled rudely. He turned back again, one eyebrow raised, and held the box towards me. I didn't know what to do. At school they had drilled into us: *don't talk to strangers*—let alone take sweets from them. I guess it was one lesson I *did* learn. I shook my head no and shuffled further along the row.

The show finished and the stranger stood and started walking off. He was going down the steps when I realised that he'd left the full box of popcorn behind. 'Hey!' I called out, 'HEY!' But he couldn't hear me over the noise of people leaving. I grabbed the box and followed the man down, but when I came out of the tent, I couldn't see him anywhere.

Only then did I realise my luck. Tentatively, I popped a few kernels into my mouth and let the warm butter dissolve. They were incredible—like magic. I hurried away from the fairground and back into the dark safety of the woods. I ducked behind the trunk of a huge pine tree and scooped handfuls of the stuff.

3.

I retrieved the bat from where I'd left it. It was nearly pitch dark now, especially after the garish lights and colours of the fairground. My eyes were hurting a bit, no, not hurting—what was happening? It felt like I was opening my eyes, even though they were already open. Strange. I looked around the wood, which seemed somehow ... different. There was no light coming from the other side. I started to walk in the direction that seemed right, but then ... then I wasn't so sure. I followed the dog for a while, but soon realised he was just scenting squirrels or something. Before long I had lost the lights and sounds from the carnival, but I didn't panic. I calmly and confidently got out my phone to use its map. But then I remembered that the screen was cracked and the whole thing came flooding back to me and then, then I *did* panic.

I roared angrily and flung the baseball bat away with all my might. It went spinning between the trees, somehow missing all of them, and landed on what sounded like a slope, because it kept bouncing along until I couldn't hear it. The dog, whose ears were raised, suddenly bolted off after it. I called after him, but he wouldn't listen.

I sighed and tested the map function on my cracked phone. *Phew*. It worked. I typed in my address and let the machine do its work. *Beep*. The map rotated as the phone's internal compass oriented. Good. I *was* going the right way. I continued on, munching on popcorn to pass the time. Strangerwood had never seemed quite that big in daylight, but that night, as I wandered through the undergrowth, it seemed vast and endless, like an ancient forest from the dark ages. Then I remembered that the wood backed onto a huge natural reserve. Dad took me camping there once when I was little. I had such a good time. Why don't we ever do that stuff anymore?

I heard a funny sound to my right, like a grinding, grating noise. Strange. What could it have been?

There it is again.

I stopped walking to listen. Another, slightly different noise cut over the first one, which stopped. I stared in the direction of the noises, straining my eye for a glimpse of movement.

There! Something grey. There it goes again. A rat? A squirrel? There's another one! That one's brown. Reddish-brown.

They stopped beside one another and made the strange grinding noise again. Almost as if they were talking. Then it was silent.

I sighed and carried on my way home. But I couldn't stop thinking about them. What on earth could they have been? As I walked along, I tried to search for some information about wildlife in the area on my phone.

I looked back over my shoulder again, and muttered the one word that summed it up. 'Strange.'

Then I looked ahead and froze in my tracks. The box of popcorn fell from my grasp and its contents scattered over the ground. I was faced with something that would change my life forever. I had come into another clearing and right in the middle of it, silhouetted by an unearthly green glow from behind, stood a vast, looming, massive, dark *thing*. It had four long, slender legs, a short wiry tail, and a roundish head, with two long ears and two great horns. It was looking up at the night sky. It was taller than the pine trees, and its shadow fell over me like a blanket. I couldn't breathe.

I heard myself murmur another word. '*Stranger.*'

The monster turned its great horned head towards me.

4.

I ran.

I ran and I ran and I ran. I burst through the wood like I was stealing home, leaping bushes and rocks and sidestepping trees. I just wanted to get away. But then I realised that I wanted to *be* home. I didn't care what Dad would say about the baseball incident. I just wanted him to shut the door behind me and protect me from that *thing*.

I jumped a fallen log and kept running.

Were the trees different here? I glanced at my phone. The map was spinning wildly. I skirted a bramble patch and pushed on. I stared down at the malfunctioning map again. It was making me dizzy. The ground was rocky up ahead. I decided to go straight over it. It was a mistake. The first rock I stepped on grabbed my foot and I went sprawling. I landed awkwardly and heavily across the rocks, banging my head on one. I remember thinking, *I've got concussion*. And I remember hoping that the rocks coming to life all around me were just a result of the bump to the head.

I awoke with a splitting headache. It was throbbing, throbbing, throbbing and each throb felt like the crack of a baseball hitting a phone, if the phone was my brain. I lay still for a few minutes, but it didn't go away. I forced myself up on one elbow. It throbbed harder at first, but by the time I was sitting up with my legs crossed, it had started to fade to a dull ache. My mind was unclear. I looked around and tried to gauge my dark surroundings. I felt the rock walls beside me curving up to meet just over my head. I couldn't even stand up. I seemed to be in a small cave. But covering the entry to my little niche was a sort of glass pane, and its surface was covered with blue electricity like those static balls that shoot miniature lightning bolts onto a cage. I moved towards it. I could see through it, hazily. I could tell my niche was in a larger cave because I could only see a small section of the starry sky. I sat back to

examine the glass itself. It was a flat surface in constant motion, and clearly full of energy. I touched it.

POW! It sent me flying to the back of the niche. I felt like I'd been kicked. The headache returned with a vengeance, throbbing along with the heightened beating of my heart. I wouldn't do that again. After the throbbing had receded, I pulled out my phone to call the police or something. But there was no reception. Even the emergency numbers wouldn't work. So I lay down on the dirt floor of my tiny cell and tried to sleep. At least I didn't cry.

I was awakened later by the grinding noise again. I had to rub my eyes to make sure, but even through the haze of the energy glass I could make out two rocks in front of my cell that hadn't been there before. As I stared, I realised that they had tiny rock arms and tiny rock legs, and the grinding noises came from one after the other. They were speaking! They split right across the middle to speak. Then one of them yawned, and I saw it open right up, and it had a huge set of choppers! Just like your grandpa's false teeth, but maybe three times the size. I tried to ask them what was going on, why they were keeping me there, and what they were going to do to me, but they just sort of grunted and barked at me. They went on muttering to each other and eventually I went back to sleep to try to clear my headache.

