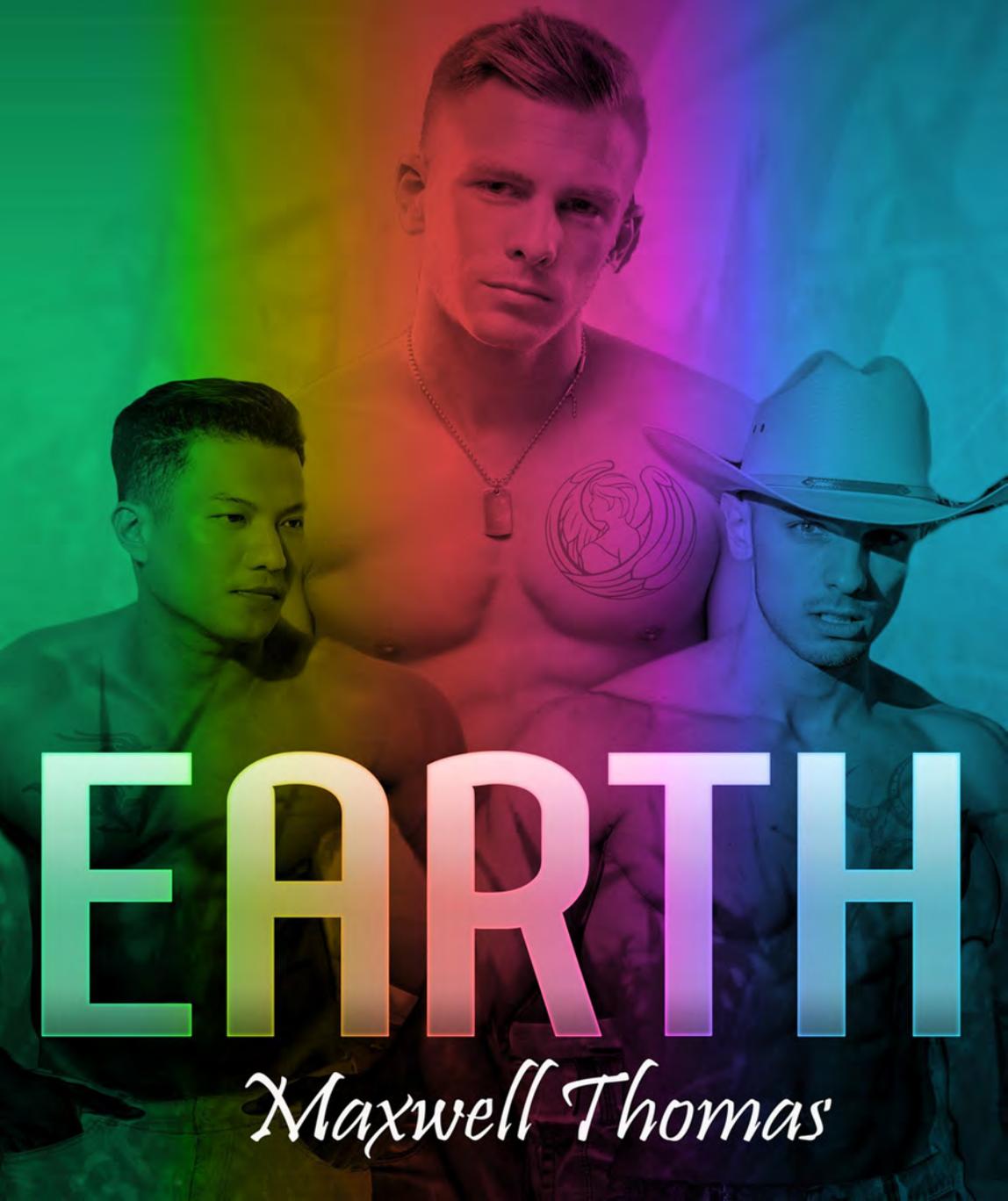


Brothers of the Zodiac



EARTH

Maxwell Thomas

BROTHERS
OF THE ZODIAC

EARTH

MAXWELL THOMAS

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PROLOGUE



TROY
1183 BC

I

THE BEAUTIFUL DARK-SKINNED WOMAN glided among the dead on the plain before the city of Troy. Ten-feet tall, she wore a gown of gold, its hem swinging through the blood, mud, and gore of the field. The angry calls of the crows contrasted sharply with the gentle tinkle of the golden tips of her hair as they moved together. She looked side to side, from body to body, studying their souls.