The next time I woke the cave was empty. The floor was free of rocks. The energy glass was still buzzing away. I sat up and tried to go over the night's proceedings in my head. It was too much to compute. What had seemed like a normal enough afternoon, even if it was humiliating, had turned into something I simply couldn't understand. It hurt my mind to even try to fit it into what I knew of the world, and my own life. I'd never experienced anything like this before. I don't think anyone had.

Suddenly there was a snuffling at the mouth of the cave. I peered through the hazy glass. It was the dog! The good old golden retriever had found me, and ...

What's he got in his mouth? A stick? What is it? Oh! It's the bat! The Slugger! Ha ha!

‘Good dog!’ I said, softly, ‘Good boy!’ His tail went crazy at the sound of my voice and he trotted straight towards me, towards the energy glass. ‘No!’ I hissed. ‘Wait! Stop! You’re gonna get zapped!’ But he just kept on coming.

5.

He stopped immediately before the barrier and sniffed it. He dropped the bat on the ground, which rolled *through* the screen and stopped halfway. Then he held his head up and stepped straight through. He paused with his head inside and his body outside and gave a happy *ruff*, then he continued straight into my little cell. He sat there panting and grinning like it was all a game. I grabbed him and scratched his ears and even let him lick me.

I tentatively slid the bat out from the screen. I examined its smooth, cool surface. It seemed unaffected. Then with nothing left to lose, I poked it at the energy glass. Closer, closer, and ... *POW*. It sent me flying again.

Ow. But what was different? The dog had dropped the bat on the ground. Oh—maybe it is *earthing* the current! Maybe it needs to touch the ground!

I placed the bat on the cave floor and slid it back to the buzzing screen. The energy seemed attracted to the metal bat, but it didn't conduct it across to me, maybe because I was holding the grip tape. I made sure the coast was clear and while still holding the bat, quickly touched the barrier with my other hand. It went through. It kinda vibrated a little, like a phone on silent, but that was all. I grabbed the dog by the scruff of the neck and pulled him out with me, then spun the bat around and withdrew it after us. The energy barrier resumed its normal buzzing.

I looked hastily around the cave and was surprised to see another barrier, this one red, over a slightly smaller niche on the other wall. I scurried over to it and peered within. I jumped back in horror. It was another *thing* like the giant creature that started all this. But this one was tiny, only the size of a kid goat. In fact, that's just what it looked like. It was pitch black with four thin spindly legs and a tuft for a tail and two floppy ears and two knobby little horns on its head. On its strange, round head. I looked again. Its eyes were big and sad. It was pleading. No. It was urgent. It squeaked and trilled and clicked. It was a prisoner just like me.

I would've felt awful leaving him there. So I just summed up the courage and *did* it. I slid the bat through the poor thing's cell door and beckoned him out. He tested the barrier with one foreleg. It buzzed faintly and the skittish little goat thing retracted its foreleg like a tentacle. Or like a snail's eye-stalk when you touch it. *That's what it was like.* It was like a goat made of snail flesh. But cute. Because that sounds absolutely disgusting.

I heard sounds outside the cave, so I threatened to pull the bat out of the energy barrier. It worked. The goat thing scampered through and was free. It stood at my feet and looked up with its big round eyes set in an otherwise featureless round face. A little horizontal slit appeared. It was a mouth, and it proceeded to thank me with its strange chatterings. Then it suddenly stopped, as if it had finished what it was saying.

After a moment, I said, 'Um, you're welcome? I'm Max.'

It replied with a definite click and ran with a funny floating prance to the mouth of the cave. The way it moved reminded me of one of the white horses in the circus, sort of trotting on its toes. It looked back and chattered some more, then pranced out into the darkness, where it disappeared against the night sky. Clearly it wanted me to follow it. What choice did I have?

I felt much better with the bat back in my grasp, and a huge dog by my side, but I knew I should still be careful not to disturb the rock creatures. Who knew how many of them there were? And they clearly had some sort of advanced tech to produce those energy barriers. I could only just make out the goat thing from its glowing silhouette in the shadows of the forest, but there was no other movement apart from the gentle swaying of the trees, so I hurried away from the cave and into the woods. The goat thing trilled and clicked some more and trotted ahead with surprising speed. In fact, it was as much as I could do just to keep up. The dog remained by my side where there was room, falling behind only when the track narrowed. We followed the goat thing for a while before I began to feel suspicious about

where it was leading us. I was about to check my map again when I heard an awful noise coming from behind.

Grinding. Rumbling. Rattling. Groaning. Scrunching.

It sounded like loads and loads of gravel being mixed.

It sounded angry. And it was getting louder.

6.

The map wouldn't help me now. I had to trust the thing, the goat thing, with my life. I sprinted after it, leaping over logs, weaving between great beech and oak trunks, and avoiding any rocks or boulders like the plague. I thought of climbing up one of the ancient trees to escape the rock people, until I remembered the dog. He had saved me from them. I had to save him too. And then I realised that that's just what the goat thing was doing for me.

It was taking us away from the rock creatures. The rumbling was receding.

This cross-country was all very well for a hunting dog and a prancing, trotting goat thing, but I was struggling. The headache hadn't completely gone and I was feeling weary. I needed a break. I stopped to catch my breath by an oak and looked around the forest. I'd certainly never been to this part before. It was beautiful in the moonlight. I looked at the leaves flapping gently like flags or sails on a calm night, and at the moon's rays illuminating the bugs in the air. But then the bugs vanished. And the first of the rocks came zooming through the wood. It was about the size of a coconut and its movement was an adaptive mixture of rolling and running.

Those tiny little legs! It's so cute!

It spotted me and leapt right for me, huge teeth bared in its round rock face. I reacted more from surprise than anything. I stumbled away from the tree and in one movement brought the baseball bat around my shoulders and smashed the thing to pieces, as if it was made of plaster. Rock dust went everywhere. Once I got over my own surprise, I punched the air and laughed triumphantly, only to find myself coughing out a mouthful of pulverised rock creature. Gross.