Hermes had not yet come to take them to Hades; she knew she didn't have very long. Her own six-man army fought in the city of Troy. Cancer, Scorpio, Taurus, and Sagittarius fought for the Greeks; Leo and Aries defended Troy.

The Greeks would take the city and sack it. Her six men would survive. But, for her name to survive, she needed more warriors. For the human race to survive, she needed more men to worship, remember, and assist her.

In return, she would bless them with the power of the elements. Earth, Air, Fire, and Water were under her command, and she would happily separate them among the

men, giving them power beyond other mortals. For here, in Troy, Zeus planned to destroy all of his sons and daughters, to begin the human race anew — without the heroes and demigods of old.

She bent and effortlessly plucked a man by the backplate of his armor, lifting him from the blood-soaked mud. He took a breath, then threw up blood as she held him in the air.

“You are my warrior, named *Gal.Gal.*” She set him on his feet in the place he had once lay.

His wound was apparent, a hole in his breastplate just above the heart. He looked down, then back up at the woman, but she moved on. She had to hurry.

“Wait! Who are you? Athene?”

“Nay,” she said, and bent to help another man up. “Arise, my warrior. You are named *Absin.*”

This second fighter — a hoplite Greek by his armor — turned to look at the man who followed the woman. “Is this Hades?”

“No,” he said. “Who is she?”

“I don’t know,” the man said. “Who are you?”

“Come,” the woman said. She tapped another hoplite.

He opened his eyes that had been closed in eternal sleep. “Lady Hera?”

“Nay,” the woman said, sounding more and more frustrated. “You are my warrior, *Gula.* Come. Follow me.”

She chose three more confused men, naming them each *Suhurmas*, *Kun*, and *Giserin*. All six followed her to the western side of Troy, where they could hear the shouts of victory. All six were equally mixed of Trojans and Greeks. All six knew they had been dead.

She looked out into the distance and could see Hermes gathering souls to him, ready to bring them to the Elysian

Fields or the Asphodel Meadows. His shining countenance, and his golden caduceus, summoned the souls up from the bodies, into his arms.

“You are my warriors. I am the goddess Ishtar.”

The men looked at each other in total confusion.

“I am older than Ares and Athene. I am older than Zeus. I am older than Chronos. I am of the beginning and the Void.”

One man bowed down. The other five looked among each other, thinking about it, before they did as well.

“I give you power, strength, and immortality — until you find the one you love in another man’s eyes. And then, I shall set your eyes among the stars, so your souls shall live forever.”

“What is our purpose, Great Ishtar?” asked the man who had bowed down first.

“Gal.Gal, you live and exist to assist the mortals. To help them grow and inspire them. To aid them and assist them. And to keep my name.” She glanced up at the walls. “Your comrades will find you. They will teach you.”

“This is crazy.” said a man, his face buried in the dirt.

No lightning bolts came down from the sky to destroy him for his blasphemy. No arrows from Apollo rained down. The sun did not grow dark. In fact, when they lifted their faces from the dirt, the woman had disappeared.

“What just happened?” asked the man called Kun.

The six men rose to their feet. “Gal.Gal,” said Suhurmas. “What kind of name is that?”

“I can’t even pronounce yours,” said Gal.Gal.

“It means Goat-Fish,” said Gula. “Capricorn.”

“You look like a Goat-Fish,” said the hoplite called Absin.

“You look like your mother’s ass,” said Capricorn.

Absin started after Capricorn, but two men held him back. Gal.Gal held back Capricorn, who merely leered at Absin.