Suddenly I was faced with more and more rock men running and rolling and leaping towards me. There were too many. I turned and ran, but not without a whoop of joy. The chill night air and the thrill of the clean hit had woken something in me, and I felt alive again. I

suddenly had energy, and as if to prove it, overtook the goat thing with a laugh. It zoomed ahead again. The dog kept pace with me throughout. Every now and then a little rock creature would get ahead of the pack and I was getting pretty good at dashing them to pieces. Soon I took it in my stride and hardly even broke step. Sometimes I hid behind a tree and smashed them as they went past. We kept going, following the goat thing for what seemed like ages, until suddenly I rounded a large tree and there was the goat thing, trapped by a rock man the size of a medicine ball against the sheer wall of a cliff. The poor thing was, I'm sorry to say, between a rock and a hard place. I jumped wildly out at them with a war cry and brought the Slugger crashing down on the rock creature. My arms turned to jelly. The rock man shook himself off and turned to face me. He was covered in pockmarks and scratches, but I hadn't even left a dent. He left a decent ding in the bat though. I realised we were surrounded. There were dozens of them. And the cliff curved all the way around. It was a dead end. They were holding the dog. And they were holding the goat thing.

It was a standoff between a boulder with teeth the size of ice cubes, and me.

Suddenly it launched itself towards me and bit me. It opened its face and clamped down on my leg. I opened my mouth but no sound came out at first.

Then it did. 'AAARGH!' I cried. 'YOW! Get off of me, ya flippin' ... rock goblin!' I kicked my leg out wildly and smashed the creature in the eyes with the bat. Only after half a dozen whacks did it release its lockjaw grip and step back. I looked down at my poor shin, bruised and swollen and hurting like nothing else. I looked back at the rock goblin.

It grinned its terrible grin and laughed its gravelly laugh. 'HEH. HEH. HEH.'

But then it was flattened by a black foot the size of a tree trunk.

Three more feet came plummeting down, pulverising the creatures to dust. The remaining rock people gnashed their teeth and wailed as they fled from the deadly footsteps of the behemoth above. It was the giant monster, the vast, looming *stranger* thing, and it craned its

neck to bring its enormous head to within a metre of my own. Its horns projected out and around like great, curved, sharpened logs. I realised it was a bull thing.

It stared right at me. Motionless. Waiting.

And then it stamped its massive foot.

7.

I fell back in utter panic, the baseball bat clattering on the broken rocks beside me. I scrambled backwards and sat cowering in terror, staring up at the vast dark beast. It was black but with specks of distant light, as if it was transparent, as if the starry sky shone *through* it. The dog huddled against the cliff and whimpered.

But then the goat thing stepped forward.

And it stamped *its* foot.

The bull thing moved its great hoof aside and looked down. It grunted and the trees shivered.

The goat thing stayed put. It bleated defiantly.

The bull thing lowed a great grunting roar and made the ground shake. A crack went up the cliff. I gasped as my eye reached the top of the cliff face and met another massive creature, a thing with a mane. It was a lion thing and it leant down and rumbled.

The goat thing took a deep breath and gave as fierce a bleat as it could.

The bull thing huffed and snorted, but clambered back up and over the cliff face. The lion thing was gone too. I looked at the goat thing in disbelief and had to wait for my heart to stop pounding. I watched as it scampered up the practically vertical cliff face as easily as if it had been stairs. Soon it too had disappeared over the top. The dog scurried towards me with its tail between its legs and curled up beside me, whimpering quietly. I decided to do much the same. I think I fell asleep. I don't know how long it was before the goat thing returned, but when it did I was feeling better. The dog seemed to have calmed down too. I didn't feel better for long, however, because the goat thing trotted right up to me, extended his tentacle-like foreleg and pushed it down my throat.

I gagged. I couldn't breathe. I thought it was killing me until it retracted its foot and flicked off the saliva. I gasped for breath.

Then it said, ‘Sorry about that. It’s the only way.’

‘What?’ I said between gasps. ‘You can speak?’

‘Of course I can speak. I’ve been speaking to you all along. You just haven’t understood.’

‘Is it really,’ I hacked a loogie and spat it out, ‘*really* the only way?’

The goat thing lowered its eyebrows. ‘No, I just really like sticking my foot in people’s mouths,’ it said. ‘Of course it’s the only way.’ Then it cleared its throat. ‘Now, where, where, where to begin? You must be a little confused.’

‘A little?’ I laughed nervously. ‘Are you *kidding* me?’

‘Fine, fine. Well, your name is Max, is it not?’

I nodded. ‘Max Turner.’

‘Very well. I am Capricorn.’

I stared blankly. Was that supposed to mean something to me? It sounded *kinda* familiar.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘So ... how are you a talking goat thing?’

‘You’ve never heard of Capricorn? The Twelve? *The Zodiac?*’

‘The zodiac,’ I said, uncertainly, ‘is that like ... the horoscope? In the paper?’

‘UGH,’ the goat thing threw its head back. ‘Did your horoscope say: your day is going to involve meeting the Planet’s Guardians. Be prepared for a big rock to bite you on the leg.’

I raised an eyebrow.

Capricorn sighed. ‘NO, not like the horoscope, for goodness’ sake. That started as a joke between the Gemini twins and got *way* out of hand. The Twelve Lords of the Zodiac were long ago assigned with the task of guarding the earth against interstellar threats. You’ve just met Taurus, and Leo,’ he jerked his head back. ‘Taurus saved your life, you know.’

‘I know.’ I swallowed. ‘But then—I thought he was going to kill me.’

‘Hah! He wouldn’t dare! He’s just grumpy that we’re down here at all. He prefers the open space of ...’ Capricorn gestured to the starry sky, ‘well ... of open space.’

‘You’re from—up there?’ I looked up, past the towering silhouettes of pine trees, at the eternal nothingness beyond.

Capricorn nodded. ‘It’s nice up there. But we come to earth in times of great need.’ He hesitated. ‘This—is one such time. A large roving band of meteorites is in open rebellion, and has managed to breach earth’s defences. We do not yet know who incited them. Normally, it wouldn’t be a problem, as we would simply send them hurtling away, or better yet, into the sun—or pulverise them, if Taurus had his way. *Or* they would burn to nothing in the earth’s atmosphere. It is a problem *now* because the protective atmospheric layer surrounding the planet has been compromised.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Why?’

‘Hm. Well, not even Libra knows why. But ... *we* know why, don’t we, Max Turner?’

My eyes widened. I murmured and shrugged and shook my head, all at once.

‘The other Zodiac don’t believe me. They put little faith in humans. But I realised *why* the atmospheric barrier has weakened when you and your dog managed to—’

‘He’s not my dog.’

‘—escape from—what? Not your dog? So whose is he?’

‘No idea.’

Capricorn narrowed his eyes. ‘You realise you have *quite* a bond.’

I looked down at the faithful retriever. It nuzzled my hand.

‘Anyway, when you and *the* dog managed to escape from the energy screen the meteorites had used, I realised what they were up to. The atmosphere is *like* an energy screen, though not to keep mankind imprisoned, but to keep ... *outsiders* away. And it is weakened now because—’

‘Don’t tell me,’ I said, with eyebrows raised. ‘Because someone’s poking it with a giant baseball bat.’

Capricorn hung his weird goat thing head and sighed. Then he said, ‘Show, don’t tell. I should’ve remembered. You people truly have no patience at all.’ And he trotted off.

I hurried after him, and the dog hurried after me. After maybe ten minutes, I said, ‘Capricorn, you’re ... you’re not as *big* as the others.’

Capricorn took his time to answer. Eventually he said: ‘We all go through seasons, Max. I’m not as big as I have been, but—I’ve never been as big as Taurus. Would you prefer it if I was?’

‘Um ... no,’ I said. ‘I suppose not.’

Another few minutes passed.

‘I suppose I’d prefer it if you looked like a person. Talking to a goat thing is kinda freaking me out.’ I didn’t know how to say it without being rude.

Capricorn was silent.

‘I’m just saying.’

Capricorn stopped and turned around to face me. He jumped up at me, resting his forefeet on my shoulders. His round black face was inches from my own. ‘I understand completely,’ he said. ‘But *you* need to understand that the other Lords would mock me, mercilessly, if they found out. I’d never hear the end of it.’

I tried not to smile. He was being serious.

Then he frowned and bleated. ‘Bah! Who cares what they say!’ I blinked, and the next moment there was a boy standing in front of me with his hands on my shoulders. He was black, his eyes were green, and his hair spiked out in short dreadlocks. ‘Just ... just don’t go around telling them,’ he said.

‘Wow.’ I smiled and stuck out my hand. ‘It’s a deal.’ We shook hands. It felt good.

We frowned at each other when we heard the sound of a girl’s voice.

There it was again.

And again. Now we could make out what she was saying: 'MAXY!'

'Maxy?' Capricorn raised his eyebrows and gave me a nudge.

I turned to see a girl about my age emerge from the dim darkness of Strangerwood.

Is that ... *Emily*? What's *she* doing here?

And in the middle of the night?

And why's she looking for *me*?

And why *on earth* is she calling me *Maxy*?

8.

‘Oh. Um, you’re Max.’ She stopped short when she saw us. ‘Max ... Turner? Art class, right? What are *you* doing here? It’s the middle of the night.’

‘Me?’ I hesitated. Good question. How was I supposed to answer that? Where would I even begin? Not with the truth, obviously. ‘Um, I’m just ... going for a walk ... with my friend—here.’

‘Oh,’ she said. She looked at Capricorn. Then she turned back to me. ‘I ... ’ I realised she was upset. ‘I’ve—I’ve lost my dog.’

‘Ah,’ I said. ‘Let me guess. A big, stupid, incredibly loyal golden retriever?’

Emily frowned. ‘What? Have you seen him?’

I turned around. ‘He *was* right behind me. He’s been following me around all night. He’s ... he’s such a good dog.’

Emily looked beyond me and called into the shadows. ‘MA-AX! Come on! Here Maxy!’ She looked back at me and blushed. ‘Sorry. I’m not—I’m not talking to you. The dog’s called Max too. Maximus.’

I laughed. Suddenly Maximus came bursting from the undergrowth. He jumped up at Emily who threw her arms around him and laughed and wrestled him to the ground. I watched them for a moment, a little envious that *she* got to cuddle him. Then I suddenly felt awkward. Who was I really envious of? The dog or the girl?

Capricorn pulled me aside. ‘Max. How is it she can see me?’ He was clearly agitated. ‘I understand why *you* can see me, but *she* really shouldn’t be able to see me.’

‘Hang on,’ I said, ‘I don’t know why *I* can see you. Why can *I* see you?’

‘Because *you* were selected. Because you ate the food given.’

I frowned at the ground and murmured: ‘Popcorn.’ That *stranger* ... he *did* want me to have the popcorn. What does *he* have to do with all this?

‘Popcorn’ll do it,’ Capricorn said. ‘Hey, Emily!’ he called. ‘Eat any popcorn lately?’

Emily stood up suddenly. ‘No,’ she said, blushing again and brushing her skirt. ‘Why? Is it in my teeth?’

Capricorn hung his head. ‘Two have been selected. It’s worse than I thought.’

‘What are you talking about?’ said Emily. ‘You guys are weird.’

Capricorn looked at me. ‘I mentioned that the Zodiac only come to earth in *times of great need?*’

I nodded.

‘Sometimes,’ he continued, ‘a human is selected to ... to *help*, in resolving the problem. But only when the need is dire. We don’t know *why*. It’s just about the only thing Libra and Aquarius can’t agree on. Humans seem so ... beneath us. No offense.’

‘None taken,’ I said. I looked sideways at Emily. ‘I agree. Some of us even eat popcorn we find on the ground.’

Emily turned crimson.

Capricorn shrugged. ‘But you *have* both eaten it now, and the things that have happened cannot be undone.’

Emily looked at me intently. She said: ‘If this is some dungeony role-player thing, then you’re even weirder—’

‘It’s not,’ I said. ‘It really isn’t.’

She studied my face. Then she frowned. ‘Whatever,’ she said. ‘Come on Maxy. Let’s get you home.’ She turned back the way she’d come and Maximus bounded after her.

‘But you cannot leave!’ Capricorn was upset. ‘You have been selected!’

Emily whipped around. ‘Don’t push your luck, boy. I’ve had enough.’ Was she crying? She turned and disappeared into the gloom of the forest, taking her dog with her.

Capricorn looked at me desperately.

I shrugged. ‘Girls,’ I said.

He looked down at his body. ‘It’s this blasted human form! No wonder she didn’t understand!’

I frowned. ‘You know, your normal form doesn’t exactly scream *Lord of the Zodiac*,’ I said. ‘No offense.’

Capricorn pursed his human lips and tried to restrain his anger.

‘Seriously,’ I continued. ‘You look like a creepy old alien kid goat.’

I don’t think he knew he was doing it, but he suddenly lost human form and was the goat thing again. And as I watched, he grew until he was as big as a draught horse. Even his horns grew bigger and started to curl. His head was now level with mine. He snorted.