“Stop fighting,” said Kun, standing aside. “We’re in this together. We’re warriors of a Goddess.”

Gal.Gal pointed out at the field. “Do you want to be one of them?” Hermes still did his work. They could see him. “Do you want to spend eternity pining for your wife and children? At least we can go back. At least we can live among men again.”

“And guide them like gods,” said Capricorn.

“That’s not what we’re here for,” Kun said.

Finally, Giserin said quietly, “Let’s find our comrades, like she said. Maybe they can help us.”

2

For the third time, the man named Gal.Gal — who found out his Greek name was Gemini — got stabbed in the back.

“We have to get you out of that armor,” said Kun, who in Greek was called Pisces. “Anybody who’s Trojan is going to be attacked.”

Absin — in Greek, named Virgo — dragged a body into a house and stripped it. “Here. This should fit you.”

Libra, who had been named Giserin by the Goddess, also changed into Greek hoplite armor. When he came out of the alleyway he had changed in, the other five men were gathered together in a knot, facing another group of five men directly across from them. Between them, men ran after women and children. Men ran past them, carrying

bulging bags of loot. Another man killed a Trojan who didn't even wear armor, right in front of them.

“I think we found our comrades,” said Libra.

“Or they found us,” said Pisces.

Then the six men walked across the road. Herded in the center of the group of six were two men in Trojan armor. The new group met them in the middle of the road.

They looked each other up and down.

“Hail, brother,” said Gemini.

A man stepped forward, his arm outstretched. “Hail, brother. I am Sagittarius.”

Gemini clasped Sagittarius' forearm and Sagittarius pulled him into an embrace.

A large man rolled his eyes. “By the Gods. Here?”

“Let's go,” said the Trojan in the center. “Let us walk together.”

They left the great city to the Greeks and their Gods.

3

“The Bull of Heaven?”

The large man crossed his arms and regarded the new Trojan. “Scales of Justice?”

“I wasn't insulting you,” said Libra, who drank the wine left at the shore by the Greeks. The Greeks had been in this camp for far too long, and now that they had the city, no one was in camp except the twelve men of Ishtar, scattered throughout the tents and campfires.

“I don't understand. What were we doing wrong?”

“She didn't mention that you did anything wrong. You still can't die, because you survived the war.”

“Maybe six of us aren’t enough,” said Aries, Libra only shrugged.

“Besides, why else would we all be here in Troy?” Aries waved his hand toward the sea at their backs. “All the gods, sons of gods, and us.”

“Are you originally Greek?” asked Libra.

Aries shook his head. “North.”

The man called Scorpio ran into the tent. “The Virgin disappeared!”

“What do you mean?” asked Taurus.

“I was talking to him, and he faded away, right in front of me. I tried to catch him, but my hands went through him.”

The three men looked between each other. “Find the rest,” ordered Aries.

As they searched, Cancer came upon Capricorn. Capricorn followed Cancer to the tent, but when Cancer got to the tent, Capricorn had disappeared, fading away silently.

Seven remained by the time they got together. Sitting at a campfire, all of the men watched as Aries stood up. “I feel —” then his voice went silent, even though he still spoke, because his lips were moving.

The men could see through him to the tent beyond. Aries looked up at the men, a confused look on his face. Then, he faded away.

“Gods ...” whispered Taurus.

“Maybe if we hold onto each other,” said Gemini, reaching for the person next to him. But Libra started fading away.

Gemini kept reaching for people, finally joining hands with the first of the old veterans, Sagittarius. Sagittarius

Brothers of the Zodiac – Earth

held tightly onto Gemini's hand. Gemini embraced Sagittarius.

Neither disappeared from each other or the shores of Troy.

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Capricorn

A Brothers of the Zodiac Story

by Maxwell Thomas

It's a race that the Earth-mover plans to win.



Taurus

A Brothers of the Zodiac Story

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No man is an island.



Virgo

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In 1930's Chicago, gangsters rule the streets. You're either with them or you're dead.



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