‘Whoah,’ I whispered. ‘Cool.’

He huffed and turned away.

‘Hey, how—how’d you do that?’

He shook his head. ‘Seasons.’

And then we heard Emily’s voice calling again. It was unsettled. ‘MAX!’ she called. ‘MAX!’

I chuckled to myself. I guessed the dog had wandered off again.

Then she screamed.

I looked at Capricorn. His ears were pricked and he was sniffing the air in her direction.

‘MAX!’ She cried out again. ‘MAX TURNER! Help me!’ Then her scream was cut off.

Capricorn narrowed his eyes at me and knelt his front legs. ‘Get on.’

9.

I'd ridden a horse before, but this was different. More like a—motorbike, maybe? We moved so fast through the woods that the leaves were like whips on my arms and legs. And we were kind of floating, I think. Touching the ground, but floating. I had stuffed the baseball bat diagonally through my belt behind my back, and held on to Capricorn's weirdly cold skin, which was definitely a bit paler than before. The confusion of scenery resolved into a patch of low scrub within an ash thicket. I realised that the sky was getting bluer. Before I knew it, I saw we were zooming towards a pile of rocks. I could see Maximus barking at the rocks. And I saw Emily's feet sticking out from underneath. One of the rocks turned just in time to give a look of horror before Capricorn lowered his head and rammed the pile in all directions, like a billiards break.

Space dust went everywhere. It was all I could do just to hold on.

Meteorites from distant reaches were broken apart and scattered to the earth.

Capricorn wheeled about and stopped. I slid off. I brandished my Slugger like a weapon and went to Emily's aid. She was lying motionless. Bleeding. But breathing. There were still six meteorites attacking her. Biting her. Pulling her hair. Dragging her away. I swung the bat at the first. *Crunch!* It went flying into a tree and shattered. The second and third exploded when I struck them. The fourth came for me along the ground so I brought the Slugger down like a hammer and it cracked into pieces. One was biting my leg now, my sore leg, and another was on my back. I whirled about and kicked my leg wildly. They held on. Suddenly the rock on my back was gone. I turned to see Capricorn fling it away with his teeth. The one on my leg he stamped on until it released its grip and was pulverised.

'Thanks,' I puffed.

He merely nodded his head at Emily, then went to the aid of poor Maximus, who was being harried by more meteorites.

I fell down by Emily's side. She had passed out. From what I could see, the wounds were not serious. I breathed a huge sigh of relief. I felt responsible for her—it was *my* popcorn she had scabbed off the ground. *I* was selected, not her. This wasn't her fight.

Capricorn was flinging rocks away with his horns and stamping others to smithereens. Soon Maximus was safe too. He scampered towards us and began whining over his master and licking her face. She tossed and turned. The day was finally breaking. Light streamed over the hills and through the trees. It made it all the more imposing when Capricorn loomed over us and blanketed Emily in his shadow.

I stood up. 'Maybe ... maybe she doesn't need to see your Zodiac form, just yet.'

He was silent.

'I take back what I said, earlier. You ... you truly are a guardian. A—a Lord.'

'Who?' Emily murmured. 'Who's a Lord?' I looked down at Emily again, who was reviving. She opened her eyes and shielded them against the sunrise.

'I am,' said Capricorn. *Phew*. He was a boy again. No, not a boy. A young man. Taller. Stronger. And with a deeper voice. 'I am one of the Twelve Lords of the Zodiac, tasked with keeping the earth safe from interstellar enemies. My name is Capricorn. Your life is in serious danger.'

'Oh,' she said. She looked at Maximus, bleeding a little but panting happily. She looked at the broken meteorites all around. And she looked at me. She didn't speak. She was scared. I wanted to stop her being scared, but I didn't know how. So I stepped toward her and held out my hand. She gave a small, painful smile and let me help her up. I think I somehow did the right thing there. First time for everything.

Then we heard them again.

Rumble. Crunch.

Emily looked absolutely terrified. I tightened my grip on the bat. It was pretty dinged up now, but still straight.

Here they come.

Rolling, scrunching, leaping into the scrub around us.

I stepped up and brandished my Slugger. Maximus bared his teeth. Capricorn paused, waiting. Listening. I wondered what he was listening for until I heard it too. A *thump ... thump* like my thumping headache. The meteorites around us stopped chattering. They parted. The top of something came into view. It rolled over the ground, snapping branches and groaning as it came. It was misshapen. Chunks of it were missing. But even so, it was still as big as a wrecking ball. It was a rock monster.

It cracked across the middle and opened its gaping maw, revealing teeth like sledgehammers.

It roared.

It sounded like a freight train. The ground trembled a little.

We steadied ourselves. Then Capricorn stepped out between us and the monster.

He didn't look back at us. He just said: 'Run.'

I hesitated, unsure.

Capricorn half-turned his head and repeated, more forcefully: '*RUN.*'

I glanced over my shoulder. Emily and Maximus were long gone.

I ran.

10.

The rocks came too, and soon were all around us and beneath our feet. It was like running down a landslide. I didn't bother trying to smash them. There were too many and I needed to try to catch up with Emily and her dog if I was going to help her.

But what about Capricorn? The rock monster!

I felt powerless to do anything. Swept along with the tide, quite literally. Why was I even selected? What if the popcorn had been left for someone else? Suddenly I heard Emily's voice. She was way over to my left, running downhill too. Maximus was further down the slope, barking loudly. Emily pointed to him. I had to veer across the flow of traffic to change course. It was too dangerous. I scrambled behind a ridge, skinning my knees, and let the barrage of meteorites fly over me, waiting for a gap. Then I bolted from tree to tree until I was in line with Maximus. Emily was with him, beckoning me on. But then they had disappeared. I panicked. Where had they gone? I made it to where they had been and spun around.

'Max!' Emily hissed. 'Over here!'

They were in a sort of hollow set into the side of the grassy slope. I scrambled over and huddled in next to Emily. I watched meteorites scuttle past, searching for us. My heart was racing. But we were safe, for now. My breath slowed. Then I realised that Emily was gripping my hand and my breath stopped altogether.

'There!' she whispered, pointing with her other hand. 'There he is!'

And there he was. The great Lord Capricorn in human form, running away from a boulder with choppers. The slope was nearly forty-five degrees now, and that gave the tumbling meteorites the advantage. But Capricorn was quick. He was approaching with lightning speed. He was past us!

'CAPRICORN!' I yelled.

He turned his head with a look of sheer panic. ‘I—SAID—*RUN!*’ he called back, in between gasps. ‘*FOLLOW—ME!*’ and he kept on sprinting down the slope. Maximus bounded up and dashed after him.

Emily and I looked at each other. We jumped up, and still holding hands, ran after him as fast as we could. We didn’t dare look back. There was a big tree in the way, but no time to go either side. We let go at the last second. *Crash!* Whatever was behind us went straight into the trunk.

We rounded a copse of trees, thick with blackberry bushes, and the ground flattened out a little. I heard the river before I saw it. It was practically in flood, maybe twenty metres wider than normal, which made sense with all the rain we’d had. We had always been taught to avoid it when it was brown and breaking its banks. But Capricorn didn’t. He ran straight for it, almost seeming to speed up, and suddenly disappeared beneath the surface and was gone. Maximus tried to stop himself before the edge, but the grass was too wet and he slid straight in too. The current pulled him under.

‘No! Maxy!’ Emily called, eyes wide in desperation.

What were we going to do? We stopped a few metres short of the bank and looked at the raging torrent in utter horror. The first meteorite to arrive seemed to have been chasing Capricorn, for it leapt after him and disappeared with a *sploonksh!* When it emerged it was way further downstream, struggling against the rapids and cracking into the river rocks.

Then the mob rounded the blackberry copse. With the rock monster at the lead. Its mouth hung open with a wicked leer. It spotted us and started running with its stupid rock legs. My heart was nearly bursting with fear and panic.

Emily grasped my hand again, tight. ‘Max,’ she said, staring intently into my eyes. ‘Do you trust him?’

I gulped.

‘Max!’ she shook me. ‘Capricorn went straight in there. He said to follow him. *Do you trust him?*’

I found myself nodding. ‘Yeah,’ I said. I returned her gaze. ‘Yeah. Let’s go.’

We jumped together, still holding hands, into the brown nightmare.

11.

I lost her as soon as we hit the water. It was too strong. It tore us apart and there was nothing I could do. Everything was brown. I was tumbled around like a sock on rinse. By the time I regained my orientation and kicked for the surface, I was ready to die. *Gasp!* I gulped down as much water as air. That made it worse. I had no strength left. My chest wanted to burst and my arms and legs wouldn't respond and all I knew was brown, brown, brown. I sank.

Then I saw Capricorn's shape through the murky water. At least, I think it was Capricorn, but where his back legs should've been was ... a fish's tail?

Then his face right in front of mine. Big eyes, round featureless head. But it was blue. And where were his ears and horns? And ... hang on, this was a woman's shape and *she* had a fish's tail. She was a mermaid thing. That must have been what I saw. She looked at me as if deciding something. I wasn't aware of not being able to breathe anymore.

Then I felt warm fur. Something grabbed me and pulled me down. This was the end. Wasn't it? No. Hang on. No, not down. Up. It was pulling me up. *Splash!* We broke the surface and it dragged me onto the far sandy bank, where I coughed and spluttered until I could gasp air again. As I collapsed I saw the thing that saved me dive back in. It looked like an otter.

A giant otter.

I must have been delirious. I looked back across the river. Some meteorites were still jumping into the raging torrent only to get swept away or sink like stones. Others stood on the bank and ground their gravelly teeth to each other. I closed my eyes. And the vision of Capricorn sprinting down the slope returned to me. It was an absurd picture, and I might've laughed if it hadn't been for the horror and loss. What a tragedy. 'Oh, Capricorn!' I murmured.

‘Yes?’ he said.

I opened my eyes. And there he was. Standing over me and smiling, in human form. I sat up. ‘You’re alive!’

He laughed. ‘Of course I’m alive.’ Then he added, ‘I *am* a Zodiac Lord.’ and folded his arms. As if it required no further explanation. Yeah right. Whatever. Let him have his little mysteries.

Suddenly the furry thing came back out of the raging river. It *was* a giant otter! This time it was pulling Emily out from further downstream. I got up and we ran to her. She wasn’t breathing.

Oh no, no, no. She’s not breathing. Her chest’s not moving. I looked desperately at Capricorn. I asked if he knew CPR. He looked blank.

I would have to try. I pumped her chest a few times. I leant over her face. Her wet hair stuck to her skin. I pulled it away.

She’s so lovely. I think I’m starting to like her. Please don’t die, Emily.

I opened her mouth and pinched her nose, took a deep breath and breathed my air into her lungs. Nothing happened. I did it again. Was I even doing it right? I pumped her chest again and breathed into her mouth again. Still nothing.

‘It’s too—’ I gulped back tears, ‘it’s too late.’ I looked up at Capricorn. ‘The mermaid thing sent that giant otter to save us ... but ... it was too late.’

‘No, it’s—’ Capricorn frowned. ‘What mermaid thing?’

‘One of you Zodiac guys,’ I said, between sniffs, ‘in the water. She looked like you.’

Capricorn’s eyes grew. ‘Pisces? Here?’ He dashed down to the riverbank. I turned to look, but I couldn’t stop sobbing and I couldn’t see properly. It looked like Pisces, or whatever the blue mermaid thing was called, was in the water, resting her elbows on the sand and talking to Capricorn, but then another Pisces stepped out of the river downstream. And this one had

legs. And she was *much* bigger. Like she could ride Taurus. If he let her. But then again, she was so regal that he just might. She was carrying a water jug and water was coming out of it and swirling and coiling around her. She bent down to hear Capricorn tell her something and then she came over to us. In one step. She knelt down and looked at Emily. I sat back. Then I noticed that Emily's wet hair was dry. And her clothes. All the water was somehow lifting off her and joining into the flow swirling from the jug. Then some came out of Emily's mouth too.

And she coughed.

12.

Emily was alive. She looked up at the giant blue alien queen who towered over the treetops. The stupefied girl gaped as the mythic, towering lady strode away with long, elegant steps, and small white clouds appeared in her wake.

Emily took deep gulps of air. Then she turned to me.

‘You’re alive!’ I whispered. ‘You were d—*I thought* you were dead.’

Emily frowned and rubbed her eyes. ‘Did I hit my head? I think I might be seeing things. Did you just see a woman? ... er, a very ... *large* ... blue woman?’

‘Her name,’ said Capricorn, walking towards us, ‘is Aquarius.’ He gestured to the riverbank. ‘And this is Pisces.’

The mermaid thing smiled and waved at Emily before slipping back into the river. Emily lifted her hand to wave back, and held it there momentarily. She stared at the water. She seemed to be in a daze. Then suddenly she turned on me with a fierce look. ‘*You knew!*’ she hissed. ‘The Zodiac—are real! *Really* real, and you knew. And you didn’t tell me!’ and she punched me on the arm.

‘Ow!’ I pulled away. ‘What did I do?’

‘Nothing!’ she said. ‘That’s the problem!’

‘Well, *he* tried to tell you,’ I said, pointing to Capricorn. ‘But you didn’t believe him!’

‘I would’ve believed *you*.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

She hung her head.

I didn’t know what to say.

Eventually, she broke the silence. ‘Sorry. For hitting you.’

‘Emily?’

She looked up.

‘Would you really have believed me?’

Emily hesitated. ‘I—I don’t know. I’m ... scared, Max.’ She looked me square in the face and I could see that she wasn’t kidding around. Under her tough persona, she was terrified inside. Suddenly she looked around and jumped to her feet. ‘Where’s Maximus?’

I had forgotten all about the poor dog. After all that, I was just glad to be alive. I averted my eyes from her piercing gaze.

Emily strode up, defiantly, to Capricorn, and stood a little too close to him. ‘Maximus followed *you* into the river. *Where. Is. He.*’

‘He’s in there,’ replied Capricorn, pointing to the overflowing river.

Emily fell on him and started thumping him and crying.

Capricorn let her. He looked at me and shrugged. Then he called: ‘Maximus! Come on!’

And out of the river burst not one large golden retriever, but one giant brown otter. It skipped across the sandy ground to their feet, holding a large trout in its mouth. It dropped the fish at Capricorn’s feet and sat, panting. When it noticed Emily, it nudged her legs with its snout, and rolled on its back, asking for a scratch the way her dog always did.

‘Ma-Maxy?’ she said, dropping to her knees and holding the otter’s head in her hands. ‘What have you done to my Maxy?’

‘Relax, girly. I’m *pretty* sure I can change him back. It’s a simple matter of molecule realignment. He’s still a dog. He’s just ... he’s just an otter at the moment. Look! He loves it!’

‘Change him back, now, please.’

‘Hang on a minute,’ said Capricorn. ‘He saved your lives as an otter. I didn’t do it for fun, you know. But just to show you I meant no harm.’ And he placed his hands over Maximus’ head and closed his eyes. It was the strangest thing I’d ever seen. And by now I’d see some pretty freaky stuff. The otter *became* a dog. I’m not sure how else to describe it. They were about the same size, and there were similarities. But seeing an otter become a dog was quite

simply the strangest thing I'd ever seen. Anyway, there he was. Maximus the dog. Emily had her Maxy back.

I wish I was her Maxy.

Capricorn started wandering around the nearby pine trees and picking up pinecones. I suddenly realised that he was still in human form. 'You let the other Zodiac see you ... like that.'

He nodded. 'I know. I guess I forgot. But they're not the ones who would tease anyway. I made them promise not to tell the others. And a Zodiac promise is binding.' He tossed up a pinecone and caught it again. 'Besides, I'm getting used to it, this body. Starting to see why humans are selected. You're still beneath us, of course.' He tossed the pinecone up again, but when it came down, it was an apple.

He handed it to me. I turned it over in my hands. I smelt it. Even had a tentative nibble. Tasted pretty much like an apple. It seemed safe, and I realised I was starving. It turned out to be delicious. I had six. Then he realigned the molecules in some acorns to make grapes, and turned some bulrushes into bananas. Emily eventually ate some of the not-fruit fruit too, and seemed much happier after that.

After my clothes and shoes had finally dried out, we were ready to keep moving. Capricorn reverted to goat thing form, but now he was the same blue as Pisces and Aquarius. Emily couldn't believe her eyes and had a hundred questions, and he answered a couple but soon grew impatient. I was secretly hoping to ride Capricorn again, with Emily behind me. She would have to hold on to me.

'Now that we're on the far side of the river,' Capricorn told us, 'We have a much greater distance to cover, and it'll take even longer at dog-pace.'

Emily looked up. 'Just what are you saying?'

‘I’m saying that I’m not planning on carrying a panicky claw-factory on my back all day, so either you let me change him into something quicker, or you send him home.’

‘Something ... quicker?’

‘Sure. Eagle... hare ... horse, you name it.’

Emily’s eyes suddenly lit up. ‘You—you could make my Maximus into ... into a horse?’

‘Sure,’ Capricorn shrugged. ‘He wouldn’t be a very *large* horse, seeing as there’s less molecules to work with, but if I keep him slender, he should be decent size.’

‘Big enough to ride?’ Emily’s smile was growing.

Capricorn laughed. ‘I can’t make a saddle, you realise. Unless we find something similar.’

‘That’s okay,’ Emily said. ‘I used to ride bareback at my grandpa’s farm. And besides,’ she grabbed Maximus’ head and kissed his nose, ‘he’s my Maxy.’

I was beginning to get rather envious of that dog.

13.

It took most of the day, and while Emily rode Maximus well, he did keep stopping every now and then to leave his mark on a tree. One time he chased a squirrel. He was a good boy, for his first time as a horse, and he was genuinely quick, though even the fastest horse in the world couldn't keep up with the unearthly pace of a Zodiac.

We had stopped at the baseball field on the way past, as I'd suggested we get some more bats, but the bat rack was locked up. Capricorn just snorted and stamped the padlock right off the door. I grabbed two more Sluggers, for Emily and Capricorn. There were even some bat bags there which no one ever used. I stuffed all three bats in one and slung it across my back.

There were less meteorites on this side of the river. We did see a few camps and wandering gangs but they could never catch us at our speed. I kinda wanted to stop for batting practice, but there was no time. Finally we arrived on the edge of a great sweeping valley. It was breathtaking. There were rolling plains and a stream came trickling through a forest which spread up the side of mountains. Mountains. Apparently there were *mountains* near my house. It was awesome. If only I'd known this was here before! Then I felt the phone in my pocket and realised that normally, I would never have chosen to come out here. Not in a million years.

In the centre of the valley was a huge compound. It looked like some sort of scientific facility, I guess. With guards. And in the middle of that was the tallest tower I had ever seen. It literally went into the clouds. We dismounted on the outskirts of the compound and snuck as close as we could get without being spotted. Did I mention there were guards? They were big, and wore black. They were mostly clustered around the gatehouse and main doors. I could see that they had riot shields, and I could see shapes of weapons but I couldn't make out what sort. Maybe they were for the meteorites. Capricorn turned Maximus back into a dog, saying that a horse would be far too visible. He also took human form again. I think he

was getting used to it. We reached the perimeter fence. It was twice as tall as Capricorn and topped with razor wire. We walked around until we found a stretch of fence which was completely out of sight of the guards.

Capricorn pointed up.

We looked up. The tower reached further than we could see. Clouds veiled its true height. It was an unbelievably massive all-metal construction. Maybe a whole *acre* wide at the base, with support cables running down to the ground at forty-five degrees in all directions, and at various heights. I'd never seen anything so big in my life.

'Wow!' said Emily. 'This must be the Space Elevator!'

Capricorn and I looked at each other in confusion.

'What? I'm not making it up! Haven't you heard about it? The billionaire space race? Joyrides to the earth's atmosphere? Some of them are using rockets, but ... I'd heard my brother talk about a space elevator, and I didn't believe him. Like, at all. I couldn't even imagine it. But this ... it must be it. I thought it was meant to be in Russia or something.'

I scanned the trucks in the compound for a logo and sure enough, recognised the slanted *X* from SpaceX. Trust Elon Musk to be behind this.

I shook my head in disbelief. 'Have you ever seen so much metal? It's like a massive antenna, or ... or a conductor. Like an enormous—lightning rod.'

'Or,' said Capricorn, with a frown, 'like a giant baseball bat.'

I stared at him. 'But—that was a joke! I was kidding!'

'I know. But they aren't,' he squeezed his hands together. 'Look at those guards. I'm sure of it now. Whoever incited the meteorites to rebellion is also behind this vast ... establishment.'

'What are you talking about?' said Emily. 'What giant baseball bat?'

‘The tower is dampening the strength of the earth’s atmospheric barrier at a time of great unrest. A time of dire need.’ I’d never seen Capricorn look so serious. He sighed. ‘The whole thing—it must be destroyed. And we are the ones who must do it.’

‘Hang on a second,’ I said, ‘you’re talking about shutting the *whole facility* down?’

‘No,’ said Capricorn. ‘I’m talking about *bringing* the whole facility down. The *meteorites* you have seen so far are basically harmless, compared to what’s coming. I hope you will never see a full-size *meteor*. It only takes one unchecked meteor to destroy a civilisation—an entire *planet*. And they are coming.’ He looked out at the blue sky as if he could see through it, through to the stars beyond. ‘They are coming.’

I gulped.

Emily and I looked nervously at one another.

‘But it’s ... massive. There’s no way we could physically do that, and even if we somehow did, we would be completely crushed. Along with everyone inside.’ I looked at Emily. She looked as worried as I felt. ‘There would be no escaping that. We’re not Zodiacs.’

‘No,’ said Capricorn again. ‘But you are the selected ones.’

I had no response. I just looked at the ground and tried to take it all in.

This is all too much.

Emily finally broke the silence. ‘What do you need us to do?’

I looked at her in shock. Didn’t she realise how dangerous this was? It was a death sentence!

Listen to yourself, Max. She’s right. This is bigger than us. Whether the whole popcorn thing is real or not, and even if we *are* walking to our deaths, Capricorn is counting on us now. He trusts us.

And I realised that I trusted him.

‘Yeah, okay,’ I said. ‘I’m in too.’

Capricorn frowned. ‘No you’re not. That’s the problem. How to get you from out here,’ he pointed at the tower, ‘to *in* there. I am *invisible* to the guards. But you may have noticed that my strengths lie with organic matter. I can’t work with human technology at all. That is why this is so cunning. Whoever is behind this is circumventing the Zodiac. Perhaps that is why *you* were selected.’

‘Huh,’ I said. That made me feel kinda important. I didn’t know what to say.

‘We’ve never faced human technology before. For thousands of years we have defended the earth, and the atmosphere has remained impervious. But ... oh. Now that I think about it ... could it be possible? What if— what if the Tower of Babel ... the—the Eiffel Tower ... the Burj Khalifa ... maybe this has been the goal all along, and human technology has finally caught up with the villain’s plans. Whoever is truly behind this, is very, very clever. Far smarter than your billionaires, smart enough to get humans to construct—this.’

I felt less important.

‘But where there is a human element, there are weaknesses.’ Capricorn went on. ‘We must work together to discover those weaknesses and exploit them. We must gain entry to the tower, without alerting the guards.’

Emily spoke up. ‘Well, this fence is the immediate problem. What about,’ she said, with a spark growing in her eyes, ‘you make Maximus into a bear or something. Could he tear a hole in the fence?’

‘Even a bear’s claws would not get through this. I’m sure I could bash through it, but it would create a disturbance. We must keep our presence undetected for as long as possible.’

Emily was a little put out and went quiet. After a minute she sparked up again and said: ‘A parrot? I’ve heard macaws can tear their cages open. And a Maximus-sized macaw ...’

Capricorn grinned. ‘Perfect,’ he said. ‘Maximus! Here, boy.’

Within minutes Emily had persuaded her pet macaw to use its massive beak to bite an opening in the fence. We were in, and it had hardly made a sound. The next part was hard work. Between the fence and the buildings lay an empty field, and guards had appeared around a distant corner. There was nothing for it but to get on our bellies and crawl through the long dry grass. At least Capricorn was able to keep a lookout for us. And Maximus didn't mind crawling on his belly ... that's what goannas do. But we were pretty scratched and sore by the time we caught up to Capricorn. He was waiting for us at the base of one of the lowest support cables. I couldn't believe how thick it was—nearly a foot. We could hear strange metallic groans travelling down its length.

This is it. We're doing it.

'I think this cable might be out of sight of the guards,' said Capricorn. 'I can walk up it in my normal form. And I can carry both of you. If we get to that exposed section of roof there, we should be able to reach that vent. I could make Maximus a bird again or something.'

Capricorn took on his blue goat thing form and lowered his shoulder for us. I climbed up and the breeze picked up, and I was terrified.

I can't believe we're doing this. We're all going to die.

But when Emily climbed up behind me, and she held me tightly before we even started moving, and she rested her head on my back, I forgot my fears.

I couldn't care less about the ascent, then. I was already in heaven.

END OF BOOK ONE